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War, Peace, Scarcity and Abundance

Today the world will pause and mark the formal end of the fighting 100 years ago. WWI was over. The Great War. Armistice Day. November 11, 1918. Four years of fighting, 8.5 million soldiers killed, 7 million civilians dead, 21 million wounded. Over 100,000 Americans died in the fighting. Armistice Day in this country later became Veterans Day, a day we honor all those who have served in the armed forces.

WWI ushered in modern warfare. Siege canons, submarines, airplanes, chemical weapons: chlorine and mustard gas. Trench warfare, with its mud, bitter cold and misery, showed how so much of modern warfare still remained in the Middle Ages.

100 years ago, people thought that because of the violence, bloodshed and human toll, it would be “the war to end all wars.” We know that was not so.

How and why did the war begin? Historians debate the many factors. I learned in school that it began with the assassination of an obscure archduke in Sarajevo. All the -isms were on full display as factors for why the fighting began: nationalism, militarism, imperialism.

It is right to pause and commemorate a day that many had hoped would end all war. We should never forget the toll that war takes on humanity and upon the creation God made and gave us to enjoy and steward. War should never be normalized. And we can remember and lift up the aspirations shared by the prophet Isaiah. God’s desire is not for nations to be in perpetual war footing, but that nations “shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” Isaiah 2:4 If ever we come to believe war is the only option, we turn to our faith tradition and a God who desires a different way. Our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, now of Royal Wedding fame, reminds us of the power of love: how love is the only way forward.

The readings before us today point us in a different direction from matters of war and peace, but they touch upon what can at times can be at the root and source of conflict, and that is the idea, some might say the myth, of scarcity.

As weather patterns change and more and more regions in our world become hotter and drier, many believe that the most valuable commodity in the future will not be oil or natural gas and fresh water. Over 600 million people in this world do not have access to clean drinking water. Deserts are expanding. Nations up stream build dams that impact countries down-river. As populations become more hungry, thirsty and desperate, governments are less secure and more vulnerable to unrest and war.

Let us hear stories of scarcity and abundance and see where they lead and what they can tell us about faith in God.

We hear of the prophet Elijah's encounter with the widow who was scraping out an existence with her son. She was down to a jar of uncooked flour and a little oil. It was meager and it was what she thought would be her last meal. She spoke these words: "I have nothing baked." I have nothing, she said. And yet Elijah uses a familiar tactic in the Bible. He said to her: "Do not be afraid" – where have we heard this before? – to and do what I have said. She went and the jar of meal and oil were filled and they all ate for many days. God often turns nothing into something. And that something often comes from someone close to us if we are open to the experience.

In the gospel, enter another widow. The villains of story were those with authority who walked around in long robes with the best seats at the synagogues and banquets. They devoured widow's houses and said long prayers – out of control land developers and long-winded in their piety.

Jesus sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on." Mark 12:38-41

The story of the widow's mite is often the go-to story of any sermon on stewardship. And that is part of the problem. It is so familiar that it can quickly become stale and scripted and thus lose its original intent to shock and move us. The meaning of the story may not be that the seeming generosity of the widow should be mirrored by us all – that any little bit we have should be offered up – but that the whole system should be questioned.

As historians try to trace the origins of how wars began, we too can ask as we hear these ancient stories: how did we get to a place where poor widows are left to starve in a world where there was enough to go around that those with power and authority were able to devour their homes and still feast at banquets and pray at the best seats in church? When and how did things get so out of sync and off balance, unjust and cruel?

So many times, when I hear the stories we read in church, and then try to connect them to the world around us, often what I fear most is the loss of simple Christian compassion and empathy. I touched on that last week. God pays attention to widows, the poor, lepers, foreigners, outcasts in the Bible again and again so that you and I will pay attention to them and care about and for them – even if we are among them. Even when they are us.

How far have we fallen from the beginning? The Garden of Eden, where God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food.

Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann believes he knows where the idea of scarcity began in the Bible. Scarcity: the idea that there is not enough to go around. Brueggemann wrote how all was good when God told Abraham and Sarah to be a blessing and bless all nations. And that good will only lasted for a time.

The Pharaoh of Egypt is blamed for inventing the principle of scarcity. From a dream about a pending famine, the guy in charge says, "There's not enough. Let's get everything." Brueggeman writes that because the Pharaoh or king is afraid that there aren't enough good things to go around, he must try to have them all. Because he is fearful, he is ruthless. Pharaoh hires Joseph, son of Jacob, to manage the remaining food supplies. As the people ran out of food, they lose their land, their cattle and finally their freedom. The children of Israel became slaves because of the fear of the one in charge of running out. The seeds of the Exodus were sown.

Many of us possess a hard-wired fear of running out. Our ancestors knew what is what like to go hungry. Try to cut back on calories too quickly for that diet and your body will tell you: not so fast. Our bodies will adjust and slow down our metabolism because it knows: there were times of starvation and hunger many thousands of years ago.

I remember watching how quickly some of my friends from large families ate their food: the learned to eat quickly if they were going to eat at all around a crowded kitchen table.

It is not easy in a finite world to believe in a God that is infinite – without end or without boundaries or limits.

It may be hard to see and know that that God's love for us doesn't run out or get exhausted. God's love does not run dry when we've done what we've done, messed up where we have, betrayed and disappointed, and wandered far from those who love us most. God's abundant love continues to come our way. We are forgiven and urged to forgive others with that same generous abandon. It makes no sense, and it is true.

When life tempts us to believe that we have nothing left in our jar besides some uncooked flour and a few drops of oil, and only have a few coins to give so something we believe in, these lessons today challenge us to ask ourselves: are we so sure?

When the jar is almost empty and we only have a few coins left, the world and what matters can get awfully clear. There is no more hiding behind status, birthright, privilege, what is due to us as our right.

I don't believe the story of the widow's mite should be taken to mean that Jesus was hoping that the poor should give their last coin to the work of institutional religion. Maybe, more likely, he was questioning why she and the widow who met Elijah were so desperate to begin with and asks us through time to test whether that is the way it should be.

When we are asked to think and pray about what we can do and contribute to the world around us, and to the communities that anchor our faith, I hope that we too challenge the myth of scarcity. It was invented out of fear. Is there really not enough to go around? Not enough time, concern, understanding, money to make a difference and to share with others?

Let us find another way.