

Today we are going to be reading from the 14th chapter of the gospel of Matthew. This chapter is a contrast between a party offered by the Roman ruler named Herod and one offered by Jesus. The 14th chapter begins with a story of jealousy and manipulation by an insecure political leader.

King Herod has begun to hear reports about Jesus and fears that Jesus is really the return of John the Baptist. Herod did not like John the Baptist. John the Baptist was the prophet who had confronted Herod that Herod had acted wrongly when he married Herodias.

Herod had hosted a big and extravagant birthday party for himself where Herodias danced in front of him. Herodias then asked Herod for the head of John the Baptist because of what he said about their marriage. People of faith who challenge the actions of the ones in authority may find themselves the objects of violence against them.

Herod granted the request of Herodias and had John the Baptist arrested and his head chopped off. John's head was brought to the party on a platter.

When we pick up the story Jesus is finding out about what happened to John the Baptist. The lives of Jesus and John were very closely intertwined. Some even say that John was a mentor to Jesus.

So when Jesus hears about the death of John and how it happened you can imagine that this was very painful for Jesus to hear. That is where we pick up the story.

Read Matthew 14:13-21

In this story we have a contrast between two ways of looking at the same problem. What we have here is a contrast between scarcity and abundance. What we have here is a problem and one group looks at the problem from a place of scarcity and another who looks at the problem from a place of abundance.

One looks at the resources not available while another looks at the resources that are available to solve the same problem.

This story of the feeding of 5,000 men plus women and children is found in all four of the gospels. In fact, this is the only so-called miracle which is found in all 4 of the gospels. Matthew and Mark also add a second story of the feeding of 4,000. And the 5,000 in this story does not include women and children in the count. So we could be talking 10,000 and maybe even 20,000 people gathered along a hillside next to the Sea of Galilee.

The disciples are the first to notice that the crowd is getting hungry. They are in an isolated place and the crowd is in need of food. The disciples seek to solve the problem in the only way that they know how. The disciples try to send the crowd away and tell them to solve the problem on their own.

Find your own food. Go buy some food from the stores. But that is not so easy. It is probably 4 miles to the nearest town and these are people who do not have much in terms of financial resources. These are not the haves. These are the have nots.

That is why so many of them are sick because they do not have access to quality health care and nutrition. Sound familiar? So on the one hand we have the disciples who are looking at the problem of hunger and conclude that they do not have the resources to solve this problem. They look at the problem from the perspective of scarcity.

It is like the person who looks at the problem that they are facing and saying to themselves, "I can't solve this problem because I do not have enough money or resources or time or experience or whatever." It is like the person who comes up with all kinds of reasons why they cannot attempt to solve the problem that they are facing.

It is like the person who is looking for excuses. It is like the people in the church who shoot down any attempt to try something new by coming up with any new excuse. We can't do that because we don't have enough money or resources or whatever.

Contrast the disciples' attitude of scarcity with Jesus' attitude of abundance. In this story Jesus looks at what they do have and figures out a way to make it work with what they got. All we have is five loaves of bread and two fish? We can make that work.

Each of the gospel stories differs at this point concerning how the food is shared with the crowd. In Mark and Luke's account the disciples set it before the crowd. In John's account Jesus feeds them. But in Matthew's account the disciples take the food and go out into the crowd and feed them.

In Matthew's account the disciples are not bystanders but rather participants in the feeding. After feeding the crowd the disciples return with baskets of leftovers.

So the question I ask us today is do we want to be people who live our lives by looking at problems from scarcity or do we want to look at problems from the perspective of Jesus who sees the abundance? Do we look at what we don't have or do we look at what we do have?

I recently read an article in a business magazine that I think gives us great wisdom in trying to live a life similar to the way that Jesus lived his life. The author offers up 7 ways to live a life from a perspective of abundance. See if you think these 7 items help to guide us to live a life like Jesus calls us to.

1. Think Big and not small. Don't be limited in thinking about the possibilities in front of you.
2. Think plenty and not lacking. In other words, everything that you need is there.
3. Be an optimist and not a pessimist. Think positively about what you can do and do not allow negative thinking to prevent you from overcoming your challenges.
4. Embrace change and don't be scared of it. The only one that likes to be changed is a baby with a wet diaper. But if we live with a mindset of embracing change then we will not be fearful of being transformed.
5. Be proactive rather than reactive. Set out to make the changes necessary rather than waiting for stuff to happen to you.
6. Be a learner rather than someone who thinks they know it all.
7. Seek what works and don't play the victim card. Don't blame others but seek to solve the challenges before you.

It's clear from this story that Jesus sees the world through the lens of abundance rather than scarcity. Jesus does not look at what he doesn't have. Jesus looks at what he does have and he uses it to do God's will.

Jesus is not driven by a selfish desire in his abundance thinking. He is driven by compassion toward others.

So we are challenged to not look at what we don't have. We are challenged to look for the tools and resources that God has provided to us. We use these tools and resources to live out a life of faith and compassionate obedience. AMEN.

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-Zimmerman, Angelina, "Discover the 7 Key Traits of an Abundant Mindset," Inc.,
<https://www.inc.com/angelina-zimmerman/discover-the-7-key-traits-of-an-abundant-mindset.html>

-Given: August 6, 2017 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)