

John 6:1-21

There's a book titled "Abundance: The Future is Better than You Think" by Peter Diamandis and Steven Kotler. In it the authors, "tell the story of how aluminum went from being one of the rarest metals on the planet to being one of the most abundant..." In the 1800s, aluminum was more valuable than silver and gold because it was rarer. So when Napoleon III entertained the King of Siam, the king and his guests were honored by being given aluminum utensils, while the rest of the dinner party ate with gold. But aluminum is not really rare. In fact, aluminum is the third most abundant element in the Earth's crust...but it wasn't until chemists...discovered how to use electrolysis to cheaply separate aluminum from surrounding materials that the element became suddenly abundant. ("The World is Better Than Ever" by Sveta McShane. Medium.com). It's hard to believe today that aluminum was ever considered rare...it's now the most abundant and commonly used metal in the world.

Aluminum (or as Fr. Mark would say – Alyoo-minium) reminds me a bit of the loaves and fish in our story today, where an extremely scarce resource suddenly produces an abundance when a new perspective and approach is applied. In the case of aluminum, it was creative technology that paved the way to abundance. In the Gospel story, it was faith that paved the way for abundance. And there are many, many stories illustrating the concept of abundance throughout the Bible, often contrasting God's abundance with the human mindset of scarcity.

For example: in the exodus story in Genesis--in the desert all the Israelites could see was the dry, lifeless wilderness around them and were sure they'd starve. They see scarcity. Then God provides manna from heaven, and plenty of it, an abundance. The problem was, the people were so fearful, they began hoarding and hiding the manna in their tents. And let's be honest: it's exactly what you and I would probably do, as would most Americans. Back in December of 1973 Johnny Carson made a joke during his monologue saying that America's scarcest resource was toilet paper.

Can you guess what happened? The next morning 20 million viewers went out and bought TP and by noon the stores were all sold out...panic and hoarding ensued. Poor Johnny had to offer an apology to the public for his joke.

And then we have the story in 1 Kings of the prophet Elijah during a famine when a widow, in faith, feeds him her last bit of bread and miraculously the oil and flour continue to produce an abundance, saving them all from starvation. Or the story in John's Gospel at the wedding feast in Cana when the wine runs out and Jesus turns plain water into an abundance of the finest wine. Jesus often calls us to a mindset of abundance – like his parable of the tiny mustard seed of faith that is able to move mountains. There are many examples like this in Scripture.

And then think about our universe itself - how vast and incredible our universe is: cosmologists explain that we can observe only a portion of our universe. They estimate the universe is about 14 billion years old- which means light has only had 14 billion years to travel through it. Thus, the most distant regions of the universe we can see are 14 billion light-years away. That is the extent of the "observable universe," but, they tell us, our universe is probably much, much larger. In fact, it could even extend infinitely in all directions...we just don't know.

My initial reaction to this information was the feeling that God has been rather wasteful about creation. I mean, why do we need all that universe? Seems a bit much. But then I studied some of the fascinating details about our universe that make life possible for us on earth.

Scientists tell us: When the Big Bang occurred billions of years ago, the matter in the universe was randomly distributed. There were no stars, planets or galaxies—just atoms floating about in the dark void of space. As the universe expanded outwards from the Big Bang, gravity pulled ever so gently on the atoms, gathering them into clumps that eventually became stars and galaxies. But gravity had to have just the right force—if it was a bit stronger, it would have pulled all the atoms together into one big ball. And if gravity was a bit

weaker, the expanding universe would have distributed the atoms so widely that they would never have been gathered into stars and galaxies...if we change the strength of gravity by even a tiny fraction of a percent—even one billionth of a gram heavier or lighter—the universe becomes so different that there are no stars, galaxies, or planets....that is, no life (source: biologos.org).

There are many examples like this in our universe, but the more you learn about this enormous universe of ours the more it looks like it has been very finely tuned to sustain life on a planet like ours. So my thinking has changed: perhaps God is not wasteful, God is simply a God of extravagant abundance. In all this vast abundance, we have exactly what we humans need. And yes, that means there could very well be planets quite capable of sustaining life besides ours. It's a fun thought. But the point is, instead of seeing the vast universe and concluding that we are insignificant in it, we could just as easily conclude that we are deeply significant because of it, of deep importance to a God who loves us. And it's as if the creation and the whole universe reveals a God of abundant generosity and love.

Still, we humans tend to focus, not on what we have, but on what we don't have or might not have—on scarcity. And our entire economic system is based on the principle of scarcity— the concept that, simply put, “resources are scarce.” So how do we incorporate all these examples and texts from Scripture that challenge us to think more abundantly?

Look again at the feeding of the 5,000 from our Gospel today. This story of the feeding of the hungry is the ONLY miracle that is in all four of our Gospels, so it must be really important... it must be a lesson God wants us to learn and take refuge in. The disciples were operating on the scarcity principle for sure when Jesus asks them to feed the crowd. They look out at all the hungry people and tell Jesus that it is impossible to feed the crowd with a couple loaves of bread and some fish. It's hard to argue with their logic. They say basically, “Uh, Jesus, our resources are scarce. There ain't

enough.” In fact, the crowd was so large scholars estimate if there were 5,000 men as the text says, then once women and children were included in the count there were probably 15-20,000 people there! All of them hungry. No Costco in sight. But this is where Scripture always challenges us: where we see scarcity, God sees abundance. And it takes just one little boy who had enough childlike faith to look beyond the scarcity and offer his 5 loaves and 2 fish in his act of faith and a willingness to share.

Now, I believe Jesus may have simply performed a miracle at that moment, that as he gave thanks to God, the loaves and fish quite literally multiplied. Or, it could be like the alternate explanation that is often offered: that the miracle was one that took place in the hearts of the people— so instead of continuing to hoard and hide the food they had tucked in their coats and packs, they were moved by the faith of the little boy and, inspired by Jesus' prayer of thanksgiving, began to share their food with one another so that everyone had enough to eat, so much so that there were 12 baskets left over. Either way: it was a miracle of generous abundance that day, made possible by faith entering the equation. And the bottom line in all of these stories is that if we live by faith in God's great abundance, God, in his great love, provides.

Our perspective can always be one of abundance with the eyes of faith. Two nuns were taking a drive out in the country when, all of a sudden, their car died. The driver suddenly realized they'd run out of gas. Fortunately, there was a farm just up the road. The nuns asked for help and the farmer was very gracious and offered to siphon some gas out of his truck for them. But there was no gas can. They looked around the barn and the only thing they could find to pour the gas into was an old bedpan. “It will work,” said the farmer, “and there's a gas station just up the road.” So, the nuns filled up the bedpan and walked back to their car. They saw another car parked behind their car, an orthodox Jewish Rabbi, getting ready to come and help. The nuns waved at him, said they're fine, and one started pouring from the bedpan into their gas tank, while the other said a brief prayer of thanks to God. The Rabbi was confused — seeing one nun praying and the other pouring from a bedpan into

the gas tank. Again the nuns assured him everything's fine. As he started to drive away he stopped and said: "Ladies, we may not share the same exact religious beliefs, but, boy, do I admire your faith!"

Faith in a God who provides is the key to abundant living. Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it more abundantly." If we're living with a mindset of scarcity, Jesus' invitation and the faith of that little boy on the mount invite us into a new vision for abundance: our God is a God of abundance. And in fact, every time we gather at the Lord's Table for the Great Thanksgiving, the Eucharist, and we give thanks and receive the bread of Christ, it multiplies to bring us spiritual blessings far beyond what our eyes can see. This is a key symbol for the life of faith.

Someone must have told this to a certain nun, who came to her superiors with three pennies and a dream from God to build an orphanage in Calcutta. They tried to discourage her, saying she couldn't build an orphanage--or anything else for that matter--with three pennies. But Mother Theresa told them that with God and three pennies, she could do anything. And she did.

And so can we.

AMEN.