

Scarcity is the first lesson of economics: there is never enough of anything to fully satisfy all those who want it. But Old Testament scholar Walter Bruggemann disagrees. He preaches the Gospel truth that “scarcity is a lie.” We serve a God of abundance, says Bruggemann, and we need not be afraid. God will provide.

Last month the Deacons & Elders met to discuss hiring Brian Jensen as our new Director of Music Ministries. Part of the discussion centered on how to pay for his salary and benefits. 2018 was a lean year, and Brian requested fulltime work, and we lost some big givers, and people don’t pledge as much as they used to, and everybody’s budget is tight, and... and... and... We talked about all the compelling reasons we couldn’t afford to hire right now. And then one of the officers at the table simply stated, “God will provide.” That’s all it took to turn the conversation from something scary and negative into something hopeful and positive.

God will provide. That phrase rattles around my head all the time now, and I’ve begun to see God’s provision everywhere. A few weeks back a church member donated to our Local Mission Fund; that same day someone came in needing the exact amount donated earlier. As a congregation, we’ve discussed adding air conditioning to the sanctuary for several years now, but the cost made it impossible; this fall a member donated a substantial sum to make that project a possibility. We asked you to support our new Director of Music Ministry, and many of you raised your pledge to help make that dream a reality. God truly does provide!

The story of Jesus in Matthew 26 is also about God’s provision. It’s part of the Last Supper narrative, where Jesus eats with his disciples and then gives new meaning to bread and wine, common elements that we still use today to remember God’s provision. In that verse there are four important verbs: Took, Blessed, Broke, and Gave.

Jesus **TOOK** bread and wine. God provided good soil to grow wheat and grapes. God provided farmers to harvest the wheat and cultivate the grapes. God provided bakers to make the bread and vintners to make the wine. Then Jesus took that bread and that wine from God’s creation and employed them to show us the greatness of God’s provision. Jesus took what God provided, accepting the gift God offered.

Jesus **BLESSED** the bread. He gave thanks for what he had, giving praise to the God who provides. Jesus recognized the bounty of the bread and the wine, and the generosity of an abundant God. Jesus rejoiced in God’s provision.

Jesus **BROKE** the bread and poured out the wine. He used his resources, and I’ll bet there was little left over. Had Jesus left the bread and wine sitting on the table, they would soon spoil and be no use to anyone. But by breaking and pouring, Jesus made these gifts from God’s bounty serviceable, he made what God gave him useable to others.

Finally, Jesus **GAVE** the bread and the wine to his disciples. He gave it to them, so that they might benefit from God’s provision. He gave it to them, so they could eat and drink. He gave it to them, so that they would know the generosity of our God.

Jesus **TOOK** what God gave him, **BLESSED** God for the gift, **BROKE** that provision so that it could be shared, and **GAVE** it away as a blessing to others.

If we believe that our God is a God of abundance, then there’s no reason why we cannot do the same with what we’re given. What can we take from God’s creation? For what blessing can we thank God? What resource can we use (break) in the service of others? What can we give away as a blessing to others? Each of us has time to spend in the service of others. Each of us has some God-given ability we can employ for the common good. Each of us has resources we can give so that others may be blessed. If each of us takes what God gives us, blesses the gift, breaks open or pours out that gift, and gives that gift away freely, then there will be enough for all. That’s God’s economy: an economy of abundance.

Some years back, Scott Lewis, the owner of Scott Machinery attended a conference where Bill Bright (founder of Campus Crusade for Christ) challenged people to give one million dollars away. Scott laughed because this amount was far beyond anything he could imagine, since his machinery business generated an income of under \$50,000 a year.

Bill asked him, “How much did you give last year?” Scott felt pretty good about his answer: “We gave \$17,000, about 35% of our income.” Without blinking an eye, Bill responded, “Over the next year, why don’t you make a goal of giving \$50,000?”

Scott thought Bill hadn't understood. Fifty thousand dollars was more than he'd made all year! But Scott and his wife, Kristen, decided to trust God. They accepted Bill's challenge, thanked God for what they already had, and asked God to help them do the impossible. God provided in amazing ways, growing their business, and providing a miraculous December 31<sup>st</sup> blessing that enabled the Lewises to give \$50,000 away. The next year they set a goal of giving \$100,000. Again, God provided. Scott and Kristen passed the \$1 million giving mark in 2001, but they aren't stopping. Scott and Kristen are learning what it means to excel at giving. That's what it means to believe in a God of abundance. That's what it means to live a hope-filled life and not suffer through a life of scarcity in a world filled with fear.

Paul said, "*See that you also excel in this grace of giving*" (2 Corinthians 8:7). Like piano playing, or cooking, or the martial arts, giving is a skill. With practice, we get better at it. We can learn to give more, to give more often, and to give more strategically. We teach the pursuit of excellence in our vocations. Why not make stewardship something we study, discuss, and sharpen, striving for excellence in our giving?

Paul also tells us that the Macedonian believers gave "*as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability*" (2 Cor. 8:3). What does it mean to give *beyond* our ability? It means pushing our giving past the point where the figures add up. It means giving when the bottom line says we can't. It means believing in the God of abundance who provides beyond our needs. It means being people who take, bless, break, and give. It means being hope-filled and helpful-hearted. It means trusting God to do great things with our simple gifts.

Prayer: God, Creator, we celebrate your overflowing love, and we give thanks to you for all that we have, all that we are. We know abundance because of you. Today we offer thanks to you by sharing what you have blessed us with, our talents, our graces, our spiritual as well as material goods. May we live in your light and in your love during this season, and during all the seasons of life. Amen.

Sources:

- Randy Alcorn, *The Treasure Principle* (Multnomah, 2001), pp. 67–68
- "What It Means to Excel at Giving," Christianity Today, <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2009/june/3062209.html>. Visited October 15, 2018.

## Excel at Giving

Stewardship Sunday, October 21, 2018  
Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Mathew 26:26

I once heard a story about a family who owned a Stradivarius violin. They family took great pride in their Stradivarius violin. They passed it down from generation to generation. They brought in valuers who assigned great worth to the instrument. They mounted the Stradivarius in a glass case and hung it on the wall. The family proudly pointed out the Stradivarius to visitors. But no one in the family every took the Stradivarius violin out of the case and played it.

After many decades on display, the violin came out of its display case when the family hosted a world-famous violinist and invited him to play it. The virtuoso tuned the strings and rosined the bow; but when he started to play, the Stradivarius produced only unpleasant noises. It seems that without regular use, the Stradivarius violin deteriorated and could no longer be played. The strings had no tensile strength and the wood, now dried out and dull, no longer vibrated appropriately. The Stradivarius violin, once an item of great personal value, was useless as a musical instrument. A violin hanging on a wall makes no music.

The moral of the story is this: "if you don't use it, you will lose it." If we do not use the gifts we are given, they are useless. Which seemed like a pretty good message for Stewardship Sunday. God gives us extraordinary gifts to use in the service of others. God richly

blesses us with all we need for daily living and, in most cases, gives us more than we need.

We've seen the amazing things that our God can do. God created the universe out of nothing. God fed the Israelites in the wilderness with manna from heaven. God fed five thousand people with only a few loaves of bread and a few fish. God healed the man born blind, the woman who hemorrhaged blood, and the boy afflicted with demons. God revived the girl who died, brought Lazarus out of the tomb, and raised Jesus to new life after three days. In our own lives, we've witnessed incredible things that can only be described as "Divine intervention." We've seen what our God can do, and still we scrimp, and save, and hoard, because deep down we're afraid that there won't be enough for us.