

Jesus was sitting in the temple in Jerusalem with his disciples. He was watching the people as they walked through the outer court. In the outer court stood the collection box. No one passed the hat or the plate at the temple. You just dropped in your offering into the collection box whenever you were in the area. Jesus noticed the number of people who dropped in large sums of money. You could tell they were making big deposits by the amount of noise their coins made. People would stop and stare and nod their heads in approval as they heard the clatter of the coins. And then came in a poor widow. She dropped in 2 coins. The coins were estimated to be worth no more than a penny. No one stopped to watch her. No one nodded their heads in approval of her donation. Yet, Jesus praised her because she gave abundantly, out of her limited abundance. She gave all she had for God. The others, while they had given large sums, they were not giving from a place of abundance but from a place of scarcity.¹ They gave big not because God was first in their lives but because they liked that feel good feeling as people commented on their perceived generosity.

Jesus knew the big spenders were not God focused. Just as we learn in the opening chapter of Isaiah that the people were not really God focused. The words are tough ones to hear. No one wants to be accused of being like Sodom or Gomorrah, two villages in the ancient world known for their lawlessness, their lack of compassion for others and their lack of hospitality. God is warning the Israelites that if they don't change their ways, Jerusalem will be destroyed just as Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed.

I am sure the people were thinking, "Hey God, we are doing everything the way we have always done things, all according to our faith traditions. We are offering sacrifices to you everyday. What more do you want?" And God shakes his head and makes it clear that a heaping of sacrifices is not the same as living according to God's commandments. God found their sacrifices to be shallow, lacking in sincerity, an easy way to meet one's obligations without getting deeply involved in God's precepts. God wants the people to get their priorities straight putting God and God's ways in first place in their lives.

If the Israelites had their priorities straight they would remember the covenant made between God and Moses for the people. They would not just remember or give lip service to the covenant they would be living in accordance with the covenant. When one lives according to the covenant - God is put in first place and God's laws, especially those related to compassion, hospitality and justice are faithfully kept. The call to put God first and others second sounds like the

¹ Matthew 12:42-44.

Great Commandment as summed up by Jesus.² When living from a place of compassion, hospitality and justice it is easy to live from a place of abundance, knowing that what we have comes from God rather than living from a perspective of scarcity ever in fear that there is not enough.

Of course the question becomes how does one define abundance and what defines scarcity? Is abundance or scarcity based on one's net worth or the size of one's bank account? Is one's view of abundance or scarcity dependent upon those around us, those whom we measure ourselves against? Is one's view of abundance or scarcity based on a state of mind?

This week, as I was walking the dogs, I noticed a woman walking down the street pulling a suitcase behind her. I have seen this woman before, always neatly dressed, always pulling her small suitcase. Even though I have never talked with her, I assume she is homeless. She stopped to chat with a young man leaning against a tree. This young man is definitely homeless. He always looks disheveled. The only thing I have seen him carry is a sign that he holds up half-heartedly when cars pass by. I did not see a car stop to hand the young man money or food. But the woman stopped. She stopped to talk with him. And she pulled something out of her pocket and gave it to the young man. I have no idea what was passed between them, but whatever she gave him, she gave from a place of abundance rather than from a place of scarcity.

In this example abundance is a state of mind. Think of the feeding of the 5,000 with just five loaves of bread and two fish in hand. Everyone ate their fill. At the end of the meal there were 12 baskets filled with leftovers.³ Or those we know who welcome the unexpected to the dinner table, adding water to the soup so that it everyone has enough.

We have all known folks who came through the depression. Many of these folks learned thriftiness, a good thing. They would wash and fold used aluminum foil, or neatly open a wrapped package so the paper could be used again. But they still lived as if their world were going to fall out from under them. Even as they count their blessings every day they still fret about not having enough. These folks lived from a mindset of scarcity.

Then there are those who have had little but seem to have a great sense of the abundance around them. I went to seminary with a gentleman named Curry. Curry grew up in a small town in a very, very poor part of Texas. He said it was a

² Matthew 22:34-40.

³ Matthew 14:13-21

real treat to have chicken for dinner. He said he loved chicken. He shared how surprised he was to learn that when people talked about eating chicken they were not talking about eating the feet – as he did as a child – but about eating the rest of the chicken. Even though his family was poor, it was not dwelled on. He was raised in an atmosphere of abundance. That sense of abundance carried him throughout his life.

For all we have in this world, it is amazing how most of us make decisions from a place of scarcity rather than abundance. According to the US Census Bureau the median monthly household income in San Luis Obispo County is \$5,334.50.⁴ To people in many parts of the world, that is an amazing amount of money. In the Republic of Congo household income for a family of 4 is reported at \$37.50 a month. In Kenya a similar sized household has around \$120.00 a month to live on. And in Vietnam \$180.00 per month is the norm.⁵

Now granted our housing costs are much higher and so are our taxes. And I would wager, just based on looking at credit card or bank statements, that you, like me, put a lot of money towards things other than meeting basic needs. Such statements tell an awful lot about the priorities of a person or a family. So what's at the top of the list: our pets, clothes, dining out, electronics, wine, sports events, concerts, travel, fitness or medical? What would you add to the list? Would anyone, looking at our monthly spending habits, determine that we put God in first place in our lives?

God worried about the Israelites. God worried that once their lives got cushy, as they shifted from slaves to wilderness wanderers to settled farmers and ranchers determined to establish community, God worried they would no longer put God first in their lives. As their lives went from awful to amazing once they settled in the Promised Land their reliance on God did shift.

In Deuteronomy God warned them that when life feels good because they have barns full of grain and gardens bursting with produce and a nice house to live in, they needed to also remember where they had been and who brought them out of slavery, who walked with them through the desert, and who fed them and kept them hydrated when they had nothing. And now that life has become so, so good, they needed to remember to give credit where credit was due. They needed to remember to thank God for what they have rather than pat themselves

⁴ US Census Bureau, "Quick Facts by State and County," accessed online 14 August 2018 @ <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045217>.

⁵ World Data, "Average Annual income by Country," accessed online 13 August 2018 @ <https://www.worlddata.info/average-income.php>

on the back, taking sole credit for a job well done. God wants them to remember the covenant. God wants them to remember to live according to God's ways commands. And above all, God wants them to remember to keep God in first place in their lives.

In our "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" mentality, thanking God for our comforts and our abundance, does not always compute. We take pride in what we have accomplished. And rather than thinking we have enough, we are constantly ferreting out ways to gain more. We pass off our leftovers to others, not necessarily because we want to share but because we want to make room for more or for something new, or because we are thinking possible tax deductions.

So how do we keep God in first place in our lives? Based on our scripture selections for today we are reminded we must be sincere in our actions and we must keep our priorities straight. If we are sincere and have the right priorities, we are living the Gospel in all aspects of our lives, every day. In our worship as we honor and praise God. We share and support one another in our faith journeys. We serve in the community sharing the Gospel in word and deed, including caring for all of God's creation. When we are sincere and have the right priorities, we walk humbly before God, accepting God's grace, love and forgiveness as we accept the love and gifts of others. When we live the Gospel in all aspects of our lives we move from a mentality of scarcity to one of abundance all because we have put God in first place in our lives. We live from a place of abundance as we know have more than enough for our loved ones and for those we are called to serve and support.

Living the Gospel is all about stewardship. Stewardship is about working with and for God to make God's kingdom a reality in this world. Stewardship is about our responsibility to care for each other, for the earth, and for ourselves. Stewardship is about accountability, taking ownership for our actions and our words and the way they impact the world around us. Stewardship is about wisely using the many gifts and resources we have been given so that all may live life abundantly.

Being good stewards, living the Gospel everyday, putting God in first place with everything we say and do and think changes the way we live and even becomes evident in our bank statements. May our commitment to God and living according to God's ways becomes evident in all aspects of our lives. With God's help let it be so. Amen