

Abundant Love
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When I was a kid, I loved to read. By the time I was in sixth grade, I was sneaking novels off the tall book shelf in the living room. I have long forgotten most of the books I read from that book shelf, though knowing my parents, I'm sure most of them were fairly good books. But there was one book that grabbed my imagination, so much so that over the years until I graduated from high school, I read it twelve times. Because I love to revisit a great story.

The Robe had all the elements you'd want in a good story: a foreign, long-ago setting; a love story; a personal tragedy; a great mystery; and great human truths woven into the warp and woof of the tale. It is the story of Marcellus, a rather spoiled upper-class young Roman, who for his obligatory stint in the army gets assigned to the city of Jerusalem.

Now, he ends up being the soldier who gambles for and wins the robe of a criminal named Jesus, after his unit is ordered to execute him and two others. The whole experience gives Marcellus what we would call today PTSD, and in an effort to regain his mental health, he goes on a personal quest to find out whether this Jesus actually deserved to die. He determines to interview people who knew this man, and see why they were saying he performed miracles.

So Marcellus makes it to the shores of the lake where Jesus was rumored to have fed five thousand people with nothing more than five loaves of bread and two fish. Some of you may have heard this Bible story before, but if you're like me, it has probably been a while. So let me refresh our memories:

Matthew 14: 13-21

¹³ Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴ When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.

¹⁵ When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." ¹⁶ Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."

¹⁷ They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." ¹⁸ And he said, "Bring them here to me." ¹⁹ Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ²⁰ And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. ²¹ And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Of course the people Marcellus interviewed had different recollections of what happened there. What fascinated me as a kid reading this book, was the way Marcellus listened to the people tell about their own experiences of being fed that day, and discovered that some of them had come prepared for a long day listening to the Rabbi, though many more had come with nothing. And he heard person after person, family after family, recount how they had felt moved by what they had already heard about, and from, this inspiring spiritual teacher. Moved

enough to divide what they had brought with them, take smaller portions than they had planned, and put the extra *into* the baskets as they passed by, so that others who hadn't brought anything with them might have something to eat.

Marcellus concluded that, whether or not the fish and loaves actually *multiplied*, as rumor had it, a miracle had indeed happened. It was nothing short of miraculous, for *so many people* to deprive themselves of some of their own sustenance in order to take care of others who needed some and had none.

Now, to some of us, this seems perfectly natural. Yet scarcity, or fear of scarcity, can tend to incline us toward hoarding what we have. And let's face it, the fear of not having enough can be powerful. Sometimes we experience something akin to panic, fearing that, someday, there very well may NOT be enough. And then what do we do?

I remember the months leading up to the birth of my second child. My husband was working at a service station, on commission (his income was iffy at best), and I had a part-time job in a day care, which wouldn't last long. Because back then, in the 1970s, many places would let a woman go as soon as they learned she was pregnant – even a day care center!

It was probably not the most practical time to have another baby. Had we been operating on something like common sense, rational practicality, we would perhaps have decided to wait for another baby. I would sometimes lie awake and worry about whether there would be enough to go around. Enough money, and food, and clothing, of course - but more than that - I couldn't imagine how I could ever love a second baby as much as I loved my firstborn. How would I find the time and energy, the *patience*, to deal with two? "What if there's not enough Love to go around?"

Forty years later, it appears to have worked out just fine. Not that there weren't plenty of unexpected twists and turns, including some lean times – oh, *very* lean times – along the way. In fact, I couldn't have begun to envision where we would be as a family today, those many years ago. But here's the point: there was enough, and more.

And that is the mystery and the blessing of Abundance. When we let ourselves believe its call of Abundance, there is enough, and more. We are welcomed into what I have referred to as Grace. The grace of harvesting what we have not planted, and planting what we may never harvest.

Last September, Ginger and I were blessed to attend a week-long retreat at the Unitarian Universalist retreat center on Star Island, seven miles off the coast of New Hampshire. We got to go to church *every morning*. I wasn't sure I'd like that much church, but we had volunteered to be in the choir, so every morning we took the short hike up the hill through the pines to the stone chapel at the top of the island, where Rev. Mary Edes led the choir and the service. And *preached*.

And it was awesome, every day. I was especially moved by one of her sermons, titled "Loaves and Fishes." I found her words both profound and wise. Sometimes, someone says something so well, just couldn't improve on it. So, with her gracious permission, I would like to share part of her remarks with you today:

Throughout human history, and to varying degrees, we have had to deal with the very real fear of not having enough to get by, and that fear is heightened when, out of scarcity, real or imagined, we must open our hearts and share what we have with others. At its core, this is exactly what we are dealing with when we start wrangling about Social Security and Medicare, the Affordable Care Act, and taxes and debt ceilings - who should pay how much and for what? And don't touch mine - whatever it is - because I'm afraid there won't be enough for me - or my constituents, or my children, or...or...or. You know what they say: The opposite of love is not hate but fear - and fear is much more insidious - a much more dangerous motivator.

What a relief it would be to stand before you and preach abundance; to assure you that 'God will provide' and all will be well, but there is *far* too much evidence to the contrary for me to do anything like that, without at least unpacking those platitudes and examining what they might mean in our century.

What does it mean to claim that there is enough for all? Is it a bogus, or a pie in the sky, claim? Is it only wishful thinking?

Well, we know from experience that there is always enough work to do, always enough trouble to share. We know that there is *usually* enough humor to balance the 'always enough stress' in life. We *believe* that there is enough love to fill the world; and we *suspect that there is enough fear to destroy it*. We *pray* that there is enough wisdom among and between all the peoples of the earth to overcome that nightmare of a possibility.

But when we get right down to the essentials in life: the water and food and shelter and healthcare and education and freedom - is there *really* enough to go around, or has our human population grown beyond our capacity to adequately care for one another? Are there just too many neighbors to love? And in the midst of all these pressing questions, do our religious traditions - do our readings for this morning - still have a word to speak to us, a word that will help us to find answers today?

"Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself."

'Heard what?' you may ask. Just before the page turn, the disciples had informed Jesus that John the Baptist was dead. Do you remember the story? King Herod divorced *his* wife and took up with *his brother's wife*, Heroditus - a nasty business, and John said so. So, Herod had John thrown into prison. Of course that wasn't the only reason Herod had John thrown into prison. He also saw him as a trouble maker - a 'peace and justice freak,' who might incite an uprising. Then one night Herod threw a party and Heroditus' daughter danced for the guests, and Herod was so enchanted - or drunk - that he made a promise: that she could have anything she wanted. Her mother suggested that, perhaps, John's head on a platter might be just the thing. Done.

"Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place - a lonely, lonely place - by himself."

John was his cousin, his teacher, his minister, his mentor, and probably, his friend. And his death was inglorious, ugly, unnecessary and cruel. Further, Jesus had to have known that he, too, was on the King's radar. An itinerant teacher - he had been traveling the countryside for some time, preaching, teaching, carrying out his ministry of healing. Not only was he grief stricken, he was, in all likelihood, exhausted. And so he went to a lonely place - in his heart and on the land - away from the crowd.

Who has not been in that kind of wilderness? Life happens, and when it does it calls into question all our treasured assumptions about the way things are supposed to be. If you are a good person, good things will happen to you. If you take care of your health, you won't ever get that dreaded diagnosis. Your children will all be healthy, happy, and well adjusted. You won't lose your job; your spouse won't die; your marriage won't fall apart. ... And then it does. Where is the "enough" for that? ...

So we read on. "But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns." Nowhere in my text study did I see where anyone picked up on this. Always there is the assumption of poor, dogged Jesus - just trying to get some peace - and here come those pesky multitudes again (Not that *he* ever calls them pesky multitudes, you understand - I'm just sayin'). But listen: it *doesn't* say they came seeking anything. They heard that John was dead and that Jesus had a broken heart and they followed him. And when they were all together - they gave to each other precisely what it was they had to give. Mutual presence. Compassion. Healing. Blessing. Food - in whatever measure they had it to give. And the disciples? The poor disciples who always get knocked here for not getting it - for trying to send the people away, unfed - I would argue that they, too, were giving what was theirs to give, as they understood it. They were trying to protect their teacher. Make sure he got a break. The way I read it, everybody in the story gave what they had. Not more. Not less. Got bread? Got fish? Got the the healing power of Love? Got community?

The moral of the story: The world spins on and the needs of the world do not abate - even from a lonely place. Faced with need, give what you have - even if it is only your presence - your precious self - warts and all. Let the gift that is you emerge and then give it away. Therein lies abundance. I'm not making this stuff up.

Listen, I do not know and cannot tell you what, if any, expectations or desires or plans the Cosmos has - what God has - in mind for your very precious and particular life. I cannot say for certain what lies ahead. But we can look at history and at faith. We can reason together. We can laugh and cry and forgive each other for, and love each other through our common humanity. We can revisit the texts that have shaped our people for thousands of years, and we can try and understand what, if anything, they have to say to us today. Is some of it preposterous? Of course. So is life. I am comforted by Mary Oliver's take on the whole thing:

Why wonder about the loaves and the fishes?
If you say the right words, the wine expands.
If you say them with love

and the felt ferocity of that love
and the felt necessity of that love,
the fish explode into the many.
Imagine him, speaking,
and don't worry about what is reality,
or what is plain, or what is mysterious.
If you were there, it was all those things.
If you can imagine it, it is all those things.
Eat, drink, be happy.
Accept the miracle.
Accept, too, each spoken word
spoken with love.

Here's what I want to believe: There are no careful cosmic measurements that guarantee an equal portion in all things to *all persons*. We will not ever and always have the same amount of anything: not money, nor power, nor suffering, nor Grace. But if we are not greedy and fearful, and if we consciously act from a place of compassion and a desire for communal wellbeing, if we all give what we can, and take only what we need, *there will be enough for everyone*. And when, at times, we find ourselves moved more by fear than by love, we hope to remember that, when we operate out of that broader definition of abundance, there is even enough forgiveness.

My advice for the next few months and beyond? Got fish? Got love? Pass it on.