SERMON – Emma

I don’t know about you, but there are moments when I wonder how we can possibly address all the needs of our day. Hurricane Ian has tied for the fifth-strongest hurricane to make landfall in the United States, causing destruction probably among the worst recorded, the cost of damage likely top $60 billion, and people in Puerto Rico are still without power. On the other side of the world, but still connected to us by virtue of our common humanity, are the people in Pakistan suffering flooding that has plunged over half the country under water. Iran’s women are rising up, protesting for their rights, marching down the streets of Tehran risking everything.

Humanitarian crises as a result of war continue to unfold in Ukraine, Afghanistan, Ethiopia and Yemen, amongst other places that rarely make the headline. More immediately, right here in Kentucky, we’re grappling with rebuilding after our own natural disasters, and we continue to be affected in a variety of ways by the ongoing coronavirus mess, economic challenges and more. On top of all of that, we’re in the second week of our stewardship series, when we ask you to pray about the pledge you will make to support the ministries and mission of this church—because without everyone contributing what they can, we’re simply weaker, less able to accomplish what we believe God is calling us together.

Yeah. Feeling overwhelmed yet? It’ll take a miracle to get it all done. Do you believe it’s possible? Can you even imagine it? There are some theologians who suggest that our theology—what we believe to be true about God and this world—has a lot to say about how we’ll answer that question.

You see, there are competing views of God’s created order: one is a theology of abundance; the other is an ideology of scarcity. At the heart of it is whether we believe there’s enough to go around: is there enough food, water, shelter, space, and resources to provide for every human life to flourish?

The Rev. Dr. Walter Brueggemann, an Old Testament scholar, theologian, and ordained minister in the UCC, explains it this way: “An ideology of scarcity says no, there’s not enough, so hold onto what you have. In fact, don’t just hold onto it, hoard it. Put aside more than you need, so that if you do need it, it will be there, even if others must do without. An affirmation of abundance [on the other hand], says just the opposite: Appearances notwithstanding, there is enough to go around, so long as each of us takes only what we need. In fact, if we are willing to have but not hoard, there will even be more than enough left over.”

Having thus set in motion a world of abundance,” he concludes, “God rests – the mechanisms are in place, the world will have enough.” Brueggemann goes on to recount examples from our oldest biblical stories of faith, where God’s people feared scarcity—but when they trusted God and didn’t withhold their own contributions, they discovered the joyful, divine reality of abundance.

The challenge for people of faith, however, has always been that we struggle with our human nature. We see this through the many stories in the Bible. And we’re immersed in a culture that’s constantly telling us we’re lacking something—that we won’t be truly content until we’ve got what they’re selling. That’s the nature of a capitalist society. So too is competition for resource. Meaning that we all have heard enough real stories of people who’ve actually experienced scarcity, whose generosity has been taken advantage of. So, it’s not a bit wonder, that we can easily give in to the fear that undermines the joy and liberation of a theology of abundance.

The “Feeding of the Five Thousand” is the only miracle account recorded by all four gospel writers. The first thing that happens in each one is an acknowledgement of the need facing them: there’s a big crowd, and they’re hungry. And in each of them, Jesus asks his disciples how they are going to address or minister to that need. Not because he doesn’t know how to himself, but because he’s challenging them to deepen not just their spiritual awareness, but their social awareness. Do you have compassion for the needs of real people? And can you see God’s heart for those who hunger and thirst? Do you understand your role in meeting that need?

Jesus is guiding, teaching, encouraging them to grow their faith, employ a theology of abundance and exercise the spiritual practice of generosity. It’s also worth noting that Jesus didn’t ask his disciples to solve all of the issues plaguing their world in that moment—he placed a specific need before them and invited them to respond in a concrete, practical way.

Because he knew that even that one task would challenge them. Jesus knew that God isn’t constrained by what’s reasonable. And God’s abundance cannot be confined by our human fears or expectations. Where his disciples see barriers, Jesus sees opportunities for deeper faith, for practical, loving action, and for surprising revelations of how God really works.

He remained calm. He knew the resources were there. He saw God’s abundance even if it was hidden. And he knew a generous child’s example could lead them. Jesus had the people sit down. In some gospel accounts, the writers report that he told them to gather in groups—a circle of smaller circles, if you will—so that no one was alone, no individual was lost or forgotten amidst the sea of people.

Then he took the loaves and fish donated by the child (although Mark doesn’t tell us where the five loaves and two fish come from). But then we are told that Jesus, “blessed them, broken them, and gave them” (v2). A liturgy that we find echoed in the story of the Last Supper (that Pastor Lori preached on last week) and in our own practice of Holy Communion. And when everyone ate until they were full. They still filled twelve baskets with leftover pieces of bread and fish.

There are a variety of ways that the story of the loaves and fishes can be interpreted. One way is to maintain that Jesus took the little boy’s food, waved his hands over it and turned it into a banquet, a bit like a magic trick.

Another interpretation that I came across in my study this week, which does not diminish the miracle but does make it more believable, is this: Most of the people, having journeyed out to the countryside for the day, would have brought some sustenance with them—but they would have expected to keep the food to themselves. Jesus knows there’s enough, it’s just hiding in the pockets of those gathered around him. And, using the example of a child’s selflessness, Jesus blesses the offering.

He allows the love of God to flow, from that child and through the crowd—and as it does, it inspires, and affects, and moves the people to participate in the abundance that pulses through them and around them, in all creation. Those who had discretely withheld their provisions for fear there wouldn’t be enough to share with everyone who might have need, suddenly produced what they had and shared it freely.

And each one’s contribution made a difference. Now, surely there were some who could only offer their gratitude and appreciation for the goodness others had provided, or they could only lend a hand to help with the distribution, or the cleaning up, but they were not begrudged because they were also children of God who were contributing just by being there, by volunteering in any way they could. The miracle occurred when the people responded with faith: each one shared what they could, caring for each other, which allowed them all to celebrate abundance in the midst of what only moments ago had looked like scarcity.

God doesn’t expect you and me to single-handedly solve all the world’s problems. But we are called by God to prayerfully discern and faithfully respond to specific and practical needs, mobilizing the abundance under our stewardship. And when we respond faithfully, like the disciples and those 5,000 people gathered on a hillside some two thousand years ago, we will surely be surprised and delighted by what God does with us and through us. The fear of scarcity will not inhibit us; instead, the joy of abundance will inspire us to work with God to widen the circle, to transform our world. So may it be! Amen.