

Disclaimer: I'm not proud of this story. Before we moved here, Amanda and I lived in Dayton, OH. There's a killer Thai restaurant there called Thai 9, and one of our favorite dishes there is the Tom Kah Gai, the coconut soup. One visit, I had ordered the soup, but Amanda didn't - she likes to mix it up. She asked for a bite of soup, and I happily obliged.

But as she raised the spoon from the soup, I noted a single fat portabella mushroom chunk resting in the spoonful of broth. Without conscious thought, I immediately reverted to a three-year-old frame of mind and insisted a bit too loudly, "Hey! Don't take my mushroom!"

[**bowl with 1 mushroom**] In my defense, I love mushrooms and Thai 9 was *always* stingy with them. In this particular bowl of soup, that was the only mushroom visible in the whole bowl.

But who am I kidding? My reaction was embarrassing and ridiculous. Amanda still (rightfully) teases me for it. What's even more shameful is that if you had polled me on the way into the restaurant, asked me, "If you order soup, and you only get one mushroom, and your wife wants it, would you give it to her?" I would've gladly answered, Yes!

Yes, because I love my wife and her happiness is more important to me than my own and for real, we're talking about a *mushroom* here. This isn't a UN peacekeeping mission or something important.

I imagine myself to be generous and kind, but when I was caught unaware, when I reacted from instinct, it turns out I was selfish.

What triggered my selfish reaction was something scholars call Scarcity. If I had been served mushroom soup, or even if my coconut soup had had 5 mushrooms floating in it, I doubt I would've freaked out. It was specifically the fact that I only had 1 - mushrooms were scarce in my soup. And *that* triggered my selfish reaction.

So let's talk about something more important than mushrooms.

Whether you like mushrooms (or Thai food) or not, we're all acquainted with Scarcity. The conviction that there's not enough to go around. That the way to the Good Life is narrow, constricted, and no one is inviting you in. If you want it, you have to fight for what's yours.

[**skyscraper**] That's probably easiest to see in the business world. If you want the promotion, you have to work harder than anyone else. Some of us are willing to cut some morally gray corners to get there, but even those of us who play it straight may think twice about helping a competitor. And if that's true within a single company, how much more true is it in the general marketplace? We're convinced that the market is a zero-sum game in which your win equals my loss.

[tee ball]How many of us approach parenting with this framework? There are only so many spots in that preschool or this select sports team. And if my kid doesn't get in, then they won't get into the right school or the right program, which means they won't be eligible for those scholarships so they can afford to go to that school and *that* means they won't be able to be a doctor or lawyer or whatever so they'll probably end up homeless and unloved.

[mean friend pic]Or maybe you approach your relationships with that framework: you keep a careful tally of who's paid for what, or who did what chore last or how long it's been since the other person did that. You've got some scales in your head and they're unbalanced.

But Scarcity doesn't function only on an individual level. Scarcity infects us at the community level as well. We become scared to welcome those who aren't like us, convinced there are only so many jobs or so much healthcare to go around. That if we let *them* in, *we* will ultimately suffer.

Scarcity makes us afraid, drives us to build bigger walls and bigger weapons because in the end we can't all be winners, which means they're out to get us so we have to protect our own even as we get what's ours.

But scarcity isn't the only story available to us. There's another story, a story of Abundance.

[bowl with overflowing mushrooms] A story that says there's more than enough to go around. That we don't have to be scared all the time, that we can be free, free to be generous, free to be hospitable to those who are different from us. The story of abundance proclaims that their win is not your loss. That dividing the world into "us" and "them" is a waste of time.

What if that story were true? What if the world *didn't* have to be characterized by fear all the time? What if we really could treat outsiders with welcome rather than suspicion? What if we could be generous in our marriages, our friendships, with our children and with our faith?

What if we weren't worried about who gets what because we saw a world that was lousy with mushrooms?

Even the most cynical among us would have to admit that would be freeing. This is the true promise of Abundance - that we can be free. Free from fear, from worry, from competition, from division.

And the good news is that this abundance isn't just a pipe dream. It's not an idealistic fantasy, but a reality that is available to us in the wake of Jesus' resurrection. But in order to live in the reality of abundance, we have to sacrifice the illusion that we're in control, that we're responsible to provide for ourselves.

[1 mushroom] That's what drives Scarcity - the conviction that I am responsible to provide for my own life, health and well-being. "I" and "my" work at every level - my nation, my group, my employer, my family, my relationship, myself.

Being responsible for my own safety, security and provision is a heavy burden. Add in a partner, or children, or employees and it only gets heavier - too heavy for us to bear, because we were never meant to bear it.

We were never meant to imagine our world as one marked by scarcity. Let me show you what the freedom of abundance looks like. If you have a bible, turn with me to Acts 4.

As you're turning there, we're in a series called Go There. This series, set between Easter and Pentecost, is all about what it looks like to live in the freedom and power of Jesus' new life. To get pictures of that new life, we're listening to the story of those first followers of Jesus, of how *they* were transformed in the wake of Jesus' resurrection. Those stories are found in the book of Acts, and Acts begins with Pentecost, which is when those early followers received the Holy Spirit.

So in order to prepare ourselves to celebrate Pentecost, we're going to look at what the Pentecost event did to those first followers, and allow ourselves to be challenged by what Pentecost can do to us today. We'll see again and again that the new world God brought about at Pentecost is not actually so new at all - that in Jesus' resurrection, God is actually restoring the world to what God originally intended.

[garden with overflowing mushrooms] Would it surprise you to learn that the first creation story is a story of abundance? That over and over, as God creates and shapes and names, he says, "This is good. This is good. This is very good!" It's most obvious when you compare Genesis 1 to the other creation stories of the time, like those from Egypt, Canaan and Babylon. In those stories, the gods created out of need, out of lack. Out of scarcity. Humans were slaves to make the gods' work less taxing.

But in Genesis, God creates out of love, out of joy. God creates humans in God's image, and we are stewards, princes and princesses. God invites us to be partners, co-laborers in the garden of the world. It's a beautiful, freeing picture that is only marred when we become convinced that God is holding out on us, that the Very Good God created would be better if we just had a little more.

And so we introduce division, murder, competition, hierarchy, slavery, all the hallmarks of scarcity into a world that God said was enough and more than enough.

But in the wake of Jesus' resurrection, God is calling us back to a world of abundance, a world that is more than enough. Which brings us to Acts 4. In the weeks immediately following the Pentecost event, the first church was formed, filled to overflowing with those who'd heard

the good news about Jesus, many who encountered his resurrected body physically, and many more who believed their stories. Now, empowered and emboldened by the Holy Spirit they find themselves chasing a bigger faith than they'd ever imagined. Let's read together, beginning in verse 32:

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need. -- Acts 4:32-35

[scared face] I know what you're thinking - uh oh. He's going to bang the drum for money! Clearly, right? They all sold everything they had and lived in community!

This is one of those passages that makes everyone *really* uneasy. People outside the church are freaked out by it because, let's face it, it's *really* radical. And people inside the church are freaked out by it because *no one actually does this*. So it makes us wonder if we're actually following Jesus as completely as we think we are.

So let's all take a deep breath and acknowledge two things: 1) I'm not going to ask you to sell everything you own and give it to Catalyst. This radical move wasn't interpreted by those first Christians as prescriptive - that is, as something everyone who follows Jesus has to do.

We know that because none of the other early Christian communities did it. This first church quickly sent missionaries out to spread the good news about Jesus all over the region, and then the world. In fact, at Pentecost, Jesus told them to spread in Jerusalem, where they were, to Judea, the province of which Jerusalem was the capital, Samaria - their neighbors to the north, and then to the whole world. The first Christians did exactly that, and they never followed this precise model of every person selling everything and living in community.

That matters - that tells us that the radical generosity we see modeled in the first few weeks of the first church aren't prescriptive.

This is the point where everyone breathes a big sigh of relief - the preacher told me that this challenging passage wasn't actually challenging. Whew!

Not so fast. It would be a mistake to interpret this passage as a command that every person should sell everything they have. But it would also be a mistake *not* to let this passage make us uncomfortable. Because unquestionably, when the Spirit moved among those first Christians, their response was *weird*. It was counter-cultural. It was disturbing.

So while this passage is not a call for every Jesus-follower to sell what we have and give it away, it *is* a call for every Jesus-follower to think carefully about how we use our money, how we even see our money. That's what's really at the heart of this passage.

[rich above poor ancient persons] In the ancient world, a person was born into their socio-economic status. If you were rich, it was because the gods wanted you to be rich, which meant you were very righteous. If you were poor, it was because the gods wanted you to be poor, which meant you were sinful.

This is sort of messed up, but when a rich person gave to the poor, it wasn't considered generous or kind - it was proof that they deserved to be rich in the first place. And when a poor person accepted a rich person's aid, it was proof they couldn't make it on their own. Everything confirmed what people already thought.

Which is why in Acts, we see something radical - everyone selling whatever they have and sharing with whoever had need. The first church blew up the categories of haves and have-nots, of blessed and cursed, of God's people and Not God's People, by leveling the field.

[rich same level as poor] In other words, this passage isn't just a radical generosity, it was a radical hospitality. By selling and sharing, the Church was welcoming in all those people everyone else considered sinful, unrighteous, cursed by God.

Which means if we want to mirror the Acts church, we too must be a radically generous people, and radically hospitable. The way we share and the way we welcome ought to make the rest of the world a little uncomfortable.

That sounds nice, doesn't it? I mean, totally impractical, but nice. We're thinking, Sure, in a perfect world, I would love to be generous and welcoming. In a perfect world, I would love to live with an open hand rather than a closed, clenched fist.

[1 mushroom] But... (isn't there always a But in the world of scarcity?) it's just not practical. It's not wise. It's not safe. Those objections grow out of Scarcity. When we're convinced there's not enough to go around, that the world is small, we can't afford to give more than feels safe. Because there's not enough! When we're convinced life is a zero-sum game, I can't afford to help you win because that means my loss. I can't afford to share, I can't afford to default to welcome rather than suspicion because in the end, it'll be us vs. them. Me vs. you. And I'll choose Me every time. Me, my family, my people, my nation.

So this vision of generosity and hospitality sounds nice, but it's just pie-eyed idealism. It won't work in the "real world".

[bowl with 1 mushroom half faded out] What good news for us that our so-called "real world" is passing away. The world of scarcity, of us vs. them, of not enough to go around, this is the world of sin and death. This is the world that Jesus put an end to when he died and was raised from the dead.

In his resurrection, a new world began, a world that looks suspiciously similar to the world of Genesis 1. A world that God called "good" again and again. A world characterized by boundless generosity and unconditional welcome. A world in which every person bears the image of God.

That world is even now coming into being. We say, "Maybe that would work in a perfect world." The Spirit - the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead - says, "I am even now bringing that new world into being. And you can be part of it."

[overflowing mushrooms] In the Spirit, we are free to be crazy generous. In the Spirit, we are free to be radically welcoming. The Spirit hovers over the darkness of our fear, our insecurity, our doubt, our suspicion, and speaks, Let there be enough. Let there be more than enough. Let there be freedom to be generous, to welcome, to give, to love.

Let there be life.

A beautiful vision of our world. A powerful vision of the potential of our relationships.

But it's still scary, isn't it? To imagine yourself giving a little more than you feel comfortable sharing? To extend welcome and love to those who don't look or think like you?

Me too. And when I get afraid, when I get anxious, when I get skeptical, the story of Elmer Letterman gives me courage. I first heard the story of Elmer Letterman from Tim Sanders, one of my favorite authors. Elmer Letterman is a hero of mine.

[Elmer Letterman] Elmer Letterman was not a pastor. He wasn't a missionary or a priest. Elmer Letterman sold life insurance. And he opened his company in 1928, which was pretty much the best time in US history to start a new business. [Great Depression graphic with sound effect] Elmer didn't use any advertising. Instead, he spent his whole week, every week, finding three people he thought should meet. He'd hear about a guy who wanted to start a [restaurant pic] restaurant, so he'd invite him to lunch on Friday. Then he'd invite a friend of his who was a [bank pic] banker - honest bankers were hard to come by in 1928, but Elmer knew a couple. Then he'd reach out to a [construction pic] construction manager he knew who had a sterling reputation for finishing on-time and high-quality.

[all 3 surrounding elmer] All three of these men would sit down with Elmer the life-insurance salesman for lunch on Friday. He introduced them to each other, and told them why he thought they all needed to meet. And at 12:45, Elmer paid the check and left.

At no point in the meal did Elmer sell life-insurance. In fact, according to legend, if any of his guests asked him about life-insurance, he got pretty offended, insisted they weren't here to talk about him and directed the conversation back to the opportunity in front of the three guests.

In a world of scarcity, that sounds like the *worst* business strategy ever. Invite three potential clients out, *pay for the meal* and then *refuse* even to discuss your product. If Elmer started his business in 1928, there's no way he survived the crash of 1929. That kind of foolish business model can't survive the Real World, let alone the scarcity of the American Great Depression.

Right?

Wrong.

In 1930, the first full year of the Great Depression, Elmer Letterman sold \$58 million in coverage, which is the modern-day equivalent of over \$800 million. [**\$58million = \$800 million**] And just to be clear, 1930 was a *bad* year for business.

All because Elmer Letterman did not live in a world of scarcity. He believed there was *more* than enough to go around, that we're actually better *together* than we are apart. Elmer Letterman lived this out by choosing to practice a generosity in his business that everyone else thought was foolish. To extend a welcome that had no strings attached in an industry that always has strings.

And it turned out Elmer was right.

We are living on the other side of Jesus' resurrection. The Spirit is making all things new, recreating our world. So we can choose.

[**Bowl with 1 mushroom VS bowl with overflowing mushrooms**] Will we allow our conviction that the soup only has a few mushrooms in it turn us into shallow, selfish, ugly people? Or will we choose to believe God's promise that in this new world, there are more than enough mushrooms to go around?

Okay that's a weird way to say it.

Will we live as slaves to scarcity? Will we fight and claw and protect and horde?

Or will we choose to look past the boundaries of us vs. them? Look past the borders the world warns us against, confident that we can Go There because the Spirit has gone before us?

You can trust the Spirit. You can choose to be generous. To be loving and peaceful and joyful and patient and kind and gentle and faithful and self-controlled. You can choose to embrace the world, arms open wide.

Examine + Challenge

I want to close our time together this week with an opportunity to reflect prayerfully on what it looks like for us to be generous and to welcome.

1. When in the last week did you live in abundance?
2. When in the last week did you live in scarcity?
3. When this week will you be tempted to live in scarcity?
4. How can you choose to live in abundance this week?