

September 14, 2025

Rev. Lisa Schrott

1 Kings 17:7-16 & Ephesians 2:14-22

*The Economics of Justice. Theologies of Scarcity & Abundance*

We are in the final week of our worship series exploring the economics of justice. The first two weeks focused on how our sinfulness as individuals and as a society contributes to economic injustice through the behaviors of envy, coveting, idolatry and greed. Last week we took a turn and considered the positive ways we can live as a people to promote economic justice through living in covenantal community. This morning we draw the series to a close by considering our theology of scarcity and abundance.

The story from 1 Kings Judi read is one where scarcity and abundance are on full display. It is hard not to miss the point of trusting God to provide even when the situation seems dire. The text I am going to read from Ephesians is a bit more nuanced. When you hear it, you might say to yourself that this was an odd text Lisa chose to reflect on abundance and scarcity. And it just might be. However, I chose the passage because of its theology – our understanding of who God is – of the attributes of the embodied God – that is Jesus Christ.

In his commentary on the book of Ephesians<sup>1</sup>, New Testament scholar Dr. Stan Saunders describes Ephesians as depicting the Christian life as a battle against cosmic and worldly powers that enslave humankind and darken our awareness and understanding. Hello, mindset of scarcity. Christ has overcome these forces and now rules the cosmos, creating a new humanity. Hello, mindset of abundance. Hear now these words from the Apostle Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, chapter 2: 14-22

For Christ is our peace; in his flesh he has made both into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us, abolishing the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.

So Christ came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near, for through Christ both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone; in Christ the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God. **The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.**

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<sup>1</sup> Stan Saunders. The Book of Ephesians. *The Discipleship Study Bible*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2008, p1990.

You may remember the slogan if you are around my age or older. It was plastered on bumper stickers and T-shirts, on coffee mugs and hats. “He who dies with the most toys wins.” The saying was attributed to businessman Malcom Forbes.<sup>2</sup> In the late 1980’s and early 1990’s when the phrase was in vogue, I was in college and then graduate school. As grad students, we adjusted the language to “she who has the most publications wins”. We said it with irony and humor, and also as a bit of inspiration, to keep going when an experiment didn’t work or Reviewer 2’s comments got us down. Like many in the academic world, we both accepted that there was some truth to the saying, and we rejected that we were going to live our lives as slaves to this mantra. And yet this “zero sum game thinking” influenced us. At times we fell victim to a mindset of scarcity - this idea there is somehow a finite amount of toys or publications and I need to claim mine, I need to stockpile mine so that I can win the ultimate trophy upon my death.

The widow of Zarephath from 1 Kings also had zero sum thinking. I can only imagine what she thought about Elijah’s request to make a cake – some bread – for him. She only had a little flour and a little oil. She was prepared to make a last meal for her and her son. And Elijah said to her, “Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said, but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterward make something for yourself and your son.” Elijah further promised that the jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the drought ends. The widow went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days.

There are many lessons of faith and trust in this story, and one that often gets overlooked is Elijah’s first words to the widow in his request for a cake: “Do not be afraid.” Do not fear. These are words we hear throughout scripture. Words to reassure us of God’s presence when we are being asked to do something difficult. To take a risk. And living with a theology of abundance in the center of our lives is risky. It asks us to give of ourselves fully and completely. It asks us to put the good of the whole above our own comfort. It asks us to trade commodity thinking for covenantal thinking. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann defines commodity thinking as “you share with your neighbor stuff that you can afford.” “Covenantal thinking says that you share first with your neighbor, and then you and your neighbor live on what you’ve got together.”<sup>3</sup>

What is your theology of scarcity and abundance? As we have been walking through scriptures relating to the economics of justice, an underlying theme and a bedrock principle has been a theology of either scarcity or abundance. Scarcity is the master that coveting, envy, and greed bow to. It breeds fear that others will attain more or achieve more. It breeds hatred of those who are perceived to have received more in life than you. It draws your life smaller, as you worry about your stockpile dwindling.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.stgeorgeutah.com/opinion/of-grave-concern-he-who-dies-with-the-most-toys-may-win-but-he-s/article\\_51b79496-e8ad-58e5-8ba3-0ca846a90671.html](https://www.stgeorgeutah.com/opinion/of-grave-concern-he-who-dies-with-the-most-toys-may-win-but-he-s/article_51b79496-e8ad-58e5-8ba3-0ca846a90671.html)

<sup>3</sup> Walter Brueggemann. *A Gospel of Hope*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2018; p2.

Scripture offers a counternarrative. We can put aside this old life and embrace being a new creation. Jesus prepares the disciples for his death and resurrection by teaching them that the Kingdom of God operates with a different set of parameters. The first shall be last, and the last shall be first. The loaves and fish are stretched to feed all. The kingdom of God is like a vineyard owner who pays all the same wages, who invites all to the banquet. The kingdom of God turns hierarchies upside down. It does not function as an “us” vs. “them” world.

The apostle Paul picks up on this theme in his letter to the Ephesians. Paul tells the church there are things they need to give up and put away – gossiping and thievery, sexual sin and vulgar talk, anger and slander and bitterness. These sinful behaviors disrupt community or prevent community from being established in the first place.

Instead the church is to embrace expansiveness, inclusion and welcome. Gone are the divisions, gone is the hostility. As we heard in verses 14-15 “For Christ is our peace; in his flesh he has made both into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us ... that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two.” Christ’s death and resurrection redeem us as individuals AND they make possible a world where there is a singular community of love and grace.

The church in Ephesus had a lot of issues that were dividing them, but two of the most prominent were ethnic and religious background and social status. The divisions between those of Jewish heritage and those who came to follow Christ as Gentiles from what is now Turkey and Greece is a major theme of the Apostle Paul’s letters to the church. But as Walter Brueggemann notes in a commentary on money and possessions, economics was also a dividing wall. There were divisions between the “have and the have-nots.” Brueggemann says, “The letter [to the Ephesians] proposes that the “new self” embraces practices that resist such divisions and distinctions. A context of rivalry and competition may indeed generate “bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander.”... Paul urges, against such destructive behavior, a stance of neighborliness that would eschew such competitive hostility.”<sup>4</sup>

Yesterday, our regional Presbytery of Lake Michigan met. The preacher and keynote speaker was Omar Salinas-Chacón, a Mission Specialist for Migration Accompaniment Ministries with the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance agency in our national PC(USA) office. A group of us from PCO had a chance to visit with Mr. Salinas-Chacón on Friday and learn more about the PC(USA)’s response to refugees, asylum seekers, and other forced migrants at the border and throughout the country. Some of this work is advocacy with legislative bodies and some of it hands on work in congregations. At the Presbytery meeting yesterday, Omar preached during the worship service and presented a keynote address, after which the Presbytery voted to become a Sanctuary and Accompaniment Presbytery.

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<sup>4</sup> Walter Brueggemann. *Money and Possessions. Interpretation. Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church.* Westminster John Knox, 2016, p229.

In his sermon, Omar shared a story about his family fleeing from El Salvador following some horrific violence and the challenges they faced in America. From navigating a new language and cultural traditions to securing housing and employment for his parents and school for Omar and his brother, it was a uphill climb that made them wonder about their future. And he shared how the abundance of one man – whom he referred to as John Wayne – changed the trajectory of their lives by inviting them to a Thanksgiving meal. It was not a gourmet meal and Omar humorously shared his reactions to the food. But that didn't matter one bit. It was the generous hospitality of a shared meal. Of someone who believed in living and loving abundantly, of someone who displayed covenantal thinking rather than commodity thinking. Omar stressed to those of us at the Presbytery meeting the importance of just doing something. Of not worrying about perfection, of pretty dishes and gourmet feasts. It is about stepping up and extending a hand out of an abundance of love.

After we had shared communion together as a Presbytery, we sang a hymn that was new to me, *Abraham Journeyed to a New Country* by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette. In her notes about this hymn, she writes: "Throughout the Bible, we see stories of immigrants - people called to settle in new lands and begin new lives for a variety of reasons, people who trusted in God's protection along the way. ... He [Jesus] also taught that all people will be judged on their compassion for those in need and their welcome of strangers.... The Church is called to follow the Bible's teachings by welcoming and supporting immigrants today."<sup>5</sup> One of the verses of the hymn included this language about those seeking a new home:

*Did they know hardship? Did they know danger? Who shared a home or gave them some bread? Who reached a hand to welcome the stranger? Who saw their fear and gave hope instead?*

Who saw their fear and gave hope instead? And Elijah said to the widow, "Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said, but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterward make something for yourself and your son." And the Apostle Paul said to the church in Ephesus, "For Christ is our peace; in his flesh he has made both into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us."

To say that there is a lot of hostility in our world right now seems like the most obvious understatement of all time. There is a lot of zero sum thinking going on. A lot of theologies of scarcity driven by fear of the "other." A lot of scarcity of grace and compassion and empathy. Scripture shows us a different path. Jesus calls us to a different kind life. A life lived with abundance at its heart. A life that believes the Good News that in Jesus Christ we are a new creation. The old life of coveting, envy and greed is gone and a new life has begun. We are a new creation, trading commodity thinking for abundant life in covenantal community. So let us have arms open wide to embrace and hands open fully to give and voices strong in singing a theology of abundance in a world so desperate to hear it. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> [http://www.carolynshymns.com/abraham\\_journeyed\\_to\\_a\\_new\\_country.html](http://www.carolynshymns.com/abraham_journeyed_to_a_new_country.html)