

**Trinity Institute, *The Good News Now – Evolving with the Gospel of Jesus***

Excuse me. Can you tell me where I could find Abundance? I am looking for a place called Abundance. I can't seem to find it. Hello. Hello. Do you know where Abundance is? I know it's here somewhere. No. I don't live in this neighborhood. In fact, I live very far away, a two-fare zone. I had to catch two trains and a bus, and I've been walking, and walking, and walking, and here I am, and I know I must be getting close, but I can't seem to find it. I'm looking for Abundance. Have you heard of it? It's a food pantry, called Abundance.

I got my paperwork. I heard about it all the way over where I live. Yeah. I live in a place called Scarcity. Scarcity is a long way away, and in Scarcity, we have a food pantry, too, but in our food pantry you get a can of meat, and two cans of vegetables, and then you get two cans of beans, and a bag of rice, and some pasta. That's it, till the end of the month. Even if you have nothing at home, that's all you get. So all the way over in Scarcity, we heard the good news about Abundance. So I said, "Let me get myself together, and get my paperwork together, and go over and find out where Abundance is." So see, I got my paperwork, and that's the address, but that's what I can't find. See, it says, "Abundance Food Pantry." Look, the motto says, "Look to us to give you food in due season, and you will be filled with good things." That's worth a trip, right? I'm going to find it.

I know I must be getting close, because I've been traveling such a long time. Now I heard that it was in a church, but I don't see that either. At Abundance Food Pantry, as I understand it, it's all you can eat. So there are enough groceries for me, and for you, and for all your families, and there's no limit on that. That's worthwhile. So I'm going to keep trying, and keep trying, and keep trying until I find that Abundance. Let me know if you see it.

Good morning.

(Chorus of good morning)

Good morning. I am very glad to be here to try to find abundance, all of us together. And my special thanks to Bob, and to the whole Trinity team for their kindness and hospitality. So that embodiment that you just saw, I put it together to try to manifest, make tangible the title of this presentation. So my title is "The Then and There of Abundance." It was motivated by my own experience of being both a minister in a church with a very busy food pantry, like maybe some of you are as well, as well as being a parent in a time of cuts in our feeding programs, not only in our city, but in our entire nation. It's within this context that this conference calls us to ask the question: What is abundant life? What is the good news of abundant life for that character in the embodiment? She's looking for a food pantry, and yet she's seeking abundant life. What is the good news of abundant life for all of us who are gathered

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here in the sanctuary and at our partner sites?

So the character in the presentation, she was on a journey, and it just kept going on, and on, and on. She had come from a place called Scarcity, and she's now trying to find this place called Abundance. She's heard about it, but never seen it. It's a mystery, but she's trying to find it and having a very difficult time locating that. Maybe you can relate. So her place that she's trying to find called Abundance actually is not an idyllic scene, you know, of the Garden of Eden, but it's just simply a food pantry, that because of her poverty, she is paradoxically seeking that food pantry called Abundance. The character, and her movements, and her gestures were inspired by the mostly women who come into our food pantry from day to day to get food.

In preparation for this talk I spent time in the pantry with my artistic observation antenna fully on. I went beyond my usual efforts at simple ministerial hospitality and greeting to engage in artistic and even slightly ethnographic observation. My goal was to study these children of God, who could all be classified in that official bureaucratic sounding term of food insecure. Now they make claims on the notion of abundant life as well. And I wanted to investigate their claims as well as ours either in the here and now or in the there and then. So by positioning the character on a journey, I want us all to take note of the distance. We don't know how long, how many miles, but it was a great distance. We also know that it was a great distance of space, and time, and in ways of thinking. So when I refer to this notion of the there and then, I acknowledge the work of Professor Jose Munoz, who does work in performance theory and queer theory, and so like Professor Munoz, in my use of the term "there and then," I also aim to signal toward a future of abundance. Differently, though, I use the term to also point to spiritual and Biblical history marked by the abundance in the creation story and in the Gospels. But before I go too far, I should describe the on-the-ground motivation for these thoughts as well.

As I stand here speaking to you in this beautiful sanctuary right now, at my home, on my refrigerator, I have two notes. I have two kids, two notes, one from each child's school, on the instructions for us this year on how we are to participate in the Thanksgiving food drive. You know what I mean? I know that you probably have some of those notes, too. So we do this every year that we participate in this Thanksgiving food drive. And at the same time, each day I walk into our busy New York City church, which four days a week has a bustling and demanding food pantry, and ostensibly, a recipient of some of those food drives, right, and on any day there could be 50 or 60 clients there arriving to get groceries to supplement, not groceries to fill their whole month, but groceries to supplement what they have most likely procured through the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program, which is known as SNAP in this country. It's a federal program, and it's administered by the USDA.

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Last year our pantry alone, just our pantry, served the equivalent of just under 90,000 meals. This year's needs are ahead of last year's. So the woman in the embodiment was a composite of those people, who come in just everyday. The grocery cart is a very common thing that you see. Obviously, you're going to take groceries home. You wheel them home. The baggy clothing is on purpose, for some reason. It seems to be a commonality. The paperwork and showing the paperwork, which is an admission ticket almost. Showing that paperwork is part of it. And also the uneven gait. So that was a signaling toward wounds that may have happened at some point in the physical, in the spiritual, in the psyche, but there's a woundedness that's being carried into the walk each day into the food pantry.

And yet, Jesus' words from the Gospel still resonate in my mind and heart, "I came that they might have life and have it more abundantly." Certainly, food, just simple food, not fancy food, just simple food, life's basic necessity, is a powerful place to engage our Christian traditions, relationship with abundance. So this morning I propose to you that right now, in this moment of history that we live in, we're actually between two moments, one in the past, and one in the future. So we live between a biblical and spiritual legacy of creation and Gospel abundance, and with the eyes of our faith we look toward a time when there shall be abundance and enough.

So this future that I'm articulating is hopefully not only an eschatological, but a future that we may, in our flesh, see on this plane. However, the moment that we live in today is marked by a sense of, a perception of, a belief in scarcity. So Professor Walter Brueggemann, in his very famous article, which is entitled, "The Liturgy of Abundance, The Myth of Scarcity" reminds us of the biblical story of creation is a story of God's generosity and God's abundance. God created this world that we know in fruitfulness, in bounteousness, enough resources for all of earth's inhabitants to live, and to love, and to produce food, and create families, and create communities, and to share. That is the notion of creation that we are given, and that we inherit with our faith. So God's acts of creating were so magnificent that it took many biblical generations before a concept of scarcity even arose in the Bible. Brueggemann argues that Pharaoh, in the Joseph cycle of stories, in Genesis, introduces the notion of scarcity. So it was Pharaoh who looks at the Egyptian agricultural situation at that time and became very afraid, and in his fear he decided that there would not be enough, there could never be enough, and so what to do? Hoard. Take it all. Put it away. Don't let anybody get to it, except in small, small amounts. His response was to hoard everything, thus creating scarcity.

God's eventual response to the scarcity occurs in a different place, rather than in Egypt. By this point, the children of Israel have already left, and are seeking

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emancipation by way of the wilderness. It happens during the Exodus, as they are afraid. Again, fear does seem to be a common thing, as they are afraid and forgetful of God's generosity in creation. On that long Exodus journey they are also between the place of enslavement and the place of freedom. So while they are in this liminal spot, God reminds them of the fruitfulness and generosity of creation by sending them manna in the wilderness. What a wonderful gift. A sign of grace. You couldn't make it. You couldn't bake it. You couldn't take it. It was manna in the wilderness. You can't hoard manna, right? You have to accept manna, only get enough for you and your beloved, your family and your household. That's it. You couldn't keep some back in the back in case an emergency happened.

And then the manna didn't come on the Sabbath. So you had to just chill out, at least one day out there in the wilderness, and not to hustle for everything that you had to get. That was God's gift, to remind them of the beauty and the bounteousness of creation. So Jesus, in the Gospel of John, reiterates these images of abundance from the Hebrew Scriptures. The prologue of the Gospel of John revisits the creation story, and revivifies God's performative generosity and abundance in creation, in the wonderful story, that never gets old, of the feeding of the 5,000.

Jesus gathers all those people who are on a journey, and he notices that it's lunchtime, and they're hungry. And from his place of compassion, he feeds them by finding a young boy with a small lunch, and creating it into more than anyone could imagine. All those people, who were on that geographic journey, also go on a journey from scarcity to abundance, from physical hunger, to the satisfaction of abundance. And even then there were leftovers. Leftovers. Can you just imagine?

So like the woman that I embodied from the food pantry earlier, we are on a journey, and we don't know how long the journey is. Even in this time when scarcity is so much around us and pervasive we faithfully strive toward a hopeful future of abundance. So here are a few current signs of hope.

So one sign of hope that I see in our times is that Dr. Jim Yong Kim, who's the president of the World Bank, he's the new president of the World Bank, is predicting and working very hard to create the end of extreme poverty on the globe by 2013. To me, that's a sign of hope that will be a new place of living for us. Another sign of hope from the World Health Organization is that breast feeding of newborn infants is increasing all over the globe. Another sign of hope, which we have to dig into a little bit, is related to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program cuts. Now probably in our churches or in *The New York Times* you've read about what's happening with Congress and these cuts, but the good news is that you are the sign of hope, we are the sign of hope together. We live in a democratic country, and so right now there is a situation where debates are happening over the farm bill. The United States

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Department of Agriculture and the Farm Bill are being debated. And there's not any good news from that. The Democrats are aiming to cut the Farm Bill by \$4 billion. The Republicans are aiming to cut the bill by \$40 billion. Both bad. But that's why I said you're the sign of hope, because we can call, we can advocate, we can email, we can visit our Congress people to let them know that food, as a basic necessity, is a part of God's abundance of creation, and that all God's children are part of creation. None are left out.

The woman with the grocery cart that we started out with, in her uneven gait, in her baggy clothes, with her small grocery cart, trying to put together food for her family from wherever she could, she is a part of creation as much as all of our Congress people. That is why you are the sign of hope, and so I task and charge you that once we're not here in the sanctuary, do go out and make at least one step toward advocating for people who are seeking yet on the journey, abundance.

Now there's another sign of hope, too, and this is another one where we can be the sign of hope, we can become the sign of hope. Do you know that in the United States 40 percent of all food that's produced goes uneaten, thus wasted. So waste happens at all levels, from the farm, to the factory, to our dinner tables. So that's why this is good news, because we can do something about this, right? Everybody's probably got a story about the half-eaten bologna sandwiches they were throwing away that maybe your mother said, "There are starving children in Africa. How could you throw that away?" And the response always is, "Well, why don't you send this bologna sandwich to them," right? That's a story that we've all run into.

But this is actually more detailed. There are many, many ways that we can involve ourselves in stopping the waste of food. Just taking that number down by 15 percent could create as many as 25 million more meals in the United States. Imagine what that would do for that woman on her long journey from Scarcity to Abundance, from gleaning on farms, to taking food that is not cosmetically perfect, and selling it or cooking it, to not wasting food, knowing about expiration dates, and knowing what to pay attention to, and what not to pay attention to. All those things create abundance, as God's creation, and decrease the sense of scarcity in our world. See, those leftovers in John 6 are still current for us. We use our leftovers. We must use our leftovers well.

So I would say finally that we all continue on this journey from a place called Scarcity to a place called Abundance. This Thanksgiving, as you deposit your non-perishables in the box, or send food with your children to school, remember the people who are on the journey. Each day may our bodies be nourished and may we embrace God's abundance and share it abundantly, and may all be healed, and fed, and loved in Jesus' name. Amen.

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