

Let's think back and remember the early days of the pandemic; when it was new and so was the anxiety that accompanied it. Most of us had never experienced anything like it before, even though this is hardly the first pandemic humankind has had to live through. Also, as we remember, we are doing so with kindness, not judgmentalism. We are not going to be cruel to our past selves, just observant.

One of the things I remember from those early days of the pandemic is the shortages, the things there were not enough of. While some of the things that disappeared from store shelves could be substituted, others were essentials and their scarcity just added stress to an already stressful situation. Especially the lack of toilet paper. I can still see the empty aisle at Kroger. I remember well when the online subscription of toilet paper delivery my husband and I had set up long before the pandemic was suddenly discontinued. There just was no more toilet paper.

Do you remember *why* there was no toilet paper?

It wasn't because there weren't enough factories producing it. It wasn't because there were fewer trees being processed for pulp. It wasn't because there weren't enough truck drivers to deliver toilet paper. It wasn't because of a shortage of workers to make, package and stock the toilet paper. In reality there was plenty of toilet paper in our country for everyone. So, why were the shelves bare?

Theologian Walter Brueggemann has a Biblical answer to that question. According to Brueggemann, people who have plenty often react to changes with anxiety and fears of scarcity. In other words, one of the greatest fears people have in the face of change is they are going to lose something or many things. This fear manifests in behaviors of accumulation, control over resources by creating a monopoly, and even violence. The uncertainty created by the pandemic caused fear and some people responded by buying more toilet paper than they needed, even for a two-week period. Think about the fights over the last package of toilet paper in stores that made the news. And those who bought up toilet paper and then tried to sell it online for ridiculous prices. Suddenly how well people were dealing with the pandemic was evidenced by how much toilet paper they had. That's how the greed of a few transformed abundance into scarcity for all of us.

Brueggemann calls this phenomenon "totalizing narratives". One example from the Bible of this kind of narrative is the story of the Exodus and how Pharaoh kept the Hebrew people enslaved by telling them life outside Egypt was one of scarcity and desolation. They might not have much, but what little they did have was better than nothing and what they had was due to the benevolence of Pharaoh who had the monopoly on resources. Remember the Hebrews were building storehouses, not pyramids in the Exodus story. Throughout their journey in the wilderness, they learned the narrative of Pharaoh was a lie, there was plenty to share, and they learned to recognize how God was with them.

Similarly, in the Gospels we see the Roman Empire had the same narrative. They had all the power, even over the Jewish religion. An example of this is Roman authorities kept in their possession the vestments Jewish religious leaders wore during their sacred ceremonies. Every year the High Priest had to formally ask the Roman governor to let them use their own vestments, with the underlying threat that if they did or said anything against Rome then they would be denied permission to hold their ceremonies by withholding their vestments.

To understand totalizing narratives, think total control. Sadly, this narrative isn't only a thing of the past. Perhaps you can think of a modern example of an institution or system that attempts to maintain control over people through scarcity, the fear of not enough. That is why the narrative of the Gospel today where Jesus fed so many people and everyone having enough is such a dangerous and important one; because it dismantles and disproves the narratives of Rome, of Pharaoh, and our modern totalizing narratives that power only comes through total control of resources.

The miracle called 'the feeding of the five thousand' is the only miracle recorded by all four Gospel writers. Today we heard the author of John's version, which is filled with references to other stories from the Old Testament. These references should not be glossed over or dismissed because they can help us understand what kind of miracle this is and why it was remembered by all Gospel writers. Our modern 21<sup>st</sup> century bias toward consumerism too often misinterprets this miracle as one of multiplication. In other words, without meaning to, we probably think of Jesus as supersizing a child's lunch of five loaves as two fish into enough food to feed five thousand hungry people. But Jesus was not the ancient equivalent of fast food nor a feeding program. Instead, I believe through the miracle of feeding so many people, Jesus was challenging the lie of the totalizing narrative.

To see this a little more clearly, we need to look at the many references to the Old Testament's promises of salvation in today's Gospel. First, we will start with why the large crowd was there with Jesus. It wasn't because they were physically hungry. It wasn't because they were looking for a show or free meal. John's Gospel says it was because they saw the signs Jesus had been doing for the sick. They saw Jesus was healing people, which means he was restoring them to wholeness. This is a sign of who Jesus is. He was not discarding the sick, as society tended and still tends to do. This is a sign of God's presence, and that is why the people showed up. Not because they were hungry, but because they were lonely for God.

We heard before they were fed, the people sat down on a grassy place. This is intended to remind us of Psalm 24 where the Good Shepherd leads his follower to green pastures and symbolized safe places where flocks would fear attack while they grazed. We also heard the leftovers were important as they illustrated nothing was lost, just as Jesus didn't lose anything or anyone entrusted to his care. Both references are, of course, Jesus as the Good Shepherd.

The author of John's Gospel wrote this miracle happened right around the yearly observance of the Passover. This means we are meant to remember that specific time of miracles was also a narrative of liberation, of breaking free from the oppression of the totalizing narrative of slavery under Pharaoh. It also reminds us of how during their forty-year journey through the wilderness God was with God's people and provided for them by feeding them manna, the bread from heaven. Unique to John's Gospel we see Jesus distribute the bread and fish himself, which has some Eucharistic overtones. Jesus is present in the bread, as he is

present in the Eucharist, and Jesus is feeding the people like God fed the people in the wilderness. It also points to the food itself not being only the kind that fills bellies but is food from heaven, which makes this a sacramental meal.

The food came from a child who willingly gave all he had to Jesus to share. This detail harkens to the prophecy of Isaiah's Peaceable Kingdom where we read a little child shall lead the way to that kingdom, one much different from the suffering and oppression too many people are too familiar with.

These observations have led Biblical scholar Raymond Brown to notice the bread itself is described in detail only in John's Gospel as loaves of barley. Brown reminds us barely was the bread of the poor in Jesus' day and suggests this means the feeding of the 5000 was perhaps a Messianic Banquet for the poor; showing God identifies not with the wealthy and powerful, but with the poor, and those who noticed the signs of God among them.

While we modern readers of the Bible often interpret this story as a reason to offer feeding programs, which are good and I am not speaking against them, I wonder if we tend to forget there was something deeper going on. Something that might be more difficult to hear or see because we can have trouble imagining an economy that isn't about greedily consuming all you can.

There is a pragmatic theory some commentators have about this miracle that the way people were able to eat their fill was because they all followed Jesus' example and began sharing whatever food they happened to have had with them. Indigenous people like botanist and author Robin Wall Kimmerer refer to this as a gift economy, one based on sharing without expectation of receiving in return for giving. And maybe that is what happened that day. We weren't there, so we don't know how it happened. But maybe how so many people were filled as *mystery* points to what this miracle is about: salvation. Throughout most of history and even today, it was and is a rarity for the majority of people to eat their fill. I'm not talking overindulging like we Americans excel at, I'm talking about eating enough to be satisfied, something we perhaps take for granted. In a place and time where those in power held people back through the practice of scarcity, where the wealthy few ate well and everyone else didn't, the very idea of having enough to be satisfied was a sign of God's Kingdom and a powerful alternative narrative to totality.

Even today it is a radical notion because the miracle of Jesus is not a miracle of excess, but abundance as a sign of salvation and God's presence. Episcopal priest Alice Downs describes abundance in her book about making bread called *Leaven for Our Lives* when she wrote: "True abundance is not suffocating wealth or too many cookies in the cookie jar. True abundance is having just enough and knowing it to be a blessing. Insisting on getting and holding onto more than enough is greed, and greed is the enemy of abundance. When we become convinced we don't have enough, even the smallest shortfall can make us lose our vision of heavenly Jerusalem ... and we become self-absorbed and our compassion grows cold."

To me, that sounds a lot like what happened to the toilet paper, the hand sanitizer, and baking ingredients like flour and yeast in the first months of the pandemic. Too many people panicked, got greedy and compassion grew cold. Because they didn't know how to look for Christ in their midst and made the mistake of believing buying and hoarding would give them the security they were afraid of losing.

Today's Gospel gives us the reminder purchasing or consuming will not and cannot rescue us from the pandemic, climate change, or any sin. Salvation isn't found through credit cards. Instead, salvation is found in the kind of miracle Jesus created and gave to those seated on the good, green grass from what was given in faith and trust not hoarded out of fear. Today's Gospel reminds us we already have enough, there is an abundance, there is plenty when we make room for each other and remember God is with us.

It is an important reminder because it can help us as we follow Jesus and help us recognize this same miracle is still happening today. Like it is with our Tree of Giving ministry, where an initial donation of 150 face masks has transformed into more than 600 masks given away during the pandemic. This isn't a miracle of multiplication, it is a miracle of God with us, it is one way we are showing our neighbors we are with them, and God is with all of us through the pandemic, that we care because God cares. Now we can use that same spirit of abundance as we look to adapting and restarting our other ministries, to renew and recreate our space outside and inside to be safe places for prayer and reflection and sharing while showing our neighbors that there is another kingdom present right here and right now, a kingdom always dismantling those totalizing narratives. The kingdom narrative based on abundance and love calling out to us all to remember every person is not a cog in someone else's wheel, we are beloved children of God. That's the Kingdom of God narrative reminding us God is here with us through every change.