

The Myth of Scarcity

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Ancient Witness: Mark 6:32-44

I came across a book a number of years ago, *Change the Way You See Everything*, by Kathryn Cramer and Hank Wasiak. In the book they discuss something called Asset Based Thinking (ABT).

ABT focuses on opportunities rather than problems, strengths more than weaknesses, what can be done instead of what can't. Instead of focusing on what is wrong (deficit-based thinking), the focus is on what is right. ABT is "a mental attitude that blocks out distractions and creates a focal point of concentration and energy that keeps you alert," they write.

Now that may all sound like not much of a big deal. Pretty natural. But I think that they are also right when they say that the natural or default setting for most of us is DBT. Cramer and Wasiak say,

Most of our research, corroborated by others, tell us that people have a bias towards deficit-based thinking that follows the old 80/20 rule. Eighty percent of the time, we're on the alert for what's not working, what the mistakes are, what course corrections are needed. Maybe if we're lucky, twenty percent of the time we're really focused on the upside and how we can leverage that.

DBT is a defense mechanism. It is driven by fear, by the myth of scarcity. Under dire circumstances DBT protects us, but, the authors say, "for most of us it has become an easy addiction that dominates our way of thinking.

And so ABT does not come naturally; it's a choice. It's not just positive thinking pretending that bad things don't happen; it's searching for the one route to better use one's assets. While positive thinking calls for a positive attitude about the future, ABT calls for "positive action and traction in the present moment." Cramer and Wasiak say,

Asset-based thinkers spend five times more effort and energy knowing what their strengths are and what they have to leverage than they do their gaps. It's a complete reversal of the way we've all been trained through school, when we used to get a grade based on how many items we got wrong. Teachers, coaches and parents all thought they were doing us a big favor by showing us how we could improve.

The actual research shows that if you want to learn something, anything that is complex or interactional with other human beings, focusing on what's been done well is the ticket to accelerating your progress and to reducing that cycle time that we all hate when we're trying to learn something new.

ABT manifests itself in a variety of ways. One of those is the way that we see ourselves. We get in touch with our *personal assets*—things like our purpose, passion, resilience, courage, analytical skill, open-mindedness, integrity, ethics, etc. And we don't focus on what we are missing. Here's a great quote from the book with the heading, "Forget Perfection":

Asset-Based Thinking liberates you from the pointless need to strive for "perfection." You realize that pursuit of perfection is not an asset, it's a liability. For a change in the way you feel about yourself, see yourself as a work in progress...just like everyone else.

And so we move from looking at ourselves and seeing flaws and weaknesses that need to be fixed, to seeing amazing, wonderful strengths and assets to looking at others and seeing these things, too. As a congregation, for example, we move from seeing things that are wrong to seeing things that are right, from seeing not the gaps or what are problems to seeing an overflowing cup, and abundance of assets and strengths. And we say, "What in the world are we going to do with all these strengths?" And each individual says, "Which of my assets am I going to share with the congregation? How am I going to contribute from my abundance, my overflowing cup of gifts?"

Most of the time, though, we focus on what is missing, on restoring what has been lost, on fixing what is broken.

This morning's ancient witness was that famous story of Jesus speaking to the multitude. So here they were—a deserted place—and the hour was getting late. So the disciples were starting to get worried and told Jesus to send them away so they could travel to the surrounding villages to buy something to eat.

And Jesus says to them, "*You* give them something to eat."

One way to view this story is that the disciples were operating by the typical DBT model, a scarcity model. They looked at this gathered community, and all they could see is what is lacking, what it needs, what is missing. So Jesus challenges this and implies that nothing is missing, there is an abundance of assets *already there*; there is a sufficient amount of food there already. And furthermore, the disciples themselves have the assets to help the community tap into this abundance. The disciples had five loaves of bread and two fish. And they also had a *moral character* and *concern that nobody goes hungry*, and they also had a *generous spirit*. And so they leveraged their own assets to tap into the assets of the gathered community.

And they led by example—freely sharing everything they had—tapping into the moral character and generous spirit *that was there* among the multitude, inspiring the crowd to share the food that people already had with them. Seen this way, this is indeed a miracle story—a miracle of the transformation of the hearts in that gathered community toward generosity, compassion and sharing. In Gandhi's words, they became the change they wanted to see.

All the disciples had was five loaves of bread, two fish, and a heart to help and care for others. Not much. But they leveraged what they had to feed thousands of people. As Archimedes said, "If you give me a lever and a place to stand, I can move the world."

This began by seeing themselves and seeing the multitude *in a different way*. And so we see ourselves *and* the world not from a deficit, from what is lacking, but from what we already have, from what is already there.

Hebrew Scripture scholar, Walter Brueggemann has written about the contrast between the “liturgy of generosity and the myth of scarcity” that we find in the Bible. In the book of Genesis, Pharaoh dreams that there will be a famine in the land, and so he gets busy to control and monopolize the food supply. He is fearful that there won’t be enough to go around. And because he is fearful, he is ruthless.

Further, Brueggemann says that we, who are the richest nation today, also feel we never have enough. And this insatiable desire is destructive. The scarcity mindset has motivated a small group of ultra-wealthy people to amass a larger and larger share of the economic pie. The scarcity myth has led to unwarranted fear of immigrants and asylum seekers who are seeking safety and livelihoods for their families. Almost all are being turned away, put into detention prisons and demonized because some are afraid there isn’t enough for everyone.

In stark contrast to the deficit based, scarcity myth Brueggemann writes:

The gospel story of abundance asserts that we originated in the magnificent, inexplicable love of a God who loved the world into generous being.

Brueggemann continues:

*The feeding of the multitudes... is an example of the **new world coming into being** through God. When the disciples, charged with feeding the hungry crowd, found a child with five loaves and two fishes, Jesus took, blessed, broke and gave the bread. These are the four decisive verbs of our sacramental existence. Jesus conducted a Eucharist, a gratitude. He demonstrated that the world is **filled with abundance and freighted with generosity**. If bread is broken and shared, there is enough for all. Jesus is engaged in the **sacramental, subversive, reordering of public reality**. (emphasis mine)*

Social activist and biblical scholar, Ched Myers strikes a similar note:

We should be clear that there is nothing “supernatural” reported to have transpired in this feeding of some five thousand men; only that “they all ate and were satisfied.” The only “miracle” here is the triumph of... sharing within a community... over against the economics of autonomous consumption in the anonymous marketplace.

Whatever we can say about this story, we can say this: Under Jesus’ leadership *strangers became a community*. Whatever this wilderness episode is about, the reality of Jesus’ practice was all kinds of people coming together to eat and to drink and to share—scribe, tax collector, fisherman, peasant, Zealot, woman, child. Under the spiritual leadership of Jesus, *a crowd became a community*.

Becoming a community is *sharing what we have in order to do what we have to do*. True as a congregation, true as a city, true as a nation, true as a world—becoming a community is sharing what we have to do what we need to do.

The problem, even today, is not scarcity but a fair and compassionate distribution. Even among the rag-tag crowd that followed Jesus into the countryside *there was enough*.

There's a story of a wealthy billionaire businessman CEO type on a paradise island, like, say, the Cayman Islands, where they have what has been termed "traitor accounts," that enable citizens to avoid paying taxes and contributing to the well being of their country and community. Quite the opposite of the miracle sharing story we heard today. But I digress...

He sees this fisherman lounging around on the beach. "Why aren't you working?" he asks the fisherman. "I went out in the morning and thought I would take the rest of the day to relax." The businessman chastised him for his lack of ambition: "If you worked harder, you could make more profit."

"Then what?" said the fisherman.

"You could buy a whole fleet of boats. You'd soon have people working for you."

"Then what?"

"You could invest your money and become even more wealthy."

"Then what?"

"Well then you can relax and really enjoy life."

"What do you think I'm doing now?"

ABT, seeing what you already have, is much more efficient and less stressful than seeing life as one conquest after another.

And finally, as a spiritual community, what is our biggest asset, our greatest strength? It is this: *inner spiritual experience, an awareness of God's presence, a sense of being held in God's love and this deep contentment and joy that it brings.*

And so what I'm talking about is not just how to think and live seeing the cup half full and not half empty. But actually, if we look again, we see a cup that is overflowing. If we look again, we can awaken to "the hidden wholeness of life." If we look again, we can see and celebrate the divine presence moving within, among and around us. There's an unseen abundance. As a spiritual community we strive to perceive it, though normally it is obscured.

ABT is a *fundamental* shift in thinking. But it is good to be aware that it sometimes is merely DBT in sheep's clothing. Sometimes it is tried merely as a means to an end, a strategy:

We've got big problems. Things are such a mess. So much is lacking and missing. I guess I'll try ABT.

So it's still motivated and originating from a perspective of scarcity. ABT is about changing the starting point, the foundation, the frame, the assumptions. But when it's just another strategy, we might say,

Yes, I see all these wonderful assets, but... We've got big problems. Things are such a mess. So much is lacking and missing.

I had a professor who was also a therapist, and he said to pay attention when people use the word, "but," because it usually negates everything that comes before it. "I know that I should

quit doing this, but..." really means "I have no intentions to quit doing this." I'm talking about switching the order: "Sure, we have problems... but would you look at this incredible abundance!" There is a true shift that changes the beginning point and the ending point. *The deficit never has the last word.*

And yet, how often, even as a church, do we look past this amazing asset and look to external solutions, focusing on our lives as a series of problems to be solved rather than blessings to be celebrated?

And so when we look at our lives we see problems, yes. We see many deficiencies that need to be addressed. We have unfulfilled goals and aspirations. But may our primary focus be upon what we already have—our personal assets, our resources—internal and external, our incredible abundance and strengths, everything that is right, everything that is good. May our thoughts and conversations *begin* here and *end* here.

And we will discover that whatever we have is sufficient. Because the asset of God's ubiquitous presence, which we already and always have, is all we really need. And with this change of focus the quality of our lives will change—no matter what the circumstances—to greater degrees of happiness, peace and awareness that all is well. All is well. All is well.

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)