

Faith Mennonite Church
April 22, 2012 – 3rd Sunday of Easter
Earth Day
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Believing, trusting and caring for abundance

Deuteronomy 8:11-19; John 20:19-31

It was 1987 and my family and I were just back from five years of service with Mennonite Central Committee in Central America. We were still reeling with a bit of culture shock. A simple trip to the supermarket could leave us in tears, overwhelmed by the endless choices and the fact that it was so easy to spend in one shopping trip an amount equal to several month's wages of the street vendor who attended church with us in Honduras.

I was about to begin a graduate program in family economics and management at Michigan State and I went for an initial meeting with my advisor. A professor at heart, she had a question for me as soon as I sat down and we'd exchanged pleasantries. "Are resources scarce?" she asked. Had I taken (and remembered anything from an) undergraduate economics course, I might have had a different response. But having lived for five years in a region that was rich in natural resources but teeming with poverty, my best response was something to the effect that resources are sufficient, if not abundant, but humans don't do a good job of distributing them equitably.

Fortunately, Dr. Walker wasn't handing out grades that day and she took me on as a teaching assistant even though I obviously didn't command the accepted language of economic scarcity. Now, 25 years later, I have to depend on Wikipedia to provide the synthesis of this concept: "Scarcity is the fundamental economic problem of humans who have wants and needs in a world of limited resources. It states that society has insufficient productive resources to fulfill all human wants and needs. Alternatively, scarcity implies that not all of society's goals can be pursued at the same time; trade-offs are made of one good against others."¹

Scarcity and trade-offs may be the bedrock of modern economic theory, but the prevailing culture in our country, at least when it comes to energy resources, tends in the opposite direction. The prevailing popular notion is that we should be able to have and use as much energy as we want and it should be as inexpensive as possible. The unfortunate result, of course, is flagrant overconsumption of resources, environmental degradation as energy companies seek the least-costly ways to extract and produce energy, and global warming as our energy use emits greenhouse gases.

Certainly the US is not alone in this exploitation, yet we remain the leading country in per capita energy consumption. So should we be naysayers and wave the scarcity banner?

Scarcity is *not* at the heart of Sabbath economics, or the economy of grace, which we encounter in the Bible. To the contrary, the Bible speaks again and again of abundance. We find abundance in the creation account in Genesis. We find abundance in the poetry of the Psalms. We find abundance in the lavish love of Jesus, and in Paul's accounting of God's grace. And in the final book of the Bible the story culminates with yet another picture of abundance, a river of life, lined with trees with healing leaves, flowing through the city of God.

But this notion of God's abundance is not the American smorgasbord, free-for-all, take and use as much as you want as if you are the only person who matters. Rather God's abundance is based in respect, trust and care. It is an abundance of sufficiency, enough for one day at a time, as the children of Israel learned in the wilderness when God provided manna. Moreover, God invites us to be co-creators, caring for nature's abundance with the love of a creator who set the world in motion. God invites us to be co-managers, sharing this abundance with the love of a God whose heart is justice. God remains the owner; we are only care-takers. We have no proprietary claims.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scarcity#cite_note-0

Today is Earth Day, an observance that began in the US in 1970 and is now celebrated around the globe. The idea of Earth Day originated with Gaylord Nelson, a U.S. Senator from Wisconsin. He witnessed the ravages of the 1969 massive oil spill in Santa Barbara, California but was unable to mobilize a response in Washington (it appears that inertia isn't entirely new!). He took inspiration from the student anti-war movement at the time, and called for an environmental teach-in, or Earth Day, to be held on April 22, 1970.²

In the intervening 42 years, environmental awareness has grown and many initiatives have been undertaken to increase fuel efficiency, reduce energy consumption, and clean up environmental degradation. Yet while we've made gains in some areas, climate change continues to unfold before our eyes, and we often feel that our efforts at conservation and creation care are a mere drop in the bucket of larger trends and attitudes.

As I've reflected on the gospel reading this morning, the verse that keeps calling my attention is the one that describes the mixture of joy and disbelief that the disciples experienced as they interacted with the risen Christ. It's always hard to accept a new reality, even as it becomes fully apparent. It is understandable that many people in this country have trouble accepting the scientific evidence that climate change is occurring and at a quickening pace, and that human behavior, primarily our steady use of fossil fuel for energy, is a root cause. Coming to terms with and accepting this reality calls for a response and change.

Jesus took a simple action to help his disciples believe his new reality. He took a piece of broiled fish and ate it. Something small, something concrete, something that said, "this is a new reality!" And then he said, "You're my witnesses!" When we know or discover something we need to act on it.

Action is always easier when we're not entirely on our own. That's why we began having Car Sabbaths a couple years ago, allowing us to take collective action. But the things we do in our everyday, individual lives are the things that make the difference. Many of you do seek abundance through sufficiency and have (re)ordered your lives in ways that makes you less dependent on a car or that have involved down-sizing in some way to reduce your energy consumption.

I learned of another collective action this week that complements our Car Sabbath. Friends in the Community of St. Martin, which meets in our basement on Sunday evenings, have started a voluntary gas tax project. While the country is abuzz with complaints about rising gas prices, this valiant group is saying we really should be paying *more* because the rest of the world already pays more and most of the world lives on lower incomes than we do. The participants in the gas tax group individually set their own tax rate and then meet periodically to decide how to allocate the money they have raised. This allows them to be in solidarity with people in other parts of the world. It also allows them to contribute to projects that create alternative, sustainable energy solutions or that advocate on behalf of communities that suffer from destructive methods of resource extraction like mountain-top removal and "fracking."

I know that each one of you has numerous examples of ways that you nurture abundance and sufficiency in your daily lives and ways that you choose to live lightly. I want to conclude by giving the opportunity for you to share these with each other. As you are able, cluster in pairs or groups of 3, preferably with someone other than a housemate, and share two things: first, name one way that you experience abundance (or sufficiency) in life; and second, share one way you work to reduce energy consumption.

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Earth_Day