**“The Scarcity of Abundant Love”**

A sermon by The Rev. Christopher Wendell

For the 15th Sunday after Pentecost

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St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford MA

Do you remember getting your first paycheck? I don’t mean the first paycheck you received at your current job, if you are currently working. And I don’t mean the first time a parent or a relative gave you money for doing something around the house that you probably should have just done anyway. I mean your first real paycheck.

I was ten or maybe eleven. It was summer and I was bored. So my parents made me get a part time job for a general contractor, sweeping up their shop and cleaning out their toilet. After my first two weeks, Nancy the manager, gave me an envelope with a check in. I was very proud to get that check. I felt a flush of accomplishment at having done something worthwhile. At seeing my labor create value. At knowing that I’d worked hard and had earned what I was about to receive.

I opened the envelope. In addition to the check there was a piece of paper with a lot of little writing on it and different numbers. My ten year old brain wasn’t quite sophisticated enough to understand exactly what was going on -- but it knew enough to get the headline. What it seemed to be saying was that though I’d earned $78, I was only being paid $56. Someone named FICA was getting the rest. FICA – I wonder who that is…? And then, in an instant, something terrible happened. All those positive feelings of personal accomplishment, pride in having worked hard, and self-satisfaction for having earned something through my labor – they all vanished. In no time at all, they were consumed by an even stronger feeling...the feeling that what was going on here was just not fair.

Now here’s the thing. If I’d just gotten a check for $56 (or whatever it was), without all the accounting showing that I was getting less than I’d earned, I am sure I would have walked out of there feeling good about what I’d done. But because I had this extra knowledge about what I was supposed to be paid, all of a sudden it wasn’t enough. I felt cheated.

This is the clearest illustration from my own life of the tension between living with an outlook of abundance and living with an outlook of scarcity. I’m particularly fascinated by how quickly I was plunged from the former state into the latter: How quickly my sense of self-worth at a job well done, of feeling good about my work ethic and perseverance, turned into a feeling of being wronged because I felt I was entitled to more. I’d gone from abundance to scarcity in about four seconds – like someone going 60 had just slammed on the brakes.

Today’s Gospel about the laborers in the vineyard invites us into the inner life of our competing feelings of abundance and scarcity. In the parable that Jesus tells, some workers arrive in the fields early in the morning and work all day, while others arrive at lunchtime, and still others in the mid-afternoon. When evening comes and it is time for the workers to be paid, those who have been working all day receive the same amount as those who came in the mid-afternoon. The ones who worked longer feel cheated. They feel entitled to receive more because they worked more. They get grumpy. They begin to complain. Whatever feelings of satisfaction they should be enjoying having worked a full day and received their agreed upon wage are wiped out in an instant by the feeling that they deserve more. You can almost hear the groans of “it’s not fair” through 2000 years of history.

The way Jesus tells the parable includes an important detail that we sometimes overlook. It says that the Master (who is a stand-in for God), specifically says that the workers who came last are to be paid first. This means that the ones who worked all day *had to watch* the late-arrivals get paid, and they then assumed they’d get more. It is the frustration of this expectation that causes their complaint a few moments later when they compare their wages with their fellow worker. Of course, if the Master had let the full-day workers had been paid first – they would’ve simply taken their pay and left, and never been any the wiser that they were paid the same amount as the latecomers. They probably would have been content, happy, full of a spirit of gratitude for what they had, rather than envy for what another received. But that isn’t what happened.

It is as if Jesus sets up the parable this way in order to teach us something – perhaps to teach us that the human concept of fairness can limit us as people of faith. So much of our human understanding of what is fair, is rooted in the fear of scarcity. When we are very concerned that things are distributed fairly, it’s mostly because we’re worried that there won’t be enough of that thing to go around: whether it is slices of cake at a birthday party, or wealth in a global economy, or hours in the day, or the love of a parent. It has to be fair, we think, because there might not be enough. It’s not always a selfish instinct. It can be altruistic too. Sometimes we’re concerned about fairness because we want to be sure someone else, perhaps someone with less power, strength, or authority, gets their share. But even when the motives are altruistic, always the human concern with fairness is rooted in an attitude of scarcity: the fear that there won’t be enough.

That is never a problem when it comes to God. Because God’s love isn’t a scarce resource: it isn’t a zero-sum game. God’s love is abundant: more love for someone else does not mean less love available for you. In the economy of God’s love, there’s always enough to go around. And so the more deeply we grow in our quest to love God, the less we are afraid of scarcity – the less we need to protect ourselves against the occasional unfairnesses of life.

And that’s the point of the Gospel story. Jesus’ parable is itself an allegory for the love of God. All the workers receive the same salary because God loves everyone the same – no matter how much work you do (or don’t do) for God, no matter how long it takes you to find your way into God’s fellowship of love, no matter why it took that length of time. God has an endless supply of divine love and forgiveness and grace radiating outward to all those who are curious about what it might be like to work in God’s vineyard. God does not care whether you’ve been around you’re whole life or are new to the party. And God wants to give us every bit of the forgiveness and love that we need to get somewhere good. That’s because God’s love isn’t something we can ever earn. It’s God’s free gift to us, there for us to accept and enjoy and be transformed by.

This kind of abundance can be shocking to us. After all, the world we live in seems to be defined by a sense of scarcity. No one ever seems to feel that they have enough; and most of the human economy is engineered to reinforce those feelings within us. And yet, Jesus reminds us again and again that we already have the most important thing we need: an endless supply of love from the one who knows us most fully. There may be places in our lives where an attitude of scarcity still reigns – where it is hard to move away from the fear that there won’t be enough either for ourselves or for others. But the good news of the Gospel today is that God is offering us a fully abundant life – a life based on trust in the abundance of God’s love and in the community of those who love God -- if we can only find the moral courage to live that life.

So the question before us today is how can we, at whatever point we are in in our lives, be transformed by the abundance of God’s love? How can our experience of an abundant love at the center of the universe, free us from our own human fears of scarcity? How can we come to love others, our neighbors, with this same kind of abundant love – rather than treating them as competition for scarce resources?

The choice to live more in an abundant frame of mind, to challenge our feelings of scarcity and the envy and hostility they fester, is the choice to live as a person of faith. It is the choice that most fully honors the gift of God’s abundant love for us. It is the choice to be more faithful in treating others the way God treats us. And it is the choice to trust that as we build a community grounded in abundant love, though we may not get everything we want in every second, we will all get what we most need. Amen