

## From Scarcity to Abundance

Is. 43:16-21; Ps 126; John 12:1-8; Phil 3:4b-14

Today we look at the couplet that moves us from scarcity to abundance, as well as the movement from fear to compassion. Each of these couplets are not either or. But the first one describes our natural tendency. The second one describes the direction our Creator wants us to move in our attitudes, habits, thinking and living. These couplets tie together. For example, as we are generous, people have less fear. As we include people, we feel more secure. And so on. Plus, it's clear the Almighty wants us to move in the direction of the second trait & not allow the first trait in each couplet to dictate our daily living.

So, we remember that what God offers is better and more life giving than how the world works. We are to seek & learn God's ways. Lent asks us to repent; to turn from our ways; to commit ourselves to the ways of God as revealed in Jesus. Most of all we are being reminded – "Your ways, O God, are higher than our ways. Your thoughts are higher than our thoughts."

Before we were missionaries in Brasil, our mission board asked us to participate in two MCC orientations. At one of them, we played a game. It was supposed to reflect the realities of survival in the countries we were going to. I don't remember all the details but we each were given a different number of chips to bargain, lend, trade, or buy things. Some people received a lot. Others few. Collectively we represented the different levels of wealth in the communities we would be living in – from peasants to rich.

I was able to talk people into lending me their chips that I gave to one of the rich persons, for future promises. This gave him more wealth and power, which enabled him to become richer – and I hoped would benefit me and my friends. Since I helped out a rich guy, I was counting on him to reward me. I didn't tell the people who lent me their chips.

The idea of the game was to become more financially secure. And to demonstrate how much lack of security most people had in the societies we were going to. I hoped this way of

using my chips & those of other people, would allow me to feed myself, my mythical family, and run a business. But I had no way of being sure I would benefit. Of course, it was a betrayal of trust with my colleagues in the game.

We had several rounds of directed activity, with buying, selling, lending, & trading chips, plus some economic realities. The game ended when we each revealed how many chips we had. Some had more, but most of us had less than when we started. I had none, but shared what I had done and how I betrayed those who lent me chips, just on my word. I wish you could have seen the reactions of the whole room – 60 or more people. They were mad at me – I had not played fair. They all had zero-sum thinking.

But the game director immediately asked me, "Have you lived overseas?" I replied "yes." Then he went on to explain that in most places we were going to, the economic game was rigged against most of the population.

What I had done – was not unusual in a situation of scarcity & fear. The purpose of the game was not to be fair, but to learn actual real economics in most places in the world. He then did more explaining. A key teaching was that most economic systems operate with what we call - a zero sum game. There are winners and losers – mostly losers. That's how we think and act.

Play explanation of zero game: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3RgSslf2OnM>

Many people have a cognitive bias towards seeing situations as zero-sum, known as zero-sum bias. That's how we see the world. We think there is only so much – of whatever – that as one person acquires more – others have less. Games like dominos & snooker & sports are like this. We are conditioned to think & act this way. During covid we saw this with toilet paper.

It's why we have wars & trade wars. We think there must be a loser and a winner. The zero-sum game is usually how the world works. We think life must balance. If we have harmed someone, we must apologize to even the scales. If we have done something wrong, we must

receive a punishment to even the scales. If we need or want something, we have to pay for it when we receive it to even the scales. We receive the grade we deserve. At work, we receive the raise we have earned – or we become angry.

Another way to understand it is to think of the world as a giant cake. There's only so much cake to get distributed among all of us. If we get more, then there is less for others. If others get more, then there is less for us. There is only so how much cake – no less or no more – so get what you can while you can! This involves more than just wealth. It touches on kindness, love, compassion, love, patience, and generosity.

This zero-sum term comes from the worlds of competitive games, economics, neighborhood relationships, politics or even family dynamics. Persons compete for the same resources, so whatever I win (or lose), you lose (or win).

From benign bicyclists ignoring stop signs to increasingly toxic shoving matches to the horrors of mass shootings, zero-sum games are played every day. Violence in all its forms testifies to the bully's illusion that whoever wins the zero-sum game is a real winner.

Our religious doctrines are pock-marked with winner/loser theologies — a zero-sum game on steroids. Obey the ten commandments, be anti – you name it, or you lose! But along comes Jesus effectively saying, “God won't play your zero-sum game of scarcity & fear. Neither will I!” Jesus knew God's immense plan for the world was based on abundance, not scarcity; compassion, not fear. Plus, there is no limit to God's abundance and compassion.

Scarcity encourages hoarding and selfishness like we see with covid in various ways. But abundance and compassion thinking and habits encourages sharing, looking out for each other. Fear moves people to hoarding and selfishness. Even nations act in fearful ways to force their policies. But compassion is Jesus' answer to fear. God has a bigger broader view of life in his Kingdom. We must learn God's ways and God's thinking are not our ways and thinking.

God's math really stretches us out in so many directions. It's what makes Jesus both strange and so attractive. Like the parable of the laborers who each worked a different number of hours – yet received the same pay. (Matthew 20:1-16) Or the dependable elder brother in the prodigal son parable who was asked to welcome, forgive, rejoice, and join the party. (Luke 15: 11-32)

God's economy is not like the world's market. The scales don't have to balance and there is always more cake, because God does not play a zero-sum game! God has invited us to His party and at God's party there are no zero-sum games. We're not required to bring anything to the party and there's always enough cake. The mere fact that we are at the party is enough for God. All we have to do is show up.

In Matthew 18:21-35, Peter asks a question that reveals he believes forgiveness to be a zero-sum game: “Lord Jesus, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?” Give us a number!

Jesus answers him first by upping the ante to 77 times, which means, forgiveness is unending. Then he tells a parable of a king who forgives a servant an astonishing amount of debt. But the servant proceeds to violently attack a fellow servant who owes him small amount of money. The king hears about this and “un-forgives” the debt and throws the servant into prison.

The servant never truly understood how much he'd been forgiven. Otherwise, he would have had the same generous abundant compassionate attitude of the king toward his fellow servant. He thought forgiveness was a zero-sum game, meaning if he gave it away to others, he would not have any or enough for himself.

The servant did not understand the kind of blessing that was flowing into his life through the forgiveness he received. So, he chose not to live with the abundance of compassion, which is not limited. He ended up experiencing the kind of scarcity and fear he was expecting.

Later on (Matt. 19:16-30), after a rich young ruler walks away and Jesus announces how

difficult it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God, the disciples begin to worry they have made a bad investment by following Jesus. Peter again speaks for the group, “We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?” He feared scarcity.

Jesus’ answer again is a resounding No to their scarcity mentality, their assumption that God’s economics are a zero-sum game, that the things they have sacrificed are lost forever. He says, “Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.” This is the true way of God – inflation and reward, beyond our comprehension.

You see, Jesus messes with our traditional ways of thinking. We are so culturally bound up in the world’s habits and sins, that we need repeated examples of how to move from A to B. From security to generosity. From earning to receiving. From exceptionalism to inclusion. From fear to compassion. From scarcity to abundance. And next week, from power over to power with. Each time we play “win/lose,” we pay homage to the idol of scarcity. Abundance is a faint memory at best. These are simple but hard truths to take in, absorb & grow deep in our guts.

When Mary washed Jesus’ feet with perfume and used her hair to wipe his feet, Judas reacts to the huge waste of a resource the disciples could use, while he stole some. Jesus’ response, “Leave her alone. It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial.”

In Brasil I had a conversation with an MCC volunteer about how much the mission board was spending per convert. I don’t remember why the conversation turned that direction, but I do remember he brought it up. He was thinking zero – sum, efficiency, cost savings, and so on, with a set dollar figure, all of which need to be considered. But I stressed, God’s math & love & abundance & economy & compassion are what following Jesus is about. Regardless of cost – it matters to those who choose to follow Jesus.

Here is a story I have loved ever since I first came across it. I do understand that being cost efficient is a good value. All the time, we must ingest, learn, appreciate, and live out God’s values. A young girl was walking along a beach upon which thousands of starfish had been washed up during a terrible storm. When she came to each starfish, she would pick it up, and throw it back into the ocean. People watched her with amusement.

She had been doing this for some time when a man approached her & said, “Little girl, why are you doing this? Look at this beach! You can’t save all these starfish. You can’t begin to make a difference!”

The girl seemed crushed, suddenly deflated. But, after a few moments, she bent down, picked up another starfish, and hurled it as far as she could into the ocean. Then she looked the man in the eye, and replied, “Well, I made a difference for that one!” It’s like the parable of the Great Shephard with 99 sheep, seeking for the lost 1. (Matt. 18:10-14)

The old man looked at the girl inquisitively & thought about what she had done & said. Inspired, he joined the little girl in throwing starfish back into the sea. Soon others joined, and all the starfish were saved.

Mary’s outrageous act of abundant worshipful love, should let us know that Mary is an example for us. Jesus’ response is a warning that we need to be careful we don’t use the poor as a means to our own end, for our own benefit, like Judas wanted. It’s a reason why Jesus defended her.

What stands out from Mary’s anointing is what matters most is simple faithful, action, with no stated return. And just being fully with Jesus. We put so much weight on right beliefs and doctrine, which are very important, that we miss Mary most likely did not fully understand Jesus, but she acted out a faith that resonates deeply with what we know of Jesus’ kingship, his purpose on earth, and his death.

As we seek God's way, we move from a place where fear dictates our actions to a space where our response to others, including Jesus, is guided by compassion, like Mary's.

As we seek God's way, we move from the fear that there is not enough for us, to the freedom of living within God's abundant protection.

Our text from **Isaiah** reminds us that God has a new way. God's way offers amazing abundance and compassion in a wilderness place of scarcity and fear, beyond our wildest imaginations.

We find this surprising abundance in Paul's words to the **Philippians**: everything else is like trash next to knowing Christ, the source of abundance. Oneness in Christ transforms us to be generous and compassionate, to humbly receive grace and share it with all.

**Mary's** anointing of Jesus embodies this abundant way. She gave everything she had without expecting anything in return. She was criticized for using expensive oil in this way by those who viewed it from a scarcity mindset. Her critics were not thinking, "This is Jesus! Nothing else matters!" It can be scary to give everything we have to Jesus, "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead because everything but Jesus is garbage." (Phil 3:8 &13).

Let's leave behind zero sum thinking and habits. God's ways go way beyond the limits of the world's values. The Almighty's cake is limitless. Our Creator owns everything. It's His world. He is always for win – win. He owns the cattle on a thousand hills and is compassionate.

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