

I remember a time when Bev and I were serving cake to our very young boys for some occasion. After I handed the cake to them, Jacob responded boldly and defiantly, "You gave him more cake than I got." I don't remember how I responded, but I hope I said, "Get over it." But more than likely, back in those days, I didn't say that. I probably tried to "make it right," cutting off a bit more of the cake to make sure that Jacob had the equal amount. If I recall correctly, Jake didn't eat all that I gave him. But that didn't matter. You see, there is only so much cake. And if one person gets more of the cake, then probably that means I get less of it. And I don't like that. In a scarce world, I have to stand up for myself, shout out: "She got more than I did."

I also remember when I was serving Peace in Toledo our receiving into membership about 25 people who came from a different church. These folks were such a gift to our congregation, but some of the folks who had been around for a while weren't particularly happy with their presence. One woman said to me: "When those Bethel people are in your presence, you sit up, you listen more intently, you get more excited in conversation. You don't do that with me."

You see, in a scarce world, there is only so much attention that can be given, only so much love. If you give love and attention to someone else, that means there will be less of it for me. It's just how the world operates. There is only so much to go around.

I find it fascinating that the first consequence of sin in the Bible is sibling rivalry. After the story of the first man and the first woman eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, something they weren't supposed to do, we hear about Cain, a farmer and Abel, a shepherd, getting into a serious battle with each other. Frankly, God was no help in the matter. He seemed to create the problem. He liked the sacrifice that Abel gave to him better than the one Cain presented. We don't know why exactly, but Daddy God seemed to prefer Abel's offering, and this ticked his brother off. You see, in a

scarce world—that's what the world of sin is—there's only such much approval to go around. If God approves Abel, that means he doesn't approve Cain. And Cain is so threatened by this that he kills his brother.

Sibling rivalry is all about a scarce universe—a universe in which there is only so much love to go around. Life at its depths is like a cake. It is governed by scarcity. Cake is a limited resource; it will run out. That's what we think about life. There's only so much to go around, which means that you better hurry up and grab what you can. If you don't grab what you can, there won't be anything for you. Rush up to that potluck, or the food will be gone. You gotta grab all the gusto you can get, or life will pass you by. There is only so much to go around.

It's no surprise that in such a world Cain killed Abel. It's no surprise that in such a world violence reigns. Violence is the way we protect our scarce universe. War is necessary in a scarce universe. If there is only so much to go around, I must fight to keep what I got or fight to get more. When scarcity runs the show, violence is ever-present.

And truthfully, scarcity, at least from an initial glance, seems to run the show. It runs the show of our politics. If you are right, then I must be wrong. And there are only two options: right or wrong. So I have to make you wrong, call you names, dismiss your humanity in order for me to be right. And I need to be right because scarcity runs the show. If I am not right, then I am not worth that much. Life then becomes about antagonism. So we fight each other, build walls, spend an enormous amount of energy deciding who is to be kept out and who is to be blamed. Oh, it's the Muslims. It's the Mexicans. It's the Republicans. It's the liberals. This is what happens in a scarce universe.

And by the way, scarcity is not limited to the realm of politics. Religious folks got it down pat. Truth is like a cake. There is only so much of it. If someone else gets some, that means we don't get any or at least enough. Only certain people can come to our communion table. Only certain people are going to heaven. Your ways must be

wrong because if they aren't then how can ours be right? It's a limited, scarce universe, you know.

What if that is a lie? What if the bottom line about life is that there is more than enough to go around? I think that is what the Bible is telling us today. First Kings with its brief story about a foreign man who shows up in the midst of a famine (radical scarcity) is all about abundance. We don't know why this man shows up. We often don't know why our gifts come our way. Sometimes they just fall on our laps.

Today they fall into the lap of the man of God, Elisha. And Elisha doesn't hoard the gifts; he tells his servant to share them with the hundred people who are in his presence. And of course, the servant, a representative of scarcity, asks the question that we practitioners of scarcity always ask: "How can this be enough for all of these people?" We are going to run out!

"Knock it off," Elisha says. "There will be more than plenty." And sure enough! The servant put the food in front of the people. And they had more than enough. There were leftovers.

The same thing happens in our gospel reading. A large crowd of people were following Jesus because they saw the signs that he was doing, the miracles he was performing. They are all gathered together, and eating time arrives, necessitating concerns about how they all will be fed. A little boy with five barley loaves and two fish shows up on the scene. Predictably and understandably, one of the disciples, a representative of scarcity, protests that such meager fare will not meet the needs of all of these folks who are gathered.

Jesus, who obviously trusted in abundance, didn't give in to his disciple's protest. "Oh," he said. "Tell the folks to sit down in the lush green grass," in the great safe provision of God. And then, Jesus takes the bread, gives thanks for it, distributes it to those who were seated and also provides them plenty of fish. They all get more than enough. There are even leftovers—twelve baskets full of them.

What if generosity rules the universe? What if life is fundamentally not about scarcity, but abundance? What if the scarcity

principle is a lie? What if there is more than enough to go around? Now I say this recognizing that some folks can misuse this. We in Western culture have misused this in our conviction that there is an endless supply of energy to fill our need and our greed and that the earth has an unlimited ability to handle our misuse. I don't want to suggest that at all. I believe strongly that we need to learn to live within limits.

But still, I am convinced, and the Bible is quite direct in suggesting today, that abundance is what runs the universe, that generosity is at the center of what rules the cosmos. Our Psalm for today is one of those Hebrew songs that is convinced that the world is ordered graciously and compassionately by a God who just gives to the world. "The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season," the Psalmist says. "You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing." This is just what God does, predictably and regularly. God just gives. The world is saturated by generosity and abundance. For the Psalmist, this is part of the created order.

The other night at our concert series I sang an old Louis Armstrong in which we hear: "I see trees of green, red roses, too. I see them bloom for me and for you. And I think to myself: what a wonderful world." This is creation faith. Life is gift, sheer gift, full of abundance. Generosity is at the center of the universe.

What if that is true? What if Elisha is right that there is more than enough to go around? What if Jesus' life, death, and resurrection are not about closing in and keeping out, but rather opening up and welcoming? What if in the world and realm of God there are always leftovers, always enough to feed more folks? What if scarcity is a lie?

If it's a lie—and the Gospel suggests that it is—then I won't have to live life measuring the cake. I won't have to live life convinced that there is a limited amount of love, grace, forgiveness. I won't have to cut other people down to feel better about myself. I won't have to think that I have corner on the truth. I won't have to keep a record of people's wrongs. I won't have to be jealous of people in my family or the church who seem to be getting more attention or approval than I

am at some given moment. I'll be able to get over my neediness. I'll welcome strangers and foreigners, not thinking that they are an intrusion in my or our common life, but rather a gift from God. If scarcity is a lie and if abundance indeed reigns, then I will be generous. I'll be understanding, forgiving of people and the mistakes that they make. I'll even let go of my money, not trying to squeeze every last penny out of it, but rather allow it to be a gift to others. This church would never have financial struggles if scarcity were thought to be a lie and generosity were trusted as the truth that runs the universe.

The author of Ephesians in our second lesson resists scarcity and embraces generosity when he writes some of the best words in all of the Bible: "I pray that you may have the power to comprehend with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of God that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God." What fills God, he is saying, is love, generosity. And what God seeks to fill the universe with is love, generosity, which **we** can be a part of. We are privileged to be a part of God's abundance, participating, as William Loader says, in "flooding the world with God's love."