

## **FREEDOM FROM SCARCITY**

2 Kings 4:1-7

Luke 9:12-17

Kelly Boyte Brill  
Avon Lake UCC  
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In 2 Kings chapter 4, we are given a story that goes something like this: There is a woman whose husband had been a member of the company of the prophets, a group of the up and coming Israelite prophets that would have trained and traveled together, and shared similar concerns. And this woman's husband, the bread winner, dies, leaving her a widow and single parent, with no means of income. This woman appeals to Elisha, the current dean of the prophets. She says, "Your servant my husband is dead; and you know that your servant feared the Lord, but a creditor has come to take my two children as slaves." The woman has experienced a tragic loss, and, on top of that, the bank is now breathing down her neck, threatening to seize her assets to repay loans that she and her husband had taken out. Apparently there wasn't much money in the prophetic business, so the family had needed to go into debt at some point to get by. And since they were poor, the only assets they had were the labor abilities of their children, who could be sold as slaves so that the bank could recoup some of the loan.

Elisha is up against some pretty powerful forces. He asks her: “What shall I do for you?” A prophet himself, he most likely didn’t have much in the way of cash reserves. But, then he asks her another question: “Tell me, what *do* you have in the house?” Let’s get a list of your assets and see what we can do. The woman replies, “Your servant has nothing in the house...except a jar of oil.”

Elisha has no cash, but he does have faith. Having discovered that one asset that this woman has, he instructs her to go outside and borrow all the vessels she can find that her neighbors might have. All the barrels, all the jars, and the cooking pots, whatever can hold liquid inside of it – to ask her neighbors for as many as they’re willing to lend her. And then she’s to go inside, with her children, and start pouring. Pour out that one jar of oil into these vessels. She and her children do this, and her neighbors give her lots of different vessels, and they go inside, and pour out the oil, and the oil keeps pouring until they’ve filled the last vessel. And as soon as that last vessel is full, the oil runs out in that original jar.

The extent of the **ABUNDANCE** of her own meager resource, extends as far as the generosity of her neighbors in lending her their vessels. Or, to put it another way, these collective acts of neighborly sharing, add up to a miracle which creates abundance where before there

was scarcity. And, when she and her children are in their house, surrounded by these borrowed vessels full of oil, Elisha tells her – now you don't have to sell off your children. You can sell the oil, use the proceeds to pay off the loan, and keep the change for you and your children, who will not be sold into slavery but will live with you.

It's a story of neighborliness, a story that reminds us of the power we have to choose the way we see the world. We have a choice to see the world through the perspective of abundance or to see the world through the perspective of scarcity. It is a choice that has profound implications for the way we live, especially the way we live in unusually difficult times. Elisha knew that there was a scarcity of money, but he didn't let that blind him to what the woman DID have. She had oil, and from that oil came more oil, as soon as she enlisted the help of her neighbors.

We have a parallel story in the New Testament, a story that appears in all four gospels in different versions. The story goes that Jesus has been teaching a large group of people, it's nearing dinner time, and the crowd is becoming restless. The disciples look at the crowd and see a scarcity of resources. They are thinking of themselves, thinking - as I would - as I'm sure most of us would - "I'm tired, I'm hungry. It's time for us to go, Jesus; enough is enough. Send the people home. We want to go get dinner." But Jesus doesn't see scarcity. He sees community and abundance, the

love of neighbor. He takes the food that is in front of them, a few loaves of bread, a couple of pieces of fish, and he does what we do in our community that gathers together in his name. He lifts that food up to God, blesses it and shares it...and well, there are all kinds of ways to interpret this story, but sometimes I like to think it happened that the true miracle was **NOT** the bread magically multiplying but that the **HEARTS** of the people in the crowd were transformed. They had all brought food with them, and they all were getting hungry, and they were all beginning to think about that sandwich they'd packed and how good it was going to taste. Have you been in this situation? I know I have. I don't want to start eating in front of someone, because that's rude, but I also don't want to eat in front of someone because I really don't want to give them half of my sandwich.

That is scarcity thinking. That's what we do when we feel selfish, when we hoard, when we clench our fists tightly and focus on words like "mine". This is mine.

Jesus embodies a spirit of generosity. Imagine that spirit rippling through the crowd. It starts with one or two people, opening their bags, ripping a piece of pita bread in half, turning to the person sitting next to them, "Are you hungry?" "Oh, I have grapes," that neighbor says, and pretty soon someone's passing a bowl of olives, and next thing you know, it's a giant potluck...it could have happened that way. It could have

happened that the word “share” replaced the word “mine”. Instead of scarcity, people saw the possibility of abundance. Whatever happened that afternoon on the side of a hill in Galilee, it was a miracle.

Not unlike the miracles we’ve been experiencing this past week. It started for me last Friday, ten days ago. I was in my home office, working on my laptop, when I received a message from a member of our church, a woman in her 30’s. She and her husband wanted to do something to assist anyone who is being adversely affected by coronavirus. It wasn’t a casual inquiry. She said, “We stand by ready to buy grocery gift cards right now.” I wrote her back and said that it was too early to know who was affected, but I was sure we *would* have people affected, and that I would be tapping our pastoral emergency fund to provide assistance. Within five minutes, I received a notification that that young family had donated \$1000 to our Pastoral Emergency Fund.

The next day, I compiled a list of 50-some people in the church that should be contacted and checked on. Some live in senior facilities that had already been closed to visitors, some are homebound seniors, some are going through cancer treatment.

I then asked for volunteers who would like to help contact people, and volunteers who would like to be on standby to deliver groceries or pick up prescriptions for people. Then my email inbox began blowing up, and I still

haven't caught up. Within five minutes of pushing "send" on that request, I had people offering to help.

Our Membership Team and Stephen Ministers and many others have been in contact and now I'm starting on another list of folks to call and check on. An abundance of caring.

One member made quilted prayer squares for people to pick up in our prayer room and take home. One of our teenagers drove to her house, picked them up from her front porch and brought them to church.

Dan and Mary Pease cleaned out the church's freezer, filled their car, and delivered everything to the Haven Center Homeless shelter.

Then we received a call from the Fairview Park Applebee's. I don't know how they knew to call us, but they said, "We heard your church can distribute food; we have produce we need to get rid of." I called Dean Henrichsen who came back to the church with his pickup truck overflowing with cases of produce. Our Mission Team began contacting our partner agencies - "who can use fresh produce tomorrow?" I contacted the people on the Helpers List and on Thursday morning, Holly and Jeffrey Kessler and Kellie Poling filled their vehicles and drove to the Haven Center, Genesis House Domestic Violence Shelter and Second Harvest Food Bank. We caught our breath for a minute, and then we received the same call from the Avon Applebees. Kevin and Kyle Bracy loaded up that food,

and on Friday, Heather and Ryleigh Tuck-Macalla delivered it to one of our partner churches, Denison Ave. UCC.

It's a miracle story in a way, of abundance, generosity, and neighborly love. I have been so heartened by the compassion I have witnessed these past ten days, and I know the stories will continue.

Our theme for Lent is freedom, and the visual image we are using is the cocoon. The cocoon represents our longing for freedom. The cocoon represents all of the ways that we are trapped, all of the ways that we feel imprisoned, entombed. We feel trapped by fear, by anxiety, by worry. We look to the outside world to be our salvation. We think about what we lack.

We selected this theme months ago, and I began taking notes for these sermons early this year. Little did I know how much more meaning we would be attaching to the word "freedom" late in the month of March. We feel trapped, don't we, inside our homes? We long for all of the freedoms we took for granted ten days ago — the freedom to go to movies, to make travel plans, to meet our friends for dinner...we are fearful and anxious and we can't tell each other not to be, because our fear and anxiety are based on reality, on data, on science.

As we all grapple with how to live in this new reality, I believe we can learn from other people who have faced adversity. I have been re-reading accounts of Holocaust survivors, of prisoners of war. Now our situation is

not that dire, but they have wisdom to teach us. Next week I will share the story of a man who spent forty years in solitary confinement for a crime he did not commit. What can we learn from people who have been trapped in other ways?

I listened recently to an interview with a woman named Ruby Sales. She became active as a teenager in the Civil Rights Movement and has spent the last 50 years working for human rights and civil rights. Her activism is rooted in her faith. She describes the racism and polarization that plague our nation as a spiritual crisis, and she says we must become as clear about what we love as about what we hate. There are three generations of Southern Baptist preachers in her family. She says that she grew up understanding religion this way: **“Religion is the ground we stand on that positions us to stand against the wind.”**

When Ruby Sales was 17, she participated in a volunteer movement in Alabama, helping black people to register to vote. Many white people from the north came to Alabama to help that summer, including an Episcopal seminary student named Jonathan Daniels. Their group was met with hostility in many towns. Following one demonstration, several of them were arrested and spent six days in jail. When they were released suddenly, no one was around to pick them up. Ruby went to a nearby store to buy something to drink and turned around to find a shotgun in her



face. Jonathan Daniels jumped in front of her to save her and was killed instantly by a state employee named Tom Coleman.

Ruby Sales was so traumatized she could barely speak for seven months. Despite death threats made to her and her family, Sales resolved to testify at Tom Coleman's trial. He was acquitted by a jury of 12 white men and said in a CBS television interview a year, after the killings, that he had no regrets, declaring: "I would shoot them both tomorrow".

Ruby Sales has lived with these memories for the past 54 years and she is a person of profound love who still believes in the philosophy of non-violence. Why am I sharing this story with you today? What does this have to do with the moment we're in? Here is how she has maintained her values, her character. It's all about her inner life.

She grew up singing songs like this one, "I'm gonna lay down my sword and shield down by the riverside, down by the riverside, and study war no more." She grew up on a religion predicated on right relations and love and nonviolence. She says, "I learned that I can't control the world, but I can control myself, and you are not going to coerce me into hating."

I can't control the world, but I can control myself.

"You see," Ruby Sales said, "slavery was based upon the idea that the white slaveowner was the master, but every time a black person sang a

spiritual, it was a proclamation that we worship someone else. We control our internal lives.”

Friends, we feel that we have lost control of much of our world at this moment. And it is a helpless feeling. We're not used to feeling this way. It leads to greater anxiety.

But we have a choice. We can focus on all that we have lost or we can focus on all that we still have. We can look at the scarcity of opportunities to be out in the world, or the abundance of opportunity to spend more time at home, and all the good that might emerge from that. This is a time of abundant opportunity for us to reflect on the kind of people we truly want to be, now and in the future. We can resolve to be people who do not look to advertising or social media to tell us who we are, but people who listen to a deeper inner voice.

Our children will remember this time for the rest of their lives. What do we want them to remember? My dad remembers the Depression. He was a young child, living in Oklahoma City and he remembers that people would knock on the back door of their home, people who had nothing. He remembers his mother, my grandmother, going to the back door and handing food to people who were hungry.

What do we want our children to remember about this time? That this was a time of hoarding, or that this was a time of tremendous generosity?

I know this is a difficult time. I have heard from over a hundred of you in these past ten days. From seniors who feel isolated and afraid. From parents who are overwhelmed trying to work and home-school and keep their children safe. From those who already were living with anxiety who now find their worries uncontrollable. We will get through this time, minute by minute, day by day, together, as we continue to choose neighborly love as our ethic. As we pray for God to give us patience. As we engage in acts of compassion and generosity. As we look at all that is still abundant in our world. As our closing prayer, I invite you to listen to this song. You might want to sing along, you might even want to get up off the couch and sway a little. Friends, love WILL hold us together.

Reference: Paraphrase of the scripture quoted from Joel Miller, Columbus Mennonite Church.