

Bigger Than It Needs to Be

George Carlin had a unique perspective on an old cliché: *“Some people look at this and see a glass that is half full. Others look at it and see a glass that is half empty. I look at this and see a glass that is twice as big as it needs to be.”*

Today’s story of the Feeding of the 5,000 is reported in all four gospels. That means it is absolutely central to the message of Christianity. But the fact that many of us have heard it so often suggests that we might do well to take a fresh look at the story, and today I would like us to try the perspective of something that is bigger than it needs to be.

The Feeding of the 5,000 is a complex study in scarcity and abundance, with the two so intertwined it’s seldom obvious which we are dealing with. The story begins with a huge crowd following Jesus into a barren wilderness. There are too many people in a place with too few resources.

As the sun dips lower in the sky, this anxious situation turns into a crisis. The people haven’t eaten all day. They need food. The disciples can see only one way to avoid disaster, and that is to wash their hands of the situation.

“Send them away so they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something to eat.”

They solve the problem of scarcity by making it *not* their problem. This crowd is not their responsibility. They did not invite them out here; in fact they were trying to get away from them. If these people go hungry, it’s their own fault.

But Jesus rejects that solution. *“You give them something to eat.”*

This disturbs the disciples because what Jesus is asking is not possible, given the scarcity of resources. In John’s account of this incident, Philip calculates that more than a half-year’s wages would not be enough to give each person even a little food.

Andrew takes a quick inventory and finds only five loaves of bread and two fish. He concludes what seems to be obvious: *“What is that among so many?”*

The disciples have a strong case. *Resources are scarce. We cannot feed them all. Imagine what will happen as the people grow desperate to stop the pangs of hunger.*

There could be a riot as people fight over what little food there is. People will get hurt if we don't send them away.

That's what *appears* to be the case.

But in reality there was far more there than anyone imagined. Jesus brought that out. The story does not tell us *how* he did it. But it does tell us *why* he did it. As Pastor Christine described last week, he did it because he had compassion for them. When Jesus acts in compassion, scarcity is exposed as an illusion.

The message of this story for us today is that when the love of Jesus is present and active in our lives, we find we have more resources, more forgiveness, more sharing, peace, and joy than any of us realized was possible.

I have occasionally heard stories from a church or individual about how when they have found themselves in a serious shortage, God provided exactly what they needed. While I can accept such testimony, there is a crucial element of the Feeding the 5000 that is missing in them.

In this story, Jesus did not calculate the shortfall and then come up with exactly the amount required. They collected 12 basketsful of leftovers. Not only was there more available than they thought, there was more than they needed. God's grace was way bigger than it needed to be.

That is characteristic of God's grace and compassion. God is neither miserly, nor thrifty, nor even efficient. God's grace and compassion are never rationed out. They are given generously and extravagantly.

We are trapped today more than ever in our illusions of scarcity, and our world suffers for it. Recently a news pundit, who makes a point of proclaiming her Christian beliefs, delivered this warning to the international community. *"The United States has only so much love to go around."*

That statement endorses the disciples' argument in the feeding of the 5,000. While it may have some validity as a social critique, all I can hear is Jesus responding, *"Don't give me that. You give them something to eat."*

When we are trapped in our illusions of scarcity, we suffer for it. Like the foolish farmer in Luke 12, who had so much wealth he did not know what to do with it all. Yet

his priority in life was building a bigger warehouse so that he could store even more wealth. Because, after all, he didn't have enough. He lived in this illusion of scarcity. Surrounded by abundance, he thought he needed more, and so wasted his life.

I've shared with all my confirmation students over the years, the story of a biology experiment that showed why this attitude is so common. The captain of my cross-country team at Luther College was a brilliant student who designed his own independent study with rats.

In an era before PETA, he was able to implant an electrode in the hypothalamus of rats, the area of the brain known to be the center for feelings of fulfillment of desire. This electrode was hooked up to a little push bar in a cage. Every time a rat touched the bar, it would get a jolt of euphoria. It took a few days for the rat to figure out the connection. But once it did, it was all over.

The rat kept coming back to the bar for more, with increased frequency. It became so obsessed with that little jolt of electricity that it could not focus on anything else. It did not eat, it did not drink. It did not sleep. By the end it was pressing the bar 4,000 times an hour, and literally starved itself to death.

Surrounded by far more food and water than it needed, in a nurturing, healthy environment, the rat created its own world of scarcity, in which it could not get what it needed to survive.

Now we human beings aren't as stupid as rats. We would never do anything that ridiculous, would we?

How many billions of dollars do Americans spend on jolting the hypothalamus? The percentage of resources spent on entertainment and comfort and convenience increases every year, and crowds out those things that bring life—food, water, health, education, and spiritual concerns.

We cut programs that provide these things for those in need, claiming we don't have any choice, because we live in a world of scarcity.

We blame God for not providing enough, but Wisconsin spends \$1 billion more per year on excessive alcohol consumption than on higher education. Like the rat, we create a world of scarcity in the midst of abundance.

Jeff Hayden is the author of four Business & Investment titles that were #1 best sellers. He has spent most of his career rubbing shoulders with the fabulously wealthy.

In an article for *Inc.* magazine, Hayden wrote, *“One day I’d like to meet someone who is, in fact, rich. Sometimes I think I’ve found one, but I’m always wrong. Someone who can now afford a fabulous new house complains of the work needed to maintain it. A man who has just doubled his income groans because his taxes are higher. A woman who just landed her dream job is bummed because now her daily commute is ½ hour longer.*

It seems that no one I meet is actually rich. And no one is actually happy.

The problem is that Hayden has been looking in the wrong place. There are many people who are actually rich, who understand they have been given more than they need. Here are a few:

Jessica Cox was born without arms. It would seem she has been short-changed in the gifts of life, but that’s not the way she sees it. Jessica is an airline pilot. She scuba dives. She has earned a black belt in tae kwondo. She pumps her own gas and can type 25 words a minute. If you ask her, she’ll tell you that what she has been given is more than it needs to be.

Ben Underwood was diagnosed with retinal cancer at age two, which caused the removal of his eyes. But Ben taught himself to “see” with an echolocation process he developed using clicking noises of the tongue.

He could play basketball, ride a bike, skateboard, and play video games. Even without eyes, his vision was so acute that he could tell the difference between a trash can and a fire hydrant just by the echo of a click that returned to his ears.

The cancer that cost him his eyes returned with a vengeance when Ben was 16. Does it seem that God gave him a very small glass in life and didn’t fill it very full? Ben never saw it that way. He died the following year, without an ounce of self-pity, grateful that he had been given more than enough.

Liz Murry was born in the Bronx to parents who were destitute drug addicts. Both died of AIDS and she ended up homeless at age 15, owning virtually nothing. But what appeared to be scarcity was an illusion. With the help of a scholarship from *The New*

York Times, she earned admittance to Harvard, and recently graduated. With just a little compassion from the outside, her world turned into an abundant place.

There are days when all we can see is scarcity. There is so much need and want in the world. So much hunger, disease, and poverty. So much warfare, violence, and suffering. We feel there's nothing we can do; we don't have the resources to cope with it. All we have is five loaves of bread and 2 small fish, and what is that among so many?

But then we are treated to a modern day version of the Feeding of the 5,000. I'm talking about the Wild Boars soccer team in Thailand who found themselves trapped in a cave by swiftly rising monsoon waters, leaving them with virtually no resources.

No food, no light, no warmth, no sanitary conditions. Trapped more than a mile underground in an area so remote it hadn't been mapped in 70 years. No cell phone or GPS service. Cut off by miles of underground currents raging through narrow, winding passageways that would tax the strongest and most experienced divers in the world.

I can hear the disciples looking at this disaster in the making and saying, "There are not enough resources in the world to find them, much less rescue them. Besides, they got themselves into this mess. It's not our problem."

But somehow the Thai people heard the call: "*You get them something to eat.*" When compassion is unleashed, it turns out what appeared to be scarcity is abundance like we have never seen.

Thousands of people arrived to search for the boys: busload after busload. More than 2,000 soldiers came to assist, even though it seemed likely the boys would never be found, much less found alive.

When they did locate them, and discovered it was a desperate race **(Slide #15)** against time to save them, people from all over the world threw themselves into the effort. More than 200 of the most expert cave divers in the world flew in from England, Australia, China, Finland, Denmark and other lands to join the Thai Seals.

Representatives from 200 government agencies including the United States, pitched in. Volunteers streamed in to cook meals, operate pumps, and provide medical assistance.

Together, in a model of global cooperation almost inconceivable in this time of strife and division, they did the impossible. Battling darkness, cold water, and powerful currents, the divers fought through the grueling, 11-hour trips to rescue the team. And they got every one of the trapped children out alive.

Everyone involved said it was a miracle. It was—a miracle proving that, spurred by compassion, we find far more resources in the world than we ever knew. Given what happened there, how is it even possible that we allow any child in the world to go to bed hungry or homeless, claiming we don't have enough to do anything about it?

It has all been exposed as an illusion. God did not abandon us in a world of scarcity. We have been given far more than there needs to be. Far more than we need on this planet to feed everybody, to provide decent health care for everyone, to eradicate disease, poverty, and war in this world. The resources are there.

True followers of Christ are more important to God's creation than ever, because the world needs someone to explode the myth of scarcity in the world.

When voices around us say we cannot afford to feed the hungry, educate the children, house the homeless, protect the refugee, rebuild shattered lives, save and protect the environment, provide health care for every person, we can be the people who say, *"No, God has not created a world of scarcity; that's an illusion of our own making. We live in a world of abundance, if we would just conquer our fear, and open our hearts to see it."*

The world needs us more than ever to tell the story of the Feeding of the 5,000 to proclaim the truth—that there is far more in our world than meets the eye; and that compassion can inspire us to tap into our immense resources to put this world back together.

Here we thought we had only a handful of crusty loaves of bread and a couple of fish—not nearly enough to do the job. The love of Jesus appears among us and breaks into our hearts, and changes who we are and how we think and act, and suddenly we find that we *have* the resources to meet the needs. They were here all along. We just got caught up in the anxiety and self-centeredness that blinded us to that fact.

Jesus did not engineer this miracle to impress or awe anyone. He was well aware that in doing what he did, he would only exacerbate the problem he had with the masses hounding him, favor-seekers stalking him, people trying to make him a king.

But he took on that burden because people were in need of food. People were in need of healing. People were in need of life. And so he gave it to them, because that is what God is all about: sharing, healing, loving, giving life.

The Feeding of the 5,000 is a story of compassion coming into the world and exposing our fears as illusion; that when we follow the gospel message, we recognize that we live in a world filled with God's riches.

To all of my friends in the St. John's faith community, I leave you with this:

Never forget that God's love and grace are far bigger than they need to be. And as long as you remain a river of compassion for the world, you will continue to experience that time and again. God bless you.