

“Meeting Jesus at the Table: Dining Alfresco”
Matthew 14:13-21

We begin today a new sermon series with the hope of meeting Jesus at the tables of our lives. I am using the book *Meeting Jesus at the Table* by Cynthia Campbell and Christine Coy Fohr. The funny thing about this week’s encounter with Jesus is that we begin not at a traditional table that is made by human hands, but at the table of the earth. It is a powerful place to begin as the whole earth is God’s table for us and it is a table of abundance and incredible generosity. And the story for today reminds us of that abundance which is so essential to our mentality of scarcity.

We live at a time when a scarcity mindset seems to be the norm. The messages around us all involve the ideas of scarcity: We don’t have enough time, energy, health, money, youth, beauty, etc. Consider how the rise of inflation and the current price of eggs have impacted us spiritually and emotionally.

In her book, *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We can Prosper Together*, Heather McGhee highlights this mindset of scarcity. She writes, “The Zero-Sum Game, has perpetuated racism and how that stinginess of imagination costs **ALL** of us.” Throughout the book McGhee shows many examples of how when White Americans have fought against public benefits like healthcare, income security, a clean environment, and even access to recreational facilities for fear that “undeserving” people would get something, the loss of these communal benefits ended up hurting White Americans as much, if not more, than the marginalized communities they were trying to keep from those same resources. Here is a clip of a video by Heather McGhee: https://youtu.be/wlK_wJLLVS0.

As people of faith, we know that this mentality of scarcity is not new. In fact, in the Bible, we hear so much about the suffering of the people because of the mentality of scarcity. People fought wars, enslaved and exploited others for the sake of resources. People distrusted God when God didn’t deliver what they wanted. Repeatedly, God had to teach the people of God about abundance and that there was enough for everyone’s need in the world. When Moses led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt and they wandered in the wilderness for forty years, they had to trust God to provide for them each day. The food they got in the wilderness, Manna, had to be collected every day without hoarding. This was a lesson in God’s economics of abundance.

When Jesus came to show God’s way of love, the lessons of the manna and of God’s provision had to be repeated. And so we have these stories of the miracle of Jesus feeding the 5000. This is the only miracle story, aside from Jesus’ resurrection, that is

found in all four Gospels. In fact, the story appears 6 times with two variations of feeding the 4000 thousand in Matthew and Mark.

Let's keep the mentality of scarcity in our minds as we listen to this story according to 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.

The disciples represent our human mentality of scarcity. Note how they say, "We have nothing." Jesus is looking at them to feed a huge crowd when they don't seem to even have enough to feed themselves. This was a time of fear and uncertainty for Jesus, his disciples, and all his followers. Just before this episode in Matthew's Gospel, the writer had recounted how Herod Antipas beheaded John the Baptist and had his head presented on a platter. Matthew has John's disciples come and tell Jesus of the execution. John the Baptist was the one who preached and prepared for the ministry of Jesus. He was his colleague in ministry, a prophet and a teacher. Matthew's Gospel account had told us of the beheading of John the Baptist - killed because he denounced Herod Antipas' marriage to his brother Philip's wife when Philip was still alive (a violation of Jewish law). After hearing the sad news, Jesus went to a lonely spot as a direct response to John's execution. Maybe Jesus saw the writing on the wall for him. He could be next. But people followed Jesus to his place of solitude. Maybe they needed to be comforted and assured themselves. The world was closing in on them! The dream of the Kingdom of God becoming a reality in their lives seemed so unlikely under the political circumstances of their day.

The disciples were fearful and thus responded out of their sense of scarcity. When Jesus asked them to give people something to eat, they wanted to send the crowd away. They thought that Jesus was asking them to go out and buy food for everyone. They had forgotten about how God provided the people of Israel with manna in the desert. They had forgotten about the story of the Prophet Elisha's multiplication of the barley loaves that were given to him by a servant. They had forgotten about the power of a community sharing what they have in order to survive. They also forgot about God's vision for abundance. They were controlled by their fear of scarcity because it seemed that the Roman system of scarcity and domination was winning. Their vision of what

was possible was reduced to nothing! But when the disciples gave their five loaves and the two fish, people began to share, and the miracle happened. We don't know exactly how the miracle took place, whether it was a miracle of community sharing or direct divine intervention, but that is not the point of the story. What is important to remember is the message of Jesus about God's abundance in our lives against the story of scarcity that is told in our cultures.

This is an amazing miracle of a group of people being transformed from being fearful and grieving to a people who are able to step outside of themselves to serve the greater good of the whole community. Their worldview was headed in the direction of a survival mode, but this miracle was about them being rerouted into the path of faith, generosity and openness.

Today we are invited to meet Jesus at the table of the earth, where God's abundance is so evident and where miracles happen all the time. Spring is upon us, and it is an incredible season of rebirth and renewal for our part of the world. New life is emerging everywhere reminding us to let this abundance seep into our souls to see that the laws of the world are those of abundance, no matter how bleak our realities may seem.

One of the places that I see this mentality of abundance in our world today is in the work and mission of World Central Kitchen. Wherever disaster strikes, in our country and around the world, people mobilize through this organization to feed the hungry. They don't take sides. Instead, they focus on helping neighbors near and far to meet their basic human need for food. The reason I share this today is to invite you during this season of Lent to pay attention to and celebrate the abundance of God and of people's sharing wherever you see it in your life and in our communities. Pay attention to where Jesus is at the table of the earth: https://youtu.be/2Gphj_VaXL0.

May the Spirit of God's grace and abundance stir our hearts to commune with God and with one another at the table of the earth each and every day. Amen.