Abundance vs. Scarcity

Matthew 6:25-34 Kimby Young

Exodus 16:11-21 November 13, 2016

So if you watch television commercials or use social media or read newspapers or magazines. Apparently all of our lives would be so much better, and fuller and more rewarding if we just bought this certain product – at least according to the advertisements. Apparently all we need to have a wonderful life is just the right product. This is not a new phenomenon. Sales have been a part of life from the beginning of recorded history. Consumerism may have reached its height in modern America. But we have always been convinced that life would be so much better if we just had this one more thing – whatever that thing may be.

In the story from Exodus from today’s scripture – that one thing was all the free meals they used to get in Egypt. Apparently the Israelites have forgotten that those meals were not really free. They came at the cost of slave labor and they were reduced or withheld at the whim of the overseers. But at least in Egypt, they always knew the source of the meals and knew who to complain to if they were hungry. The reading for today starts with God saying, “I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites” which had actually been recorded in the scripture for the last three chapters. I didn’t have us read those grumblings today. “I have heard the grumbling,” God says – “and I will provide meat every night and bread every morning – everything you will need.” What God patiently does not say is “just as God has been providing every meal and every gift of grace they have ever received all of their lives.” The source of our provision has always been God and will always be God. God will provide. Guaranteed!

We understand the story. We understand the complaining. It’s fear talking. We know all about fear. Way too much about fear. It is a motivating force in our society, in our world. Most of the political ads from both sides of the aisle were – be afraid of the other guy, be afraid of the bad things in the world, be afraid of how terrible it is, be afraid – and only I can solve your problems. All of the television ads – now that we have swapped to Christmas consumerism – are saying wouldn’t your life be better with this product or this service or this one more thing. We can help your family. We can fix your problems. We can make you more beautiful, more prosperous, more happy. Buy this and everything will be ok.

And of course that is absurd. Of course, owning more and buying more is not the answer – in fact, it might be part of the problem. The challenge is to reset our perspective. The challenge is to recognize all that we already have and to know that we are blessed. The challenge is to remember all that is good, all that is positive, all that is possible. The challenge is to recognize – that really everything is already better than it seems. Of course, nothing is perfect. And of course there are difficulties, but it is not because we don’t have enough. The Israelites were wandering in the wilderness, facing challenges of life, working daily tasks. But really – God had provided everything they needed. God had freed them from slavery, given them good leaders, prepared a way for them through the dessert, and now promised to provide food and water daily so that they could live in peace. The truth is God has done that for us as well. But sometimes we fail to see it. Sometimes we are too busy worrying about tomorrow to appreciate today. Sometimes we are too busy scurrying for our next meal that we fail to appreciate the beautiful table spread before us, and the bounty of all the gifts we have received. The message for today is pause for a moment and take in the blessings. Take time to smell the roses. Take time to appreciate the goodness. Take time to know that God is with you, God loves you and God will care for you, always, no matter what.

Our world has taught us to fear scarcity, to fear that there isn’t enough or won’t be enough. Our society has taught us to compete for resources, to fight for what we want, and to hold on to what we have. Our culture has taught us to hoard our gifts and to “put aside for tomorrow.” And that’s a good idea, because rainy days will come. But don’t take it to the extreme. I’m preaching to myself here as much as to anyone else. Enjoy today. Appreciate today. Give thanks today. For God has blessed us with abundance. God has promised to provide for us. God has proven again and again that there will be enough, there will always be enough – there will be more than enough. Believe it. And act on it.

In less than two weeks we will celebrate Thanksgiving, so we have already started counting our blessings. Next week, we will dedicate our pledge offerings of time, talent and money for the year 2017. This sermon grew out of that stewardship dedication next week. I was thinking about how far this congregation has come in the last year. During the interim period, you struggled. You lost some members and you lost some ground. You got worried. You got scared. And you listened to the culture of scarcity all around us in the world that said, “Watch out, better hold back, better hold on, there may not be enough, we may lose everything we value.” You briefly forgot that God provides manna in the wilderness. God gives water out of rocks. God cares for the sparrows. God clothes the lilies of the field and dresses all the world with beauty and grace. How much more does God care for you? How much more does God promise to give us everything we need?

I read an article this week by Walter Brueggemann – a modern Presbyterian theologian whom some of you may know. It was about “cultivating a theology of abundance in a culture of scarcity.” Let me repeat that, “cultivating a theology of abundance in a culture of scarcity.” To me that says creating a way of living that actively appreciates all that is good. It says to me our faith is about encouraging one another to remember God’s abundant grace and constant provision, supporting each other in living as if there is always more than enough, knowing that God will provide as God has always provided, and boldly reaching out into the world with confidence that all will be well. It means, offering what we have to share generously. Not giving in such a way as to put ourselves in peril, but giving joyfully as we are able, knowing that God can use our time and talent and money to do some good in the world, to make the world a better place, to help people see the light of love, and the peace of forgiveness. It means finding ways to bless people in their daily walk – not beating people up because the world does far too much of that. It means finding hope and sharing it with those around us. It means recognizing the abundance of God’s gifts everywhere and living in gratitude every single moment – not just on Thanksgiving Day.

It takes a change in perspective – a change in the way we look at the world. We need to see the world as God sees it, not as culture sees it, not as the commercials present it, not as reality tv portrays it. We need to put on the lens that God offers – look at the world through God’s eyes. Then we don’t see the world as a place of scarcity, a place where goodness is limited, a place where we will run out of what we need. Instead we see that God has created a world with creatures of every kind, and God has called it good. We see that there is enough for everyone and plenty to spare. We see that beauty is everywhere and goodness is free. We see that we can accomplish miracles because God gave us the Spirit to do so. We can see that gifts multiply and joy abounds. A theology of abundance reminds us anything is possible thru Christ, everything is holy, and we will always have what we need to do what God calls us to do – to share God’s love in the world.

As a congregation – you are there. You have so many gifts to offer. And you are so generous in your caring for one another and the world. Yes, there are limits to what we can do. But there are no limits to God’s love, there are no limits to God’s grace, there are no limits to what God can do in, among and thru us. Believe that. And share whatever gifts you feel inspired to share. Give whatever it is you have to give to the glory of God – and know that God will take what you offer and use it to bless others. That is the promise of God’s abundant grace. That is the joy of living fully in God’s power. You are blessed and you are a blessing to the world.