

Cultivating Faith sermon series
Sharing the Crops – Matthew 12:1-8
March 21, 2021
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One of my favorite Broadway musicals is “Les Miserables.” I’ve seen it a number of times in all kinds of settings, from a huge auditorium to an intimate dinner theater. You may have seen it, too, or at least watched the movie with Hugh Jackman and Russell Crowe. Along with the amazing music and compelling storyline, one of the things I love the most about the play is the moral dilemma at the center of it. Jean Valjean is arrested for breaking into a house and stealing a loaf of bread to feed his starving niece. He escapes and is pursued by Javert, a by-the-books policeman who is determined to bring Valjean to justice for his crime. But was it a crime?

One of the most moving scenes is when Valjean attempts to steal some items from a church and is caught. Instead of punishing him, the bishop of the church lets Valjean take the items he stole and gives him even more. We worship a God of justice and a God of mercy. So who’s right, Javert or the bishop? Does Valjean deserve prison time for breaking the law or a second chance? Should the poor have to steal in order to be fed?

As we continue our sermon series called “Cultivating Faith,” today we’re looking at the call to share what we have in a way that honors the humanity of others. The readings from today make it clear that God has blessed us with more than enough, and we are called to share our abundance with others. In the Leviticus passage, God’s law calls farmers not to harvest all their crops, so that the poor and the alien can find something to eat in their fields. And in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus and his disciples pick grain from a field, angering the Pharisees. But Jesus reminds them of God’s words, “I demand mercy, not sacrifice.”

How would you feel about someone you didn’t know eating grain from your fields? Probably not a realistic scenario for most of us. I don’t know about you, but I stopped harvesting my grain field several years ago. And yet, in our country today, the concept of someone else benefiting from our hard work is a pressing issue. We earned what we have; why should we share it with others who haven’t done the work? Let them get their own grain from their own fields. I mean, really, are we our brother’s and sister’s keeper?

For many people, the fear of sharing what they have with others comes from a place of scarcity. We only have a finite amount of resources, and if we open ourselves up to sharing them with others, then there won’t be enough for us. We have our own families, our own responsibilities, our own bills to pay. How tragic would it be if we did what God told us to do and gave sacrificially to help others and then ended up not having enough for ourselves?

I understand that perspective, but I have to say it goes directly against what we read in scripture about God’s care for us. We don’t worship a God of scarcity; we worship a God of abundance. We see this tension all throughout the Bible. God promises abundance, people live with an attitude of scarcity. When Moses leads the Israelites out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, and into the Promised Land, what’s the first thing they do? They grumble that they don’t have enough. So God provides them manna, just enough for each day. If they tried to gather more than they need, it went bad. That had just what they needed for each day, and it was enough.

But that didn’t stop the Israelites from grumbling. They settle in the Promised Land, which God so graciously provided for them, a land abundant with milk and honey. The Israelites have so much! But they start to hoard their blessings, forgetting to take care of the widows and

orphans and poor and homeless. You can hear the refrain echoing through the whole Bible from God's people: we need more, we have to make sure we're going to be OK, we don't have enough. And God's saying, "Really? Haven't I blessed you enough?"

This polarity between scarcity and abundance was one of Jesus' favorite topics. Remember the parable about the farmer who had a bumper crop, but instead of sharing it, he built bigger barns to hold it all? Or the story about the rich folks who threw a few dollars in the offering plate, but the widow who gave her very last quarter? Jesus was keenly aware that those around him were living from a perspective of scarcity in culture of abundance. They were constantly worried they wouldn't have enough.

How about us today? Do we have enough? That may depend on we define "enough." Webster's says it means, "as much as is required." Ah, but isn't it interesting that our perception of what is required changes, doesn't it? What I required to live in college is a whole lot less than what I require to live today. Some of that is necessity; I now have family responsibilities, a car to keep on the road, rent to pay. I need those things. But I also think I need a lot of other things, like a full pantry and stocked refrigerator. Isn't it interesting how things that used to be conveniences or luxuries – dishwashers, extra bathrooms, heated seats – are now necessities? How much is enough?

I remember going to breakfast one time with a minister friend of mine. I ordered first and got the things I wanted: a bagel with cream cheese and a fancy hot chocolate. My bill was \$5. He ordered half a bagel with a free pat of butter and a glass of water. His total was \$1.25. I ordered my definition of enough, never even considering that there was an alternative. His definition of enough and my definition of enough were very different. How much is enough?

I think our answer to that question is greatly skewed by our society, which will always define "enough" as "just a little bit more than you already have." "Enough" becomes the carrot we chase which always stays just outside of our grasp. We are conditioned to believe that in order to live the kind of life we deserve to live, we need certain things, and until we have them, we won't have enough. And underlying that line of thinking are two false beliefs that insidiously worm their way into our psyche: First is the false belief that we can ever have enough, that we will eventually be able to satisfy our desire. And second is the false belief that being good enough and having enough are tied together. If I can just have enough, I'll be good enough – as a spouse, as a worker, as a parent, as a Christian. But if we don't believe we are already good enough, we'll never have enough. That's living from scarcity.

When we strip away all of our culture's distortions about what it means to have enough, we realize we do indeed have enough. More than enough, really. How do I know? If you recently upgraded your cellphone, you have enough. If you have a cellphone, you have enough. If you push a button to dry your clothes rather than waiting for the sun to dry them, you have enough. If the coffee you drink has a name other than "coffee," you have enough. If you know what "wi-fi" means, and even if you don't but you still use it, you have enough. We have enough.

Therefore, part of cultivating our faith is taking some of the abundance God has given us and sharing it with others who don't have as much. God doesn't ask us to interrogate them to find out why they don't have enough. God doesn't demand they show proof of citizenship or take a drug test. God simply says, "You have enough. Others don't. Share what you have." You don't have to give away everything you have. Leviticus simply says you have more than you need, so don't hoard what you don't need.

"What a second, Kory. I thought this sermon series was about helping me cultivate my faith, helping me grow in my relationship with God. You didn't tell me you were going to preach

a stewardship sermon.” Surprise! An essential part of growing in our faith is recognizing the abundance of blessings God has given us – that’s gratitude – and then finding ways to share that abundance with those in need. Our cups overflow, don’t they? We have more than enough. So when we share from our abundance, we are honoring God, whom Jesus says desires mercy. Other translations say God demands mercy, a divine mandate to extend the mercy we have received to others.

Here at Crestwood, we strive to live this out in tangible ways. Some of you may know about our Blessing Box, located at the entrance to our Children’s Wing. It’s a simple concept. We fill it with food, and people who need food come and get it. That’s not unlike leaving some of your crops unharvested so that those who pass by may find something to eat. I guarantee you that none of our congregation members who donate to the Blessing Box go hungry. But I do know that, without our sharing, other people would go hungry.

I know at times it can feel like we don’t have enough. We all go through those seasons, don’t we? And we are prudent to be concerned about the future, to make sure we have enough put away to help us live comfortably in the future. But we have to be careful about not letting our perspective slip from one of abundance to one of scarcity, especially when it comes to helping others. There is a disturbing imbalance in our country between those who have enough and those who don’t. If those who have enough recognized how God has blessed them, they would have no choice but to respond with gratitude to God by sharing what they have. To do anything else would be to ignore the abundance God has given us.

There is poverty right here in Lexington. There is homelessness. There is food insecurity. Organizations like Glean KY and God’s Pantry are providing ways for those of us who have enough to help those who don’t. In “Les Miserables,” the bishop saw Jean Valjean’s desperate need and met it, giving away a luxury so that someone else could have food. Our challenge is to find the balance between what is enough and what is too much, between being comfortable and being faithful to our calling. May we lean into the words of John Wesley, who said, “Earn all you can. Save all you can. Give all you can.” If we can do that, I believe that would be enough.