

ABOUT ABUNDANCE

Texts on Sunday, November 6, 2011

1 Kings 17: 8-16, John 6: 1-14

No one dragged a sharp point across the door panels of our car yesterday. Not the day before either. Neither had anyone on our street that complaint. Maybe not in all Harlem.

All the glass in the windows of our house remained glazed and intact all day. In every building I walked by, not one course of brick quit yesterday. They were such bricks! The 137 steps of the stair through Morningside Park stayed stone for a whole day more and let another thousand pairs of feet pad up and down, their owners hardly noticing. The asphalt in the roads just kept d-doing it in the road—hanging in there, bearing the burdens of a million wheels wherever they would go. The spire of Riverside Church did not expire, but inspired one day more.

Across this city, trees faithfully dropped their leaves. The Hudson River stayed its bounds, and the great ocean its. The plumbing worked mostly—in our homes, in our bodies. Couples made love and that worked, again, more or less. Children by the tens of thousands listened to their parents. By the thousands, teenagers didn't, yet mostly in ways carefully arranged not to shred the tissue of honor by which families bear babies toward adulthood each day, and feed them. Sleep came to almost everyone yesterday, and after an interval, eyes opened. Billions waked again. Then you came here.

Now, many things did not go well yesterday. I do not offer these observations to make any sorrow small, or any pain, any injustice, any crime. Sad and appalling things happened. Some bent the course of lives. Still, notice this. When something breaks, we want to know what broke and we try to locate it. Lately, I drove my car to a garage with a tire so slowly leaking I feared it couldn't be fixed. The attendant's perseverance for what pierced the rubber astonished me. At last—a tiny sliver at the end of his pliers, and his big smile. When something breaks, we see what at once, or search for it.

But when something works, like the stairs of a stone path or the good will of an adolescent, who can begin to say where the working is? Anything that works comprises an infinite quantity of good links, from the big stuff we've just described though never much notice, right down to the mysteriously bonding molecules and atoms and God knows what—quarks and muons and strong forces and weak which make mystics of physicists and utterly elude our ordinary attention. Not in an eternity of leisure could inventory be made of the endless abundance of participant elements in what works.

This abundance of function is the basic stuff of our reality. With just a little less of it, there would be no life on earth at all, no earth even, say the physicists—in which case, not much to complain about. But complain we do. Think what immense part of our mental energies we give to complaint about what is not working. Now, I am not going to complain about this, for in one way, our mitching and moaning . . . is working! Considering the astounding disproportion between what's good and what's broken, our instant distress with imperfection reveals the ideal we are holding in our mind, just as a shadow reveals a source of light. You could say we are wired for bliss and so respond to any broken thing like an infant waked from a warm nap. We expected heaven. In itself, that was remarkable—a divine gift, we might say. But now, everything hangs on how we wake, whether as infants, or as spiritually mature. The 13th c. Sufi poet Jalal-ad Din Rumi set it down like this.

I've said before that every craftsman
searches for what's not there
to practice his craft.

A builder looks for the rotten hole
with the roof caved in. A water carrier
picks the empty pot. A carpenter
stops at the house with no door.

Workers rush toward some hint
of emptiness, which they then start to fill. Their hope, though,
is for emptiness, so don't think
you must avoid it. It contains
what you need!

If you see that the emptiness—what is broken—contains what you need, then you are blessed. Yet for as long as you do not see it, you feel cursed. This is one reason that we have released the dialogue project across the church, an inquiry, one to one, into what works, asking you to look for the light shining behind the shadow of your disappointments. Some of you have turned away these offers to talk, though they were meant for your blessing. Indeed, everything that has been set down for you in the spiritual treasuries forever is for this, to awake you in spiritual maturity, able to feel the touch of the eternal—that blessing!—especially in what afflicts you.

Why else have we told for a hundred generations the story of the jar of meal not emptied and the cruse of oil unailing? You know we are not moved to fight over whether this happened or whether it didn't; those are children's squabbles. We give our attention rather to the eye that sees the flame in the story and guards that flame from the winds in order to hand it on to others in a vessel like this. The flame in the story is in the woman.

Elijah already knows he is a God-bearer; his blessing is secured. But that woman at the cliff of death with her boy, after the drought-dry earth has too long withheld its bounty: had she barked a rebuke at Elijah, when he said “First make me a little cake, then go make your grave,” who would put her in the wrong? Has it not become the norm of our power politics, our sick cities, our churlish churches that people feel encouraged to complain, *Why should I give two hoots about you? What about me!*

But the widow of Zarephath listens to Elijah’s promise. She trusts him when he says that God will give abundantly until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth. And therefore, she goes and gives freely of her few possessions, as Elijah asks. The flame in the story is given to encourage you in the night. Who trusts in the word of God’s abundance has power to abide in the present, unafraid, and to see what others cannot. And the jar of meal is not emptied, neither does the jug of oil fail. *Don’t think you must avoid emptiness. It contains what you need.*

Scarcity is a myth, mostly. I do not mean that poverty or economic injustice is unreal. I do mean that the healing wisdom of the ages has come from people without wealth—period! And I do mean that dreams of wealth and comfort, beyond a certain margin, work like prison walls of our own construction within which our complaining, churlish nature no longer sees or smells anything but itself and the paint peeling. In this sense, scarcity is a myth we make and abuse to keep everything locked down. Tragically, the myth of scarcity is also the tune by which politicians pipe people to the polls to get more power to abuse, for the sake of more power.

There is only one way out of the prison of the myth of scarcity. You have to break out. Like the widow of Zarephath, you have to step out of line and push hard at the walls of the prison with a gift. You built them with your mind; now push at those walls with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength. They will give, if you give. That is the flame in the story.

I do not mean to suggest, as prosperity gospel evangelists do, that divine reality is a slot machine which will return you ten dollars for every one you gamble on God. I mean that as freely as you give yourself into the emptiness you find, just so freely will your eyes be opened in blessing to see the inexpressible abundance of good on which you with all creatures depend. And contrariwise, as surely as you keep protecting all you think you possess inside the shell of what you think is you and yours and safe, just so surely are you imprisoned in the myth of scarcity, the myth of the solo self, a curse.

Every one of the gospels tells the story of the feeding of the five thousand, and each a little differently. John’s gospel includes this morsel. It is Andrew

who sees what the others cannot see, that the two fish and the five loaves are like parables of God's kingdom that might have something to do with feeding the five thousand. According to John, Andrew was the disciple who on first meeting Jesus trusted that he was given from God for the sake of the world. You see the connection: If you see who Jesus is, you see abundance and possibility; you see God's goodness even in the way bread holds together, and a church, too. And for self-diagnosis, the reverse applies too: If you do not see abundance and possibility, but your days are full of complaint and injury, then you have not yet seen Jesus, no matter how you moan or what church you belong to. This is not awful. It means something more may yet come for you: the old self submerged in waters of life, walls crumbling, hostilities passing away, and an abundance coming. With regard to the myth of scarcity, Walter Brueggemann wrote, "When people forget that Jesus is the bread of life, they start eating junk food."

So step out of line and do something. Push hard at the walls of scarcity. Start giving of what you have so you can feel the mystery of abundance which surrounds us in all things. Hear the poet Rumi again:

Gamble everything for love,
If you're a true human being.
If not, leave this gathering!

Half-heartedness doesn't reach into majesty.
You set out to find God, but then you keep
stopping for long periods at meanspirited road-houses.

Don't wait any longer.
Dive in the ocean,
leave and let the sea be you.
Silent, absent,
walking an empty road,
all praise . . .

May we wake from the myth of scarcity and go gather up the fragments of divine love abounding across this city and the wide world. Trust this: whatever justice more may come to earth will come through eyes made reverent in abundance to see the jar of meal never empty and the cruse of oil unfailing.

Rev. Stephen H. Phelps

*The Riverside Church
in the City of New York*