

“From scarcity to abundance”

Isaiah 43:16-20; John 12:1-8 (April 3, 2022)

by Paul Matheson

Can you remember what was happening in the world about two years ago? We were in the early days of the pandemic then, and no one knew what to expect. In-person services at First Mennonite ended on March 15th and would not resume until mid-September. It was a strange time. People were in a panic. There were shortages in grocery stores.

One thing that was difficult to find was toilet paper. It's odd, when you think about it. The word on the street was, “buy it while you can!” No one wanted to be stuck without that precious commodity. Shelves were stripped bare. A roll of even the bargain brand was hard to find. Consumers began to buy in bulk and stockpile it in their homes.



Our sermon today is “From scarcity to abundance.” And what I want us to think about is the mindset that leads us in those two different directions. What makes us think that things are scarce and in short supply? And what makes us think there is an abundance?



First, the scarcity. I had an experience of this myself last summer. Our next door neighbour suggested we replace the aging wooden fence that was teetering between our properties. He said he'd investigate, and when he did, he made a shocking discovery!



The price of wood had skyrocketed: about double what it was just a few short months before. Lumber was in tight supply. Apparently, during the pandemic, people have decided to divert the money they might normally spend on vacations to things like renovating homes, building decks, replacing fences.

Shortages can be real. Just ask people in parts of the world where there is famine or drought. Where sources of clean, safe drinking water are limited. Where conflict has cut off deliveries of food, vaccines and medicines. Some bear the brunt of scarcity more than others.

In the big picture, I wonder how many of these shortages are human caused? What would happen, for example, if the 1% who hold most of the world's wealth were to share more freely with those in need? What if we all practiced better stewardship of God's creation? If we loved our neighbour, and strove to live in right relationship with God and others?

Lindsay and I enjoy going for hikes. And when we do we're struck by the awesome beauty of nature, and the way each



element hangs in perfect balance. When something throws that balance off, others compensate. When there is too much rain, for example, the bogs and wetlands store the water. In time of drought, they provide a refuge to wildlife that otherwise would not survive.



When it comes to kingdom things – such as grace, mercy, forgiveness, love, hope, peace and joy – there is great abundance! Remember that wonderful vision we read from the prophet Isaiah? It’s the promise of plenty in the middle of a wilderness. A work of God.



“I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? ... I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild animals will honour me, the jackals and the ostriches.” (Is. 43:19-20)
God will provide for us, even in those *desert* times of our lives!

Remember also the words of Jesus, who said: “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. (Jn. 6:35) ... I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. (Jn. 10:10)



In our gospel reading for today, we find Jesus at the home of Lazarus and his two sisters, Mary and Martha. Lazarus was the one whom Jesus had raised from the dead. And now they are having a dinner in Jesus’ honour. They’re grateful for the gift that Jesus gave them. Is there anything *more* precious than the gift of life?

The scene opens with Martha serving delicious food to the guests. And Lazarus, no longer bound in graveclothes, is fresh as a daisy, seated at the table and visiting with his friends. And as all this is playing out in front of us, Mary appears. What does she have in her hand? It’s a jar of ointment, costly and fragrant.



Then she does a most surprising thing. She takes the ointment and pours it out on the feet of Jesus, wiping his feet with her hair. It’s a tender moment. Embarrassingly so. Should we look away? What do we do with this public display of affection?



Let me tell you what *one* of the disciples, Judas, did. When he sees Mary pouring out that precious perfume, he reacts badly. He’s critical of her, right there, in front of everyone. Just as *she* surprises us with an unexpected display of love, so *Judas* surprises us too. His sharp outburst shames Mary and silences the room. It’s an awkward moment.

“Why didn’t you sell this ointment?,” he barks. “We could use the money, you know.” And then, thinking quickly, he adds: “It could help the poor.” The truth is that Judas had no interest in helping the poor. He was the treasurer for that little band of followers, and wanted to help *himself*. Which he frequently did.



It seems that Judas has not quite cottoned on to Jesus’ plan, his great kingdom vision for the world. He’s still operating on a mindset of scarcity.

Signs of God’s abundance are all around Judas: A banquet has been prepared. So many tasty treats. The table is heavy laden. Friends have gathered to share fellowship with one another. There is laughter and joy. Lazarus has been raised to new life. Jesus, the guest of honour, is seated in their midst. Mary is overflowing with love and gratitude – they all are!



But Judas is not. Even in the presence of so many blessings, all he can think about is how to get his hands on the proceeds from that ointment. Not to share it, not really, but to hoard. Can you see the mindset of scarcity at play?



Now *contrast* that with the mindset of Mary, who shares this precious gift from the depths of her soul. Her love is overflowing. The ointment is an expression of that love, a way of physically demonstrating it. Why *not* pour it out?



I’m speculating here ... but my guess is that oil may have been meant for Mary’s brother. It was the Jewish practice to wrap the body of the deceased in linen cloths with fragrant spices. (Jn. 19:40) Now that Lazarus has been raised, that jar of ointment can be used for other things. It can be used for Jesus, who himself is facing death. “Let her alone,” he says. “Let her keep it for the day of my burial.” It’s coming soon.

Mary is generous and loving and immensely grateful for all that this anointed one, this Christ, has brought into their lives.

Every one of them shows gratitude in their *own* unique and special way. Martha in her serving and careful preparation of the meal. Lazarus in his warm hospitality and welcome to many guests. Mary in her pouring out of perfume. The fragrance of grace and gratitude fills the room.



Have you ever found yourself in a situation like that? Where it just seemed like the right thing to do, however crazy, however it might be perceived by others? We can hold back, set the jar on the shelf where it can be admired and stored away for another time. *Or* we can give of ourselves in loving care for others, and in gratitude to the one who blesses us with abundant life.

Yes, our lives *are* abundant. Not always in monetary ways. But whenever Christ is with us, the table is spread, the bread is broken, the cup is raised, the gifts are shared. Life and love have come to fill the world!



Will Mary have regrets for what she did? What do you think? Will she miss that perfume? Will she have second thoughts? It's a good question to ask whenever we contemplate such wild and passionate actions. But I don't think Mary will regret this day one little bit! In fact, I think she'll look back on it with satisfaction. "It wasn't too much," she might say. "Not when you consider all that he has done for me! It was something I could do. And I'll be glad for the rest of my life that I did it!"

It was a "desert" time for Jesus. A time of trouble and suffering. But the gift of Mary, that beautiful outpouring of love, must have seemed like a river flowing through the wilderness, refreshing him for the days that lie ahead.



A mindset of scarcity or a mindset of abundance. Which do you have?

I doubt very much that Judas understood what was going on around him. Was he aware of anything outside his own self? When our world shrinks down to such a small and miserly size, it's hard to see beyond it. To recognize that others too might have needs. And that our actions might be full of blessing. And that God's own self may be present in them.

A mindset of scarcity sees everything in short supply. Even God's love and grace. Did Judas know that he was loved? I wonder.

Do you know that *you* are loved? If so, then perhaps that love will move you toward some wild and crazy thing of your *own*, sooner or later, whenever the situation arises – you'll know when it's the right thing to do.

Don't put it off. Don't go to your grave without saying and doing and being the beautiful gift-giving person God is calling you to be. The theologian Paul Tillich reminds us that we should not fear to waste ourselves in the service of God's new creation.¹

Of course, as always, I'm preaching to myself as much as anyone. I acknowledge that these choices are sometimes difficult: When to be practical, when to be passionate? When to save, when to be extravagant? When to hold back, when to give it all away?

Once again, I hope you will consider the questions for reflection that are printed in the bulletin. And as you do, be aware of what is influencing your choices.

“Where can you give something?”

“Where can you give all?”

Is your life influenced more by the shortages in the world – or by the movement of God's kingdom breaking in to transform our world, so that we can all be part of God's new creation?

As we leave this place of worship, may we go with the blessing of God, and an awareness of God's abundant gifts to us. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ “Beautiful service”, John 12:1-8, from: The Christian Century <newsletter@christiancentury.org>, “Sunday's Coming”, email article by MaryAnn McKibben Dana on Mary's act of service, March 7, 2016.