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A Culture of Scarcity And a God of Abundance: Leading a Church into a Bigger, Better, More Beautiful Story

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

A CULTURE OF SCARCITY AND A GOD OF ABUNDANCE:
LEADING A CHURCH INTO A BIGGER, BETTER, MORE BEAUTIFUL STORY

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

DMin Dissertation

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ABSTRACT

Christians live in the ever-present tension of two competing stories. The first is the story our culture promotes. It is one of scarcity. In this story, there is never enough money, resources, time, or love to go around. The other story is the one God tells in Scripture. It is a story of an abundant Creator who gives more than enough for life, love, purpose, and enjoyment in this world.

This paper explores my journey in leading Belfair Community Church away from a mindset of scarcity and into a living theology of abundance. When we truly trust that God is willing and able to give God's people more than enough for the living of these days, then we are free. We are free to give ourselves to authentic relationships in the Christian community, and we are free to take great risks on loving those outside of the faith.

I have focused on the power of the stories we tell and how we tell them. If you want to change the culture, you must change the stories that shape that culture. Chapter One introduces the problem of scarcity and the God of abundance. Chapter Two traces the theme of abundance throughout scripture to help us consider how God defines abundance. Chapter Three looks to the worlds of business, psychology, and the church for different approaches to changing a culture.

The remaining chapters focus on the power of story to change a culture. In Chapter Four, I propose that *how* we tell the story matters by encouraging a shift from monological to dialogical preaching. Chapter Five invites the church back to the table,

where the story of belonging is enacted in community. Chapter Six invites us to participate in the story of God's abundance by joining in risky mission together.

CHAPTER 1:
A CULTURE OF SCARCITY. A GOD OF ABUNDANCE.

It was my first Sunday as the new pastor of Belfair Community Church. I opened the worship bulletin to give the announcements. The words jumped off the page. That was their intention. In all capital letters, bold, and followed by three exclamation marks the Fellowship Team made it known, **“URGENT! WE ARE OUT OF COFFEE CREAMER!!! BRING SOME THIS WEEK OR WE WILL GO WITHOUT IT!!!”** There was no please or thank you. The message did not say, “If you happen to run errands this week and think of us, some creamer would be nice.” It was all urgency, all demanding, and all fear based. The message screamed, there is not enough and that makes us anxious. Until there is coffee creamer, we cannot focus on anything else.

Fast forward one year. Things were looking up in this same church. Giving was steadily increasing as was church attendance. Children and youth filled the halls. We were engaging in exciting outreach in our community. We had five baptisms in one month alone. I was sure we had turned a corner from anxiety to hope, from scarcity to abundance. Unfortunately, my hopes were soon disappointed.

After the fifth person stepped out of the baptismal waters, word got back to me. Our baptism committee was concerned. A dear lady worried that we were baptizing too many people. “If we keep filling this baptistry up like we are, we are not going to be able to pay our water bill!” So many things had changed in a year. On the surface, the church was looking healthier by the day. Our identity and vision, however, was still tied to the lies of scarcity.

I realized that leading a congregation into a new mindset would not happen by way of increasing the budget, adding new programs, or even growing membership. It would require a cultural shift: a total transformation in how individual hearts connected their own stories to the God story. This would take time and intentionality, but if it happened, this cultural shift would lead our congregation into a depth of discipleship and mission that we had never known before.

It is not surprising to find a small church in an economically depressed county struggling to overcome the lies of scarcity. This mindset, however, does not only affect small congregations with minimal resources. A large downtown church has several million dollars in endowments, along with half a million dollars in its benevolence fund. Its location makes it a frequent stop for individuals seeking assistance. Daily someone requests help with gas, rent, bus tickets, or utilities. The response is always the same. “I am sorry. We do not have funds for that at this time.” Did you catch that they have half a million dollars in their benevolence fund alone?

This is a generous church. The people truly want to serve God, and they do so in many ways. Even so, that fear of scarcity is present. Though there is plenty of money specifically given each month to help individuals facing difficult circumstances, they fear giving that money today might deplete the account tomorrow. The account keeps growing. The green light to share it stays unlit. “I’m sorry. We don’t have funds for that.” These are two very different churches with one shared mindset: scarcity.

Scarcity refers to the gap between limited resources and limitless wants. The scarcity mindset is deeply imbedded in the American culture, and its messages impact every church in some way. The myth of scarcity says there is not enough (food, water,

shelter, space, money, time, love) to go around, so people must hold on to what they have. Even better, they should hoard it, so if they need it in the future it will be there. It matters not how this decision affects others who need it today.¹

The Scriptures, on the other hand, tell of an abundantly good God, who invites God's people to live into *more than enough* realities. An affirmation of abundance takes God at God's word, believing there is enough to go around. If people are willing to have, but not hoard, there will be more than enough for all.² Our culture, however, tells a tale of lack which ushers citizens into fearful, competition-based realities. Scripture tells a story of abundance. It dares God's people to try out generosity and risk. The American church knows both stories well, yet ultimately chooses allegiance to one.

A God of Abundance

The scripture story begins in abundance. Walter Brueggemann views "Genesis 1 [as] a song of praise for God's generosity."³ God fills the world with vitality, giving every created thing the means to be fruitful and multiply. The creation story tells of plants, animals, and human beings jam-packed with the fullness of life and all that is needed to fling that life afar. Each breath of creation culminates in God's declaration that "it is very good."⁴ The story begins with life overflowing. There is no lack.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, "Enough is Enough," *The Other Side Online* 37, no. 5 (November-December 2001), <http://www.jmm.org.au/articles/1181.htm>.

² Ibid.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *Deep Memory, Exuberant Hope: Contested Truth in a Post-Christian World*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 69.

⁴ Ibid., 69.

God's abundant generosity in creation moves from the Garden of Eden to wherever God's people dwell. Later in Genesis, God blesses Abraham and Sarah with a promise of family, land, and status (Genesis 12). God's heart is for the well-being of God's people, and creation is viewed as a gift from God that just keeps giving. That is until Pharaoh enters the story in Genesis 41, bringing the threat of scarcity with him. He has a dream that warns of a coming famine. For the first time in the Bible someone says, "There is not enough. Let's get everything." Pharaoh begins his work to monopolize the food supply for fear of what might come. By the end of Genesis 47, he has all the land and power to distribute resources as he sees fit. Scarcity has found its way into the story, making Pharaoh fearful and ruthless. This is to be expected from someone who does not know of God's abundant goodness.⁵

From Genesis 47 on, God's people struggle to live out the promise of abundance in the face of the always-present myth of scarcity. Even in the struggle, the stories of God's abundance consistently win the day. In captivity, the people of Israel continue to multiply, even after Pharaoh demands that the babies be killed. The great king of Egypt asks Moses and Aaron for a blessing; a subtle hint that the future lies in the hands of those who trust God's abundance.⁶ When Israel finds abundant freedom in the wilderness, they immediately notice what is not available: protection, water, and bread. In the face of perceived scarcity, they murmur and groan. In Exodus 16, God calls out the lies of scarcity by sending manna. This bread from heaven becomes a daily declaration that God is the Provider, and God always provides enough. God's people need not hoard,

⁵ Brueggemann, *Deep Memory, Exuberant Hope: Contested Truth in a Post-Christian World*, 69.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

nor fear, nor plow over their neighbor in efforts to accumulate, for the blessing will return in the morning. Brueggemann notes, “the gift of bread transforms the wilderness. And from that point on, Israel would entertain the thought that a place of perceived scarcity may turn out to be a place of wondrous abundance.”⁷

God’s abundance continues to challenge the lies of scarcity in the New Testament. Mary’s anthem in Luke’s gospel is a song of abundance. The Magnificat names the God who topples thrones and lifts up the lowly. Mary sings of the God who fills the hungry and sends the rich away empty (Luke 1:46-55). Everywhere Jesus went, he lived out the song his mother sang. Jesus broke cycles of poverty, fed the hungry, healed the sick, and pulled up a chair for the outcast. Jesus brought new life to those who had been told there is not enough.⁸

God’s miracle of abundant manna in the wilderness is replicated by Jesus on the hillside when he feeds the multitudes. Mark 8 uses four words to describe what Jesus did. He took the bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it. In taking the bread, Jesus first recognizes the capacity of what *is* present, rather than focusing on what is lacking. When Jesus blesses the bread, he sets it apart, dedicating it to God’s glory. The bread is still bread, but at the moment of consecration it becomes a carrier of all the hidden, powerful gifts of God. The crowd becomes a people receiving what they could not provide for themselves. The desert becomes a place for feasting, even more, the arena for the reign of

⁷ Brueggemann, “Enough is Enough.”

⁸ Brueggemann, *Deep Memory, Exuberant Hope: Contested Truth in a Post-Christian World*, 73.

God.⁹ In blessing, breaking, and sharing, Jesus puts into practice the generosity of God. “It is as though Genesis 1 reappears in Mark 8, and the world is again made new.”¹⁰

Scripture challenges the myth of scarcity in other places as well. Psalm 23 declares that, with God as our shepherd, we lack nothing. Jesus picked up this same imagery in John 10, calling himself the Good Shepherd who has come to give life abundantly. Romans 8 revels in the generosity of God’s love from which nothing can separate God’s people, not even hardship, famine, or nakedness. From beginning to end, scripture invites God’s people to live into the power of generosity, the freedom of gratitude, and the reality of abundance. What makes it so hard to believe in the limitless generosity of God? Our culture breathes the lies of scarcity.

A Culture of Scarcity

The myth of scarcity awakens a fear in people that there is too little of something to go around. More than ever, Americans are living with this fear. “For the first time in American history, the next generation of working and middle class adults is not expected to surpass their parents’ generation in education, income, or opportunity.”¹¹ Scarcity is not a problem unique to the middle class. In a 2015 survey of American millionaires, more than half said they did not feel financially secure. At every level of wealth

⁹ Brueggemann, “Enough is Enough.”

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Jack Alexander, *The God Guarantee: Finding Freedom from the Fear of Not Having Enough*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017), 23.

evaluated in the survey, respondents said they needed double what they currently had to feel secure.¹²

Pharaoh introduced scarcity with his anxious response to that dream of famine in Genesis 41. Fast-forward a few thousand years and it is no surprise that governments and secular entities continue to promote these same debilitating messages. The media convinces people that they need bigger and better things. The drive of consumerism is dependent on the myth of scarcity. Marketers tell us we are not rich enough, beautiful enough, young enough, or smart enough; but buying something will help us.¹³ As a result, an August 2018 article on CNBC said the average American now has \$38,000 in personal debt.¹⁴ Former senior officer of the Belgian Central Bank, Bernard Lietaer, claims greed and the fear of scarcity do not exist in nature, not even in human nature. Rather, we are programmed; intentionally built into a money system designed to keep us wanting and buying. We have lived in this system for so long that we consider fear and scarcity the normal and legitimate behavior, when in reality they are neither.¹⁵

The threats of scarcity move beyond economics. A 2018 nationwide survey administered by the health insurer Cigna found that 50 percent of participants experience loneliness always or sometimes, while 54 percent said they always or sometimes feel that

¹² Alexander, 24.

¹³ K. Killian Noe, "The Ultimate Question: Where is My Security?," in *Money and Faith: The Search for Enough*, ed. Michael Schut, (Denver: Morehouse Publishing, 2008), 20.

¹⁴ Megan Leonhardt, "Here's How Much Debt Americans Have at Every Age," *CNBC*, August 20, 2018, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/08/20/how-much-debt-americans-have-at-every-age.html>.

¹⁵ Lynne Twist, "Scarcity the Great Lie," in *Money and Faith: The Search for Enough*, ed. Michael Schut, (Denver: Morehouse Publishing, 2008), 33.

no one knows them well. Two in five participants admitted they “lack companionship,” their “relationships aren’t meaningful,” and they are “isolated from others.” The survey concluded that most Americans feel lonely.¹⁶ Loneliness reflects a scarcity of meaningful relationships. There are not enough social bonds to meet an individual’s needs.

Scarcity goes farther still. Most mornings, many Americans wake up knowing they did not get enough sleep, and they do not have enough time. The voices of “not enough” come to us before we even think to question or examine them. Lynne Twist summarizes the dilemma:

We don’t have enough time... rest... work... profits... exercise... power... wilderness... weekends... money. We’re not thin enough- smart enough- pretty enough- fit enough- educated enough- successful enough- rich enough. Before we even sit up in bed, before our feet touch the floor, we’re already inadequate, already behind, already losing, already lacking something. And by the time we go to bed at night, our minds race with a litany of what we didn’t get, or didn’t get done, that day. We go to sleep burdened by those thoughts and wake up to that reverie of lack.¹⁷

This cry of not enough becomes the default setting from which we see and interpret everything, a sort of hermeneutic for life. It determines how we relate to the cash in our wallets and the people in our lives. Scarcity becomes the reason we cannot have what we want and cannot be who we want to be. We blame it for hindering our dreams, for forcing us to compromise our integrity, or for making us give up on ourselves and others.¹⁸

Twist unpacks the mindset of scarcity to expose three central toxic myths that define our culture’s relationship with money and block our more honest and fulfilling

¹⁶ Rhitu Chatterjee, “Americans are a Lonely Lot, and Young People Bear the Heaviest Burden,” *NPR*, May 1, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2018/05/01/606588504/americans-are-a-lonely-lot-and-young-people-bear-the-heaviest-burden>

¹⁷ Twist, 32.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

interactions with it. The first myth is that there is not enough. This myth says everyone cannot make it. Someone will have to be left out. This fear drives us to be sure we are not the ones left out.

The second myth says, “more is better.” This is a logical response to “there is not enough.” It takes things a step farther, however, in creating a culture that competes to accumulate and acquire. “More is better” stimulates greed which in turn heightens fear and speeds up the race. The rush for more handicaps our ability to see the value in what we already have and, more tragically, tempts us to judge others by their financial success and achievements. “More is better” is a never-ending chase, where no one wins in the end. Unfulfillment gets the final word.¹⁹

The third toxic myth of scarcity says, “That is just the way it is.” This is a response to deeply engrained injustices that we feel powerless to change. With resignation, we justify the greed, prejudice, and inaction that scarcity fosters in our relationship with money and others by saying, “I can’t do anything about it. It is what it is.” Globally this third myth ensures the people with the most money wield the most power and feel entitled to do so. We feel bad about injustices and inequality, but the systems that perpetuate them are so deeply imbedded in our world that we resign our thinking to “that’s just the way it is,” thus, declaring ourselves exempt from trying to make a change.²⁰

¹⁹ Twist, 35-36.

²⁰ Ibid., 38.

The Effects of a Scarcity Mindset in Daily Life

How does this culture of scarcity affect American's daily lives? The ways are numerous. The great contradiction for Americans today is that we have more money and less generosity than ever before. There is less public money for the needy, and less charity for the neighbor. "We who are now the richest nation are today's main coveters."²¹ The lies that tell us we never have enough make us greedy and unneighborly. Most Americans have good intentions, but after buying into a culture of consumerism, there is not much left to share with those in need.²² The mindset of scarcity overrides logic and evidence, creating distorted and irrational attitudes and behaviors, especially around money. No matter where we fall on the economic spectrum, the myths of scarcity create an underlying fear in us that we and the people we love will not have enough of what is needed to have a happy and productive life, and so we must consume more to keep what is ours.²³ Brueggemann goes so far as to claim that consumerism has become a demonic force among us, and thus, the question for God's people is whether or not the gospel can help us stand up to it.²⁴

In 2007, researchers at the University of California- San Diego published the findings of a study called, "The Sharing Game." In the course of the experiment, researchers asked participants to choose one of two options. The first option said the

²¹ Brueggemann, *Deep Memory, Exuberant Hope: Contested Truth in a Post-Christian World*, 72.

²² *Ibid.*, 69.

²³ Twist, 34.

²⁴ Brueggemann, *Deep Memory, Exuberant Hope: Contested Truth in a Post-Christian World*, 69.

participant would receive \$7; in which case an unknown person would receive \$9. The second option would give the participant \$5; in which case an unknown person would receive \$3. The overwhelming majority of participants chose the second option, even though it would give them less money than they would have otherwise. People simply did not want their neighbor to get more, and they would even accept less for themselves to ensure this outcome.²⁵

In their book *Scarcity: The New Science of Having Less and How it Defines Our Lives*, social scientists Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir uncover fascinating effects of scarcity. They have found that scarcity captures the mind. When we experience scarcity of any kind, we become absorbed by it. The mind automatically orients itself toward unfulfilled needs.²⁶ By staying at the top of our minds, scarcity determines what we notice, how we make choices, and how we behave.²⁷

Mullainathan and Shafir use the term *bandwidth* as the measurement for mental capacity. When facing scarcity, our minds constantly return to the source of what is lacking, leaving us with less cognitive energy to give to the rest of life. Scarcity makes us less insightful, less forward-thinking, and more impulsive. It captures our attention, turning it fully to one thing, which might help us do a better job of managing pressing needs, but it costs us on a larger scale, as we neglect other concerns and become less

²⁵ Alexander, 192.

²⁶ Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir, *Scarcity: The New Science of Having Less and How It Defines Our Lives*, (New York: Times Books, 2014), 7.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

effective in other areas of life. “Scarcity in one walk of life means we have less attention, less mind, in the rest of life.”²⁸

To illustrate how this plays out, Mullainathan and Shafir conducted an experiment involving random mall-going participants. Individuals were divided according to their stated income, and they were introduced to a scenario of a car needing repairs, followed by unrelated questions to test their IQ. In the first scenario, the needed car repairs were going to cost \$150. In the second scenario, the repair bill was going to be \$1,500. The study revealed that simply raising significant monetary concerns for the poor negatively impacts cognitive performance. The same person scored fewer IQ points when she was preoccupied by scarcity than when she was not. The poor responded to the IQ questions just like the rich when the car repair cost was low, and scarcity had not yet been awakened. Just like a computer processor that slows down when too many applications are open, the poor in this survey appeared less intelligent because some of their bandwidth was being used elsewhere.²⁹

When we think of having very little (time, money, calories), we focus on the physical implications of scarcity: less time for fun, less money to spend. The bandwidth tax suggests there is another, perhaps more important, shortfall. We must now get by with fewer mental resources. Scarcity doesn't just lead us to overborrow or to fail to invest. It leaves us handicapped in other aspects of our lives. It makes us dumber. It makes us more impulsive.³⁰

²⁸ Mullainathan and Shafir, 14-15, 41.

²⁹ Ibid., 52.

³⁰ Ibid., 66.

The Effects of a Scarcity Mindset in the Church

What does this have to do with the church? Our culture is embedded in the scarcity mindset. Our sanctuaries are filled with people who live and breathe in this culture. We are not exempt from it. Just like everyone else, American Christians encounter the lies of scarcity every day. And just like everyone else, Christians believe these lies more than we would like to admit.

After the second feeding miracle in Mark 8, the disciples are alone with Jesus and anxious again because there is no bread to eat. Jesus quizzes them. “When I fed the five thousand with just five loaves, how many basketfuls were left over?” They answer, “Twelve!” “When I fed the four thousand with seven loaves, how many were left over?” “Seven!” Jesus follows up with the question that gets to the heart of it all. “Do you not yet understand?” He is asking, “So what is the message of the leftover loaves?” Stuck in their anxiety, tunneling on what they do not have, the disciples are unable to see the message they have already received; twice.

Like the disciples, the scarcity mind-set keeps many American churches from taking risks into great unknowns, on mission with Jesus. The scarcity mindset keeps ministries under-resourced as volunteers fear giving away the little bit of time they have. The scarcity mindset keeps churches from looking beyond the needs inside their walls, daring to see the hungry on the hillside in their own zip code. It keeps them blind to seeing what they have and considering how God wants them to bless and share. Individuals in our congregations who have a mindset of scarcity, typically ease into an existence of mere survival. They tunnel on the immediate needs in front of them and have little bandwidth left to consider what new opportunity God might have for them to embrace. Discipleship and mission get put on hold while only the most pressing “crises”

are considered. The problem is the next balls are constantly waiting to drop. The pull of immediate needs is endless. Significant spiritual growth will always remain a future desire, as it is simply viewed as too demanding to prioritize today.

The stories of our culture tell us to take more for ourselves, think less of our neighbors, live in fear and shortsightedness, and hold a grudge toward those who have more. Church people play victim to these lies as much as anyone else. When that happens, the bread meant to feed everyone today goes bad in our church pantries, being held, hoarded, and locked up just in case tomorrow's needs are greater. We miss out on ministry today, and before we know it tomorrow becomes today.

Recognizing True Abundance

The question that is begging to be answered is how a pastor might lead a congregation from a mindset of scarcity toward a lived theology of abundance. Before delving into that, it is necessary to give a brief overview of what I will be referring to when I speak of abundance.

Unfortunately, the concept of biblical abundance has been distorted by those who preach a prosperity gospel. Churches rooted in the prosperity gospel have interpreted Jesus' promise of abundant life in John 10:10 through a narrow lens, claiming promises primarily of wealth and health for those who truly believe. One's faith can quite literally be measured by the wallet and the body, making material reality a sign of success and favor in God's eyes.³¹ Kenneth Copeland, one of the best-known preachers in the

³¹ Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 7.

prosperity movement, once said, “The gospel to the poor is that they don’t have to be poor anymore!”³² Proponents of the prosperity gospel claim everyone possesses the God-given ability to reap and sow their own financial harvest. Everyone has the opportunity to not have just enough, but to have an excess of wealth and good health. Poverty is seen as a mark not of financial but spiritual lack. While outsiders have called this narrow reading of John 10:10 “baptized materialism,” followers of the movement call it “living in the overflow.”³³

We might assume this prosperity gospel teaching only impacts a small number of Christians. However, a Pew survey surprisingly reported that 43 percent of all Christian respondents believe that the faithful do receive blessings of health and wealth.³⁴ The misconception is widespread. We cannot lead our congregations into a theology of abundance until we clearly articulate what this abundance actually entails.

To that end, researchers have proven time and again that money does not buy happiness. Individuals who make Forbes magazine’s list of the 400 richest Americans indicate the same level of happiness as the Inuit people of frigid Greenland and the cattle herding Masai of Kenya, who live in dung huts with no electricity or running water. Calcutta’s slum dwellers only fall a small point behind these other three groups on the happiness scale.³⁵ In an open-ended British questionnaire, people were asked to list factors that make up “quality of life.” Seventy-one percent of answers were

³² Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*, 77.

³³ *Ibid.*, 95.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁵ Sharon Begley, “Wealth and Happiness Don’t Necessarily Go Hand in Hand,” *The Wall Street Journal*, August 13, 2004, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB109234085670790101>.

nonmaterialistic in nature.³⁶ An analysis of more than 150 studies on wealth and happiness showed that in many countries where economic output has rapidly increased in recent years, there has been no noticeable increase in life satisfaction. In fact, there has been a substantial increase in depression and distrust.³⁷ These studies concluded that happiness comes less from money and more from “social relationships, enjoyable work, fulfillment, a sense that life has meaning, and joining civic and other groups.”³⁸

In general, researchers report that money consistently buys happiness right up to \$10,000 per capita income. After that point the correlation between money and happiness all but disappears. “When the Irish were making a third as much as Americans, they were reporting higher levels of satisfaction, as were the Swedes, the Danes, and the Dutch. Costa Ricans score higher than Japanese; French people are about as satisfied with their lives as Venezuelans. In fact, past the point of basic needs being met, the “satisfaction” data scramble in mind-bending ways.”³⁹ The “life-satisfaction” of pavement dwellers in India was among the lowest of all demographics, but their score almost doubled when they moved into a slum, at which point they are about as satisfied with their life as the average college student.⁴⁰ The facts are out, and even still, when Americans were asked which single factor would most increase the quality of their lives, the most frequent

³⁶ Bill McKibben, “After Growth,” in *Money and Faith: The Search for Enough*, ed. Michael Schut, (Denver: Morehouse Publishing, 2008), 90.

³⁷ Begley, “Wealth and Happiness Don’t Necessarily Go Hand in Hand.”

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ McKibben, 92.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

answer was money.⁴¹ Our culture tells us what the abundant life is supposed to be, and even when we have seen that tale break down time and again, old beliefs die hard. This is the power of a myth.

Even so, the word *abundance* connotes an overflow of something God desires for God's people. It does not make sense that God's abundance would come in a form that does not increase peace or joy. And research has proven that more money in no way guarantees either. It brings just the opposite in many cases. So what might God's gift of abundance be?

The world God intends is a world where there is enough for all. The Good Shepherd leads all his sheep into green pastures. Jesus feeds every person in the crowd and has leftovers. None leave hungry. None go unseen. God's vision of abundance must have something to do with the well-being of *all*. It must be about resources not being hoarded but shared, directly confronting our culture's and the prosperity gospel's definition of abundance. God intends for God's people to live in kinship, creating a world where there is enough for each soul's well-being.⁴² The witness of all major religious traditions is that we are most fully alive when we are not the centers of our own universe, but when we are serving others. Thus, God's economy not only imagines but intends for abundant life to be a reality here and now. God's economy pays special attention to lifting up the poor and powerless, directly challenging those who claim abundance as a

⁴¹ McKibben, 94.

⁴² Michael Schut, "Foreword," in *Money and Faith: The Search for Enough*, ed. Michael Schut, (Denver: Morehouse Publishing, 2008), 19.

gift to come only in the hereafter. God's abundant life is meant to be tasted, seen, and shared by all and for all, right here and right now.⁴³

In John 10, Jesus paints a picture of the abundant life using the metaphor of sheep, gates, hired hands, wolves, and the Good Shepherd. The abundance Jesus offers is akin to a pasture, providing nourishment, along with the presence and care of a good shepherd. Under his watch, the sheep dwell together in a single flock. And for their sake, the shepherd is willing to lay down his own life. From the sheep's perspective this is abundance indeed. They know an abundance of nourishment, safety, community, and care.

At the same time, the text warns there will be trouble. The abundant life is not free from attacks and sickness. Hired hands are ready to turn on the sheep. Wolves are trying to get to them. The abundant life is not a condition sheltered from pain and suffering, or even death. Rather, it is a life with others that is provided by One whose commitment to the flock is unbreakable. To live abundantly in the flock and with the Good Shepherd is more than mere existence. It is full participation in the true life that comes from God.⁴⁴

Throughout the gospels, Jesus encourages his disciples to measure their abundance not by the materials they possess but by the fruit that they bear. God does not promise to fill our lives with possessions, but God does promise to give us people to love, serve, and bless. When we pass the baskets of loaves to those among us, God promises to

⁴³ Schut, "Foreward," in *Money and Faith: The Search for Enough*, 19.

⁴⁴ Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra, *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 35.

refill our empty hands until there is more than enough. More often than not, these same people offer the gifts of provision to us as well.⁴⁵ This is abundance: knowing the Good Shepherd, remaining in his good care, living at peace with the flock, and following wherever he might take us. We will delve deeper into Scripture's view of abundance in the next chapter.

⁴⁵ Alexander, 18.

CHAPTER 2: THE ABUNDANT LIFE IN THE SCRIPTURE STORY

Abundant life. Human flourishing. Blessedness. Shalom. The good life. These terms are common language among biblical scholars and preachers. Each assumes there is a certain quality and way of life that God both desires and makes possible for God's people to know. Abundance is not just enough to survive. Its very definition connotes an overflow. If God has created us to live abundantly, that must mean that God wants us to experience overflowing fullness. The question that begs to be answered is what kind of fullness. Does God promise an abundance of monetary wealth? Does God promise an abundance of safety and comfort? Does God promise an abundance of success? What does God promise to fill us with in this abundant life?

The affirmation of abundance is rooted in the belief in a generous God, and it stands in direct opposition to society's false claim of scarcity. From Genesis to Revelation, the story of scripture invites us into an alternate reality. It is a reality rooted in kinship, mutual suffering and thriving, and in covenant with God for the good of all. It is a reality that moves forth in love rather than violence.¹

In the simplest terms, the abundant life is the good life that God wants for all God's people. It is living how God wants us to live so we can experience and encounter all that God wants us to experience and encounter. In a world of moral decline, Christians

¹ Brueggemann, *Deep Memory, Exuberant Hope: Contested Truth in a Post-Christian World*, 6-7.

today, perhaps more than ever, must articulate a clear vision of the life God intends for us to live. The entirety of the Christian faith is about knowing the good life, or as 1 Timothy 6:19 calls it, “the life that really is life.”² At the beginning of his *Summa Theologica*, Thomas Aquinas says, “that which gives (human beings) unadulterated happiness and realizes their human fullness cannot possibly be in any creature good but must be found in God alone.”³ This chapter will trace the theme of the abundant life through the story of scripture, ultimately identifying the life that really is life.

Abundance in the Old Testament

Creation: Genesis 1:1-2:3

The story of Scripture starts with a liturgy of abundance.⁴ Genesis 1 is a song in praise of a generous God. The way the world is ordered is only described as “good, very good.” God blesses creation and infuses all of it with vitality. Everything is invited to bear fruit and multiply. There is life in full and every created thing will participate in the overflowing goodness that pours out from the generous Creator. The creation song culminates in Sabbath, a final word that God can rest because everything that is needed for life is here.⁵ “The mechanisms are all in place. The world will have enough.”⁶

² Miroslav Volf and Matthew Croasmun, *For the Life of the World: Theology That Makes a Difference* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2019) 53, 61.

³ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁴ Brueggemann, *Deep Memory, Exuberant Hope: Contested Truth in a Post-Christian World*, 69.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, “Enough is Enough.”

Three times the term “blessing” is used in Genesis 1. It is used to speak of living creatures (vs. 22), of humans (vs. 28), and of the Sabbath. While some describe a deep gulf between the goodness of God and the wickedness of the world, in the creation narrative this gulf is non-existent. This world is inherently endowed with the blessings of God. At the very beginning of scripture’s story, God does not stand over and above creation, but rather, God dwells alongside and in relationship with the world. God is satisfied that the world created in love is the vehicle by which God’s desires will come to fruition. “The blessed world is indeed the world that God intended.”⁷

Abundance in Covenant Blessing: Genesis 12:1-9

In Genesis 12, God calls Abram away from his homeland with a covenant that will shape Israel’s identity and calling for good. “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:2-3; NRSV). Abram is promised all the pieces of a flourishing life: land, a good name, and blessedness. From the initial giving of the blessing, God makes it clear that Abram’s abundance will be for the good of all people. Abram will flourish so all the earth may flourish. Abram will be blessed, so he and his people might be a blessing. Through God’s blessing of Abraham, Brueggemann concludes, “blessing is the force of well-being active in the world, and faith is the

⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation: A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 37.

awareness that creation is the gift that keeps on giving.”⁸ The abundant life cannot just be about oneself. It must also be about our neighbors, even including the strangers in our midst. If God’s first covenant tells us anything, it is that in God’s economy, abundance for one must be abundance for all. This truth dominates Genesis until scarcity is introduced in its forty-seventh chapter.

Abundance in Famine: Genesis 41-47, Exodus 12

Pharaoh is warned in a dream that seven years of abundance in Egypt will be followed by seven years of famine. For the first time in the Bible someone says, “there is not enough.” Scarcity is introduced into the world’s economy. As resources dwindle, Pharaoh’s fear intensifies, and he becomes ruthless. Humans are no longer seen as kin, but rather, as mouths to feed and objects for labor. God’s people who were promised land, a good name, and overflowing blessings are enslaved. Exodus picks up the story, recording the contest between a generous God and fearful king; a contest to see if abundance or scarcity will win the day.⁹

Even in confinement, the truth of abundance sneaks into the story. Hebrew women continue to conceive and bring forth new life at intimidating speed. Pharaoh demands the Hebrews babies be killed at birth. A couple of courageous midwives refuse to obey. By Exodus 12, the great king of Egypt who monopolized all the world’s resources, asks Moses and Aaron, two lowly slaves, to bless him. The figurehead of the

⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *Deep Memory, Exuberant Hope: Contested Truth in a Post-Christian World*, 70.

⁹ *Ibid.*

myth of scarcity is submitting to this little subversive community that is holding on to a promise of enough. The power of the future is not in the hands of those who, driven by fear, selfishly hold onto resources that others need, but rather, the future belongs to those who trust in and live by God's abundance.¹⁰

Pharaoh had forgotten (or perhaps he never knew) the stipulations God ties to wealth and blessing. They come with a call to maintain justice and righteousness. Egypt's big question in their time of famine is, "What will you do with all that you have been given? Will you use it to build an empire, or will you use it to help the oppressed?" Each time wealth is seen in the Scripture story, it is expected to be used as a pathway to liberation. Pharaoh fails the test here, and later, Israel will fail the test as well. Their golden days of wealth and empire gave way to their own system of slavery and oppression. When God's people in Jerusalem lose sight of the plot of God's story and forget why they have been given their blessings, they are exiled to Babylon, far from home.¹¹

At some point, the gift of abundant resources gives way to building empires. With more mansions comes more need for security. Resources go to protecting the empire, rather than caring for one another. Egypt stores grain, not to help everyone, but to make everyone dependent on them. Sin introduces the myth of scarcity and scares people into thinking they will not have enough. Thus, they feel justified in acting on their own behalf. God, however, has infinite creativity and is always making a new way of life regardless

¹⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *Deep Memory, Exuberant Hope: Contested Truth in a Post-Christian World*, 71.

¹¹ Rob Bell, host, "Building a New House with Don Golden and Don Golden," The Robcast (audio podcast), November 19, 2019, <https://robbell.podbean.com/e/building-a-new-house-with-don-golden/>

of the limitations in front of us. Knowing who God is and who we are in God frees us to move beyond fear so we might actually enjoy the gift of the abundant life, that is the blessed life that generously blesses others.¹²

Abundance in the Desert: Exodus 16

Israel's life post-slavery finds them in the desert, and it is not long before they begin to grumble there. They would rather have died enslaved in Egypt than starve to death in their newfound freedom. The people's complaints turn to Moses and Aaron. They accuse their leaders of bringing them out to kill them. God rains down bread in order to show God's people that food abounds even in the wilderness.¹³ Terrence Fretheim stresses the ordinary nature of manna and quail. God's gifts are not only to be found in the unusual but in the every day. Fretheim compares the Exodus description of manna to a natural phenomenon in the Sinai Peninsula, in which a certain plant louse "punctures the fruit of the tamarisk tree and excretes a substance from this juice, a yellowish white flake or ball...It has a sweet taste. Rich in carbohydrates and sugar, it is still gathered by natives, who bake it into a kind of bread."¹⁴ Likewise, migratory birds fly in from Africa and are often exhausted enough to be caught by hand.¹⁵ These ordinary

¹² Rob Bell, "Building a New House with Don Golden and Don Golden."

¹³ Terrence Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation: A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), 181.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 182.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

gifts from God are given to Israel. What they will do with them is what matters, and *that* might even become extraordinary.

There are, however, unusual features of the manna and quail that cannot be attributed to natural phenomena. For example, there is a very precise leveling out of the food according to need, regardless of how much was gathered. Also, a double portion of manna was available each day preceding the Sabbath. There is divine initiative here, as God alters the usual patterns of nature to meet the needs of God's people.

However one explains the manna and quail, the heart of Exodus 16 is the relationship of food and faith. Four times, the narrative of Exodus 16 makes it clear that God has heard the murmurings of the people, and God will provide for them, even though they complain against God. "The very presence and activity of God can be discerned in connection with daily provisions."¹⁶ It's all too common that the stresses and crises of life lead to a crisis of faith. Material and spiritual wellness are difficult to separate. The people of God have often been so clouded by physical circumstances that they have struggled to discern God's providential involvement in the daily details of their lives. In the desert, Israel is learning to recognize the presence of God in the attention to the consistent provision of their daily needs.¹⁷ God is not only concerned about the dramatic moments of our lives, but God also cares about the hundreds of little moments that make up our ordinary days.

Brueggemann notes other results of the feeding in the wilderness. First, everybody had enough. Israel had learned all about scarcity in Egypt, and so their first

¹⁶ Fretheim, 183.

¹⁷ Ibid.

inclination was to hoard what God had freely given. When they tried to save the bread, it rotted. Israel learned that God's generosity cannot be stored up for selfish gain.

To challenge this scarcity response, Moses led the people in imitating God's example in Genesis 1. They observed Sabbath. Sabbath affirms that God's people believe there is enough, and thus, they need not run themselves ragged just to survive. There is no evidence that Pharaoh ever took a day to stop hustling and hoarding. The people of God can slow down, only take what is needed, and refuse to live by struggle and competition because they know a God who brings new manna every day. There is always enough.¹⁸ "The gift of bread transforms the wilderness. And from this point on, Israel would entertain the thought that a place of perceived scarcity may turn out to be a place of wondrous abundance."¹⁹

Abundance in Pastures and Valleys: Psalm 23

"The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing." This is a version of the first line of the best-known psalm. The pictures and symbols that are found most frequently in early Christian tombs are of the Good Shepherd, the fish, and the vine. The Shepherd represented for the earliest believers the recovery of the lost sheep, his tender care and compassion, the green pastures and fresh waters, and even the sacrifice of one life for another. The Good Shepherd was a complete picture of salvation.²⁰

¹⁸ Brueggemann, *Deep Memory, Exuberant Hope: Contested Truth in a Post-Christian World*, 71.

¹⁹ Brueggemann, "Enough is Enough."

²⁰ Kenneth Bailey, *The Good Shepherd: A Thousand-Year Journey from Psalm 23 to the New Testament*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 35.

A Western reader might be tempted to read Psalm 23 as an individual sheep's personal experience with its shepherd. However, no sheep is ever taken out to pasture alone. Where there is a sheep, a flock is always nearby.²¹ Life with the good shepherd inherently assumes a good life with the shepherd's flock as well. Within the flock, the psalmist identifies a basic set of needs that the shepherd gladly provides for his sheep. These include food, drink, tranquility, rescue in times of crisis, freedom from fear, receiving God's grace, and a permanent place in God's home. There is no mentioned need of power, full understanding, or control. There is nothing about the ability to consume or be entertained.²² The life with God that "lacks nothing" simply entails basic needs being met and intimate union with the shepherd and the flock.

With these things in place, the sheep willingly lie down and rest. One cannot force a sheep to lie down. They will only do so once they have been fed, their thirst has been quenched, and they feel protected from wild animals and biting insects. Sheep rest in the shepherd's presence because they know they are in the care of one who sees them, recognizes all the threats around them, and will attend to their personal needs and interests. They can rest when they know without a doubt there is a good shepherd who cares for them.²³ That does not mean the sheep are free from threats and trials. Psalm 23 is written in the tradition of David whose life was turbulent to say the least. David knew murder, incest, betrayal, adultery, treachery, civil war, and the loss of a child. Yet, he found a way to return to those still waters and rest. Even in the midst of tumult, there is a

²¹ Bailey, 38.

²² Ibid., 39.

²³ Ibid., 40.

way to steal away and lie down in God's good care.²⁴ That rest is a gift of the abundant life.

The shepherd and sheep move from the resting place into the open wilderness, and the shepherd leads them from the front. The shepherd does not push and poke. He does not drive the sheep, but rather, draws them. The shepherd leads by relationship. Instead of intimidating and charging, he guides them with familiarity, even intimacy. In place of whips and prods, there is a voice and a special call.²⁵ Even today in the Middle East, shepherds will lead their flock by playing their own tune on a pipe, or more frequently, by singing their own unique call to the sheep. The sheep are most attracted by the voice of the shepherd, which they know, and are eager to follow.

The valley of death and deep darkness is not something that can be avoided. The only way forward is through it. It is daunting, but the sheep know that the shepherd sees an open way through the valley. He recognizes the needed growth that can only happen through trials and failures. The shepherd does not rush the sheep through the valley but stays with them each step of the way until they arrive at the other side.²⁶ The good shepherd never works remotely. He dwells where the sheep dwell, moves as the sheep move, and stays when the sheep stay. This is the abundant life: life in the company of the Good Shepherd.

On the other side of the valley of death is a table set in the presence of one's enemies. The Good Shepherd becomes a Good Host, creating a place where conflicts are

²⁴ Bailey, 43.

²⁵ Blaine McCormick and David Davenport, *Shepherd Leadership: Wisdom for Leaders from Psalm 23*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 32-33.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 41-47.

transformed, and reconciliation is realized. The Good Host recognizes that all conflicts may not be avoidable, but through an abundant table, new relationships can be imagined even after damage has been done.²⁷ In traditional Middle Eastern culture, a wealthy person shows the community what they have acquired by hosting meals with three times as much food as the guests can eat. Psalm 23 celebrates this life in community that is strengthened and solidified by shared meals around a shared table.²⁸ The cup overflows, honoring not only the host but the guests around the table. Enemies become friends in the presence of the Good Shepherd Host. Life at his table is the abundant life indeed.

Anointing oil for sheep keeps irritants away, and oil at the table is the ultimate act of hospitality. It affirms the guest's place of belonging in the presence of the host. No stone is left unturned as the Good Shepherd turned Good Host makes every effort to emphasize his guests' belovedness. The waiters are hovering. Every time a guest takes a sip, they refill the cup to overflowing. Those at the table know this treatment is not merely ordinary but rather extraordinary; even abundant.²⁹ *From a flock to a gathering at a banquet table, the life without lack must be a life centered in community.*

The psalm concludes with the personification of Goodness and Mercy, as God becomes an actor in the drama.³⁰ The psalmist is confident that wherever he goes, whatever he encounters, and in whichever ways he may fail, this one thing will not change: God's unfailing, covenantal love and grace will be with him, always ready to

²⁷ McCormick and Davenport, 73-74.

²⁸ Bailey, 54-55.

²⁹ Ibid., 58.

³⁰ Ibid., 60.

lead him home. While predators from the outside and disease from the inside may come, life is essentially grounded in mercy and goodness.³¹ While life may be hard, it is always a gift. While there may be dark seasons, life with God is always ultimately good.

Abundance in the New Testament

Abundance at Dinner Time: Matthew 14:13-21, Mark 6:31-44, Luke 9:12-17, John 6:1-14

The images of the Good Shepherd in Psalm 23 reoccur in the life and ministry of Jesus. Only three miracles appear in all four Gospels: the resurrection of Jesus, Jesus healing the blind, and Jesus feeding the five thousand. The latter is the focus of this section. In Matthew's account, the feeding immediately follows a discourse on the drunken feast of Herod Antipas in which John the Baptist's head is brought to the king on a platter. If the preceding story is titled, "Herod's Party," the scene on the hillside between Jesus and the crowds could be called, "God's Party."³² Jesus is accompanied by a large crowd, has compassion on them, heals them, and feeds them. The focus on Jesus' compassion is a direct critique of Herod's cruelty. Jesus sees a hungry crowd and feeds them just because he cares about them. Herod provides food for a crowd to demonstrate

³¹ McCormick and Davenport, 104.

³² Craig S. Keener, *Matthew*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 253.

his own power and stroke his own ego. Jesus' feeding is an alternative to the politics founded in envy and greed that the Herods of this world cannot avoid.³³

But before Jesus does a thing, the disciples reveal their own lack of faith. Psalm 78:18-20 says of Israel, "They tested God in their heart by demanding the food they craved. They spoke against God saying, 'Can God spread a table in the wilderness? Can he give bread or provide meat for his people?'" The disciples stand in line with faithless Israel, asking Jesus the same questions. "Are we to spend two years' worth of wages on bread to feed these people?"³⁴ Can Jesus give bread and meat to five thousand men plus women and children in the wilderness? Of course not. The crowds must be sent away!³⁵

Images of Psalm 23 are prevalent in this scene. Jesus stands in the presence of his enemies who have just killed John, demonstrating they can do the same to Jesus if and when they want. The circumstances are bleak. How will Jesus respond? He speaks with authority commanding the crowds. Herod used his power to send his soldiers on assignment to kill John. Jesus uses his authority to organize the people to recline in groups of fifties and hundreds. "Indeed they are to lie down in green pastures."³⁶ The good shepherd is taking over after the bad shepherd has misused his authority and mistreated the flock. He is on a mission to show the way things are really meant to be.

Faced with the hungry multitudes and five loaves of bread, Mark uses four verbs to describe what Jesus did: took, gave thanks, broke, and gave. These are Eucharistic

³³ Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 139.

³⁴ Mark 6:37

³⁵ Bailey, 171.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 170.

words spoken freely in the desert. Jesus uses what he has to oversee a sit-down thanksgiving meal that brings the needs of the people under the care of a generous God.³⁷ We will look at each movement as they work together to paint a picture of the abundant life.

According to Henri Nouwen, the words “you are my beloved” reveal the most intimate truth about human beings. We are the beloved of God, and our ultimate calling is to let that belovedness breathe life into all we think, do, or say.³⁸ The four words Jesus uses in this feeding miracle can also be used in our lives to help connect us with the truth of our belovedness.

First, Jesus *takes* the bread. Jesus sees potential that no one else sees in what already is present. He not only sees the needs of the people, but also, the capacity of the fish and loaves to feed them.³⁹ God often uses what people already have when God moves on their behalf. When Moses asked God for a sign before going to Pharaoh, God asked Moses to look at what was in his hand (Exodus 4:1-3). When a widow was in a financial crisis, Elisha asked her what was already in her home (2 Kings 4:1-7). God takes the ordinary things we have among us and uses them to do something extraordinary before us.⁴⁰ Humankind cannot live in abundance until we are assured of our belovedness as children of God. Thus, the first step in our spiritual lives is acknowledging that we have already been chosen. We have been seen by God, and God calls us precious ones

³⁷ Walter Brueggemann, “Enough is Enough.”

³⁸ Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World*, (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 30, 45.

³⁹ Alexander, 34.

⁴⁰ Keener, 254.

with whom God wants to share God's goodness.⁴¹ Just like the bread, God has taken us just we are, and said "This is beautiful and good." We must constantly re-claim the truth of our chosen-ness as we lean into the life of abundance.

Second, Jesus *gives thanks*. He speaks a blessing over the bread. Thanksgiving precedes the miracle. Jesus embraces what is "not enough" and blesses it before God.⁴² Much of the world's brokenness begins with the act of forgetting that God is enough, that the gifts God gives are enough, and that there is always more than enough in front of us to enable us to live in intimate union with God. Giving thanks to God for what already is helps us remember.⁴³ The abundant life is marked by gratitude.

Just as Jesus blessed the bread, Jesus *speaks words of blessing* over us. We need to hear that ongoing blessing that reminds us that we belong to a God who will guide us by love in every step of our lives. Those who are secure in their own blessedness become a great blessing to others. It is easy to call forth the beauty and truth in others when you have seen the beauty and truth inside of you. Those who know the voice of the one who calls them beloved are free to bless others, knowing there is enough belovedness to go around.⁴⁴ This freedom to bless is a key to living abundantly.

Thirdly, Jesus breaks the bread. In fact, the miracle happened in the breaking. It is our natural inclination to avoid suffering and run from brokenness. However, knowing that the bread could not be shared until it was broken, and reflecting on how often our

⁴¹ Nouwen, 53-54.

⁴² Ann Voskamp, *The Broken Way: A Daring Path into the Abundant Life*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 30.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁴⁴ Nouwen, 82-83.

lives have little to offer the world until we know struggle and heartache, empowers us to embrace our brokenness and befriend our pain.⁴⁵ Rather than denying it, living through pain is the true pathway to healing. However, we are not meant to walk through the pain alone. We need someone to assure us there is peace beyond the suffering, life beyond death, and love that will outlive fear. When we have those companion voices in our corner, our suffering can become the very means by which we discover the peace and joy our hearts long for. “The great secret of the spiritual life is that everything we live, being gladness or sadness, joy or pain, health or illness, can all be part of the journey toward the full realization of our humanity.”⁴⁶ When we place our pain under the bigger umbrella of our blessedness, we recognize that the very things that we thought were to punish and push us away are opportunities to grow into deeper understanding of and communion with the God who loves us.⁴⁷

Ann Voskamp suggests that abundance only comes by way of brokenness. Because we are called to imitate Christ who was broken for us, our hearts also are made to be broken open and broken free. The deepest wounds birth the deepest wisdom. Our weaknesses contain God’s glory.⁴⁸ “The seed breaks to give us the bud. The soil breaks to give the crop. The sky breaks to give us rain. And the wheat breaks to give us bread. The bread breaks to give us a feast. There was once an alabaster jar that broke to give Jesus all the glory. Never be afraid of a broken thing.”⁴⁹ Growth only comes through change,

⁴⁵ Nouwen, 92-93.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 96.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 98.

⁴⁸ Voskamp, 24.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 25.

and change only comes through surrender. There is no surrender that does not leave wounds behind, but abundance comes through the breaking. The miracle always happens in the breaking.⁵⁰

Finally, the bread is *given*. Everyone would not be fed unless the bread was freely shared, from one disciple to the next, from one group to the next group. In the same way, our greatest fulfillment comes in sharing our lives with others. The world tries to convince us that happiness comes from having. But it is hard to identify someone who is happy just based on what she has. True joy, that is the abundant life, comes from giving ourselves to others.⁵¹

In Jesus' final moments on earth he does not look for comfort or protection. Jesus does not hold on to his own life but allows himself to be broken and given away. From the place of his own belovedness, Jesus is free to give thanks, be broken, and give himself away. God so loved that God gave.⁵² If we are to be fully alive, we also must learn how to give ourselves away.

The abundant life is marked by generosity. We will only be generous if we are convinced that we are loved enough by God to freely share that love with others. The love of God always breaks and gives.⁵³ The abundant way forward is to give ourselves forward. Every act of grace and kindness moves another heart forward to give the same. Dr. Sonja Lyubomirsky, a psychology professor at the University of California and an

⁵⁰ Voskamp, 26.

⁵¹ Nouwen, 109.

⁵² Voskamp, 31.

⁵³ Ibid., 68.

expert in human happiness has found that five random acts of kindness in a week can increase happiness up to three months later.⁵⁴ Giving changes us, moves our neighbors, and transforms our world.⁵⁵

On the hillside, Jesus' disciples are faced with a real situation of scarcity. By the end of the day, they were picking up leftovers, and Jesus was letting the world know he was turning it back into a place of abundance. God is the giver that keeps giving. People who draw near to Jesus receive the overflow of Jesus' abundance, and thus, are free to live generously. This is still true. Jesus takes, blesses, breaks, and gives. And those with eyes to see are astounded by the surplus. We are recipients of more than enough to have, to share, and to be glad in the Giver of it all.⁵⁶

Abundance in the Care of the Good Shepherd: John 10:1-21

The best-known promise of abundant life comes in Jesus' Good Shepherd discourse found in John 10. This parable follows a shepherd and his sheep from the village to the countryside. In the village, several flocks of sheep would be penned together in a walled enclosure with a secure door that must be opened from the inside by the doorkeeper. The shepherd would come early in the morning to gather his sheep from the other flocks. He would call from the door, and the doorkeeper would know his voice. Then the shepherd would call for his sheep and, knowing the sound of his voice, they

⁵⁴ Sonja Lyubomirsky, "Sonja Lyubomirsky," accessed November 2, 2020, <http://sonjalyubomirsky.com/>.

⁵⁵ Voskamp, 73.

⁵⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Celebrating Abundance: Devotions for Advent*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 9.

would come out from the pen ready for a day of feasting and exploring. New sheep in the flock did not yet know the shepherd's voice. Hearing the call, they might have a temporary nervous breakdown, running around, beating their heads against the stone walls, and emitting pitiful cries, until they learned their shepherd's voice.⁵⁷ Each morning, the shepherd shows up at the gate to call his sheep. He knows the way to green pastures and still waters. They hear his call, and he leaves it up to them if they will come and follow or stay behind and hide.

Sometimes shepherds would have to journey many miles from their village to find food and water, leaving them unable to get home by dark. In that case, they would find a pen in the wilderness that had been constructed by other shepherds. Once the sheep were inside the only vulnerable spot was the opening across the entrance. Here the shepherd would lay down in the doorway, putting his life between the sheep and any predator that may come their way.⁵⁸

With the Good Shepherd keeping watch over his flock, the sheep can come in and rest and go out and find pasture. The shepherd does not place the sheep in cages and feed them one by one in the safety of the barn. Rather, in his care they have the freedom to go out and graze, play, adventure, and rest.⁵⁹ The abundant life is one that recognizes the sustenance and freedom gifted us by the Good Shepherd. Knowing his watchful eye is upon us, trusting every predator is in his sight, and believing he would rather die than see us undone, we are free to take risks, run and jump, eat and let others eat.

⁵⁷ Bailey, 214-215.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 222.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 224.

This does not mean the abundant life is free from thieves and wolves. The Good Shepherd warns they will come. The community to which Jesus spoke these words was threatened by oppressors and betrayers even while under Jesus' care. The abundant life could not have meant ease and comfort. Nor could it have excluded physical death, which the shepherd himself will suffer. The abundant life, then, is a life with others that is provided by One who loves us, knows us intimately and lets us intimately know him, and whose commitment to the flock is unbreakable.⁶⁰

Conclusion

While each story stands alone, there are common threads from Genesis to John that give rich insight into the full life God makes possible for us to live. First a few words on what abundance clearly is not. None of the stories emphasize material wealth as the mark of true abundance. Even Abraham's blessing of land and provisions is for the clear purpose of being a blessing. In seeking to attain more and more things, we have actually lost something of inestimable value. North American society emphasizes the "good life" which is primarily materialism and the pursuit of the American dream.⁶¹ We have all seen the emptiness at the end of that road. In fact, in America happiness peaked in 1957 even though consumption has more than doubled since then.⁶² The well-known bumper sticker says, "He who dies with the most toys wins." This assumes there is no giver; we end up

⁶⁰ Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra, *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 35.

⁶¹ Michael Shut, "Introduction," in *Simpler Living, Compassionate Life*, ed. Michael Shut (Denver: Living the Good News, 1999), 23-31.

⁶² Sallie McFague, *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 86

with whatever we can accumulate for ourselves. And it is all a competition. This mindset leads to despair and fills our society with anxiety, fear, greed, and brutality. It leads to indifference to the poor, building up walls and arms, and divisions between people. It tells us to only look after ourselves. This is the dominant creed of American society today.⁶³

In direct opposition to this, the abundant life is founded in the depth and intimacy, the wealth, of relationships. First, it is an intimate union between God and us. God's greatest desire is to rule the world in such a way that God and the world are at home with each other.⁶⁴ Psalm 23 and John 10 both show a shepherd and his sheep sharing the same home. In the feeding of the multitudes, Jesus ate the same food he provided. The Good Shepherd knows his sheep, and his sheep know him. This is an intimate, dwelling with, kind of knowing. The abundant life is a "with-God" life. A life that walks with God, talks to God, listens to God, and dares to dream with God.

The abundant life is one where pain is not an obstacle to peace, but rather, a means by which one can grow in deeper connection to God and others. In Jesus' life suffering was directly connected to true flourishing.⁶⁵ The sheep walked through the valley of death. The bread was broken. The shepherd was willing to lay down his life. The abundant life leans on the God who promises to be near to the brokenhearted, glorified in weakness, and busy at work turning the things we mean for wrong into vehicles for life and grace. It is not a life free from suffering, but one that can walk

⁶³ Brueggemann, *Deep Memory, Exuberant Hope: Contested Truth in a Post-Christian World*, 72.

⁶⁴ Volf and Croasmun, 68.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 79.

through the valleys with peace and hope, knowing God is in the valley with us and will use every moment in the valley to grow us for good.

The abundant life is the life of love. It is a love that extends beyond family and friends, reaching out to neighbors, strangers, and enemies just the same. It is a love that is practiced and practical here and now. In Genesis 1, God created everything out of the overflow of God's love. God blesses Abraham generously, so Abraham will be generous to all. God invites the psalmist to dine with his enemies, and all have full plates and overflowing cups. Jesus moves to feed the crowds because of his compassion and love for them. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep, just because he loves them. The abundant life recognizes how deeply beloved we are, and freely shares that love with the world. It moves toward the other in hospitality, forgiveness, grace, kindness, and generosity.

The abundant life is a life that gives thanks. It lives in community and acknowledges the joys and responsibilities that come with it. The abundant life is a life of service. It is a life that can rest in its belovedness. It is a life unafraid of leaving the stall and going on an adventure with God. It is a life that takes holy risks and dreams God-sized dreams. It is a life marked by the smallest acts of kindness each day. It is a life absorbed in the life of God. It is a life that in its flourishing, sees that countless other lives begin to flourish too.

CHAPTER 3:
TRANSFORMING CULTURE: THREE VIEWS

What Makes and Transforms Culture?

At the heart of my research is a desire to change the culture of Belfair Community Church, leading us away from a mindset of scarcity and toward one of abundance. As a native Texan living in the Pacific Northwest, I have often heard myself say, “You can take the girl out of Texas, but you can’t take the Texas out of the girl.” The statement suggests that people are shaped by more than their present realities. People who know the biblical story might resonate more with a lesson from the Exodus story: it takes but a few minutes to get Israel out of Egypt, but it takes forty years to get Egypt out of Israel. This metaphor derives from the Exodus story. God appoints Moses as the leader of the enslaved Israelites. After pleading with Pharaoh for God’s people to be set free and Pharaoh’s subsequent refusal, God afflicts Egypt with ten plagues. Pharaoh finally breaks, leaving the Israelites to frantically gather their things and head to the Red Sea. The waters are parted, and a people who were enslaved for four hundred years are now free.

In Exodus 14 the Israelites enter into new circumstances and a new reality. In Exodus 15 they are singing songs of praise to God. By Exodus 16 they are hungry in the wilderness with no food in sight. They accuse Moses and God of bringing them to the wilderness to watch them die. Even though their reality has changed, the Israelites still

view God as another Pharaoh; a tyrannical dictator who delights in the helpless state of his servants, and they still see themselves as slaves without hope, entitled to nothing but bitter complaint. God will keep Israel in the wilderness for forty years. They will not enter the Promised Land until they finally see themselves not as slaves of Pharaoh but as the chosen people of God. This truth was theirs before they left Egypt. But their culture did not reflect that truth for several more decades.

What is culture anyway? A basic definition says that culture is the behaviors and beliefs of a particular social, ethnic, or age group.¹ Still, culture is difficult to clearly define. That is because the building blocks of culture include many unspoken rules about “the way we do things around here.”² A culture of a place is something we *experience*, and so describing it to individuals who have not had the experience can be challenging. Culture is the invisible personality of a group or place, that thing you sense, without being told a thing. We feel it more than we can articulate it. Peter Scazzero defines culture as such: “the sum total of the learned patterns of thought and behavior of any given group.”³

Every group has a culture. Every business, regardless of size or scale, has a unique culture. Every nation, and every zip code within those nations, has a unique culture. Universities have their own cultures, as do churches. Every group of friends or colleagues, every team, and every board has a certain way of being together that

¹ Craig Wortmann, "Can Stories Change a Culture?" *Industrial and Commercial Training* 40, no. 3 (2008), 134-141.

² Peter Scazzero, *Six Marks of a Church Culture that Deeply Changes Lives* (Emotionally Healthy Discipleship, 4, 2019) https://www.emotionallyhealthy.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/churchculture_ebook-1.pdf?v=7516fd43adaa.

³ Ibid.

constitutes the spirit of that particular community. It is true that culture is in every place where people gather. It is not true, however, that culture just happens. Culture is shaped, created, and maintained.⁴ It is formed, and there often comes a time it needs to be reformed or transformed.

Is that possible? Can culture really change? Can the behaviors and beliefs that identify and drive a community really be transformed without the initial community disappearing? Craig Wortmann compares a cultural change to an organ transplant. While it is possible, some strong drugs may be necessary to keep the body from rejecting the invasion.⁵ Even still, cultures do change. We can think of countless examples of such. On a social level, the common beliefs toward slavery and civil rights have been transformed in a matter of decades. On an environmental level, most Americans think twice before throwing a ream of paper into a wastebasket. Though recycling came to the United States as early as 1690, our culture saw little need for it until Earth Day in 1970. That event ignited a tiny spark that would begin a gradual transformation in a nation's beliefs and behaviors. Culture can change. The changes, however, will often come slowly, at times imperceptibly, and with plenty of disruptions along the way.⁶ God took forty years to transform the Israelite's culture. John Kotter, the expert on leading change, says it can take three to ten years for changes to sink deeply into the culture of a business.⁷

To reiterate, culture is the beliefs and behaviors that shape how a group of people see the world. Changing a group's circumstances can happen fairly quickly and easily.

⁴ Peter Scazzero, *Six Marks of a Church Culture that Deeply Changes*.

⁵ Wortmann, 134-141.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ John Kotter, *Leading Change*, (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1996), 12.

Leading a true cultural transformation is a much more complicated and longer process. Even so, it is possible for cultures to be transformed. This chapter will gather insights on leading cultural change from the worlds of business, psychology, and the church.

Transforming Culture: A Business Perspective

The majority of research on leading cultural change comes from the corporate world. There are endless suggestions and case studies available to help leaders influence change in their unique contexts. I am highlighting three that change experts identify most frequently.

Urgency and Inspiration

Cultural change begins with identifying a reason to change. Kotter says the number one error in leading change is not establishing a high enough sense of urgency for why the transformation is crucial.⁸ Too often organizations settle for a spirit of complacency that leaves them striving less for flourishing and more for “good enough.” Such a spirit sets in when, among other things, leadership neglects to recognize and talk about real crises, when the overall performance standards are low, when employees’ goals are narrow, and when feedback from external sources is ignored.⁹ If a cultural change is going to happen in a complacent environment, the leadership has to raise the level of urgency. This starts by naming the crisis, setting goals so high they cannot be

⁸ Kotter, 5.

⁹ Ibid., 40.

reached by conducting business as usual, humbly listening to feedback, and bombarding people with the realities of future opportunities and rewards that are possible with change.¹⁰ People must have a convincing reason to change their beliefs and behaviors. That will not happen by accident. The need must be presented as both urgent and possible.

Simon Sinek claims there are only two ways to influence human behavior: through manipulation or inspiration. Great leaders choose the route of inspiration. They present the needed change as a unique opportunity, and those who respond do so not because they are swayed but because they truly want to be a part. They feel a personal connection to what can be, and they find belonging in journeying with the community that is heading in that direction.¹¹ Leading change starts with a spirit of urgency and inspiration.

Relationships Matter Most

The majority of experts agree that the relational dynamics shared between all members of a group become the central factor affecting if and how a group's culture will change. Daniel Coyle spent four years researching eight of the world's most successful groups, including a special-ops military unit, an inner-city school, a professional basketball team, and a band of jewel thieves. While the purposes of these groups were incredibly diverse, Coyle found their cultures were created by a similar set of skills. Two

¹⁰ Kotter, 44.

¹¹ Simon Sinek, *Start With Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*, (New York: Portfolio, 2009), 6-7.

of these skills were shared safety and shared vulnerability in the group. The third, shared purpose, will be addressed in the next section.

The cultures of strong groups instill a real sense of belonging and identity in the group. Once people are convinced that they are safe together, they will then consider taking risks together. Too often leaders demand risks before ensuring safety.¹² “Safety is the foundation on which strong culture is built.”¹³

When observing the interactions between members of successful groups, Coyle noticed several similarities shared across the board. The members of these groups work and communicate in close proximity to one another. They also exhibit above average levels of eye contact and physical touch, and when the group members communicate everyone engages everyone. The members practice active listening, and they laugh a lot. These dynamics shared by the most successful groups consistently reinforce to each member the essential truth of a healthy culture: we are safe and connected.¹⁴ When people are convinced they belong, they will stick with a group through all sorts of changes.

Why is belonging such a powerful force? We turn to neuroscience for the answer. The amygdala is the part of the brain that constantly scans the environment looking for potential threats. Researchers have recently discovered it also plays a role in building our social connections. When the amygdala perceives that you belong somewhere, it immediately switches from the overly alert guard dog into an energetic guide dog solely

¹² Daniel Coyle, *The Culture Code: The Secrets of Highly Successful Groups*, (New York: Bantam Books, 2018), 6.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 8, 15.

focused on staying connected to your people. When we sense we are part of a group, the amygdala starts tracking the people of that group to help keep us with them. The brain literally lights up when it receives a steady feed of those cues that tell us that we are close, we are safe, and we share a future.¹⁵ When the social brains of group members simultaneously light up in response to these signals of belonging, cohesion results.

There are many ways a leader creates a sense of safety in a group. She overcommunicates that she is listening well and openly shows her own fallibility. The leader embraces group members who have concerns and critiques, assuring people their voices and experiences matter. The leader overdoes “thank-yous,” using every opportunity to ensure members that they are seen and valued. He creates space for people to work together in the same room as often as possible, leads by serving, and embraces laughter.¹⁶ Relationships take precedent over results. This is a benchmark of a successful group with a healthy culture.

When people feel safe, they are more likely to take risks in order to grow together. This is where the shared skill of vulnerability comes into play. Vulnerability asks individuals to be willing to experience some pain and discomfort for the sake of the group growing together. Asking people to consider changing their core beliefs and behaviors is a big request that demands vulnerability. Leaders will have no chance of getting their group to sign-up for that if the individuals are not totally convinced the leader is with them, for them, and more committed to a relationship than to some

¹⁵ Coyle, 25-26.

¹⁶ Ibid., 75-87.

monetary reward. If people are convinced they are safe in their environment, they will work together to achieve things none could have fathomed on their own.¹⁷

Establish a Clear Purpose/Vision

The third shared skill Coyle found in highly successful groups was an established purpose. This is where people who belong to a group ask, “What is it for? What are we working toward?”¹⁸ Kotter warns that underestimating the power of vision is one of the biggest errors leaders make in times of change. If the vision behind what you are trying to change cannot be stated in less than five minutes and does not get a reaction that signifies understanding and inspiration, change is going to be hard to come by.¹⁹ A vision is simply a picture of the future with some commentary on why people should strive to see that become a reality. Kotter identifies these six marks of an effective vision. First, it is imaginable: it conveys a picture of what the future can be. It is desirable, appealing to the long-term interest of those who have a relationship to that enterprise. It is feasible, comprised of attainable goals. It is focused, clear enough to provide guidance in decision making. It is flexible, general enough to allow alternative responses as conditions change. And it is communicable: it can be successfully described in under five minutes.²⁰

¹⁷ Simon Sinek, *Leaders Eat Last: Why Some Teams Pull Together and Others Don't*, (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2014), 15.

¹⁸ Coyle, 178.

¹⁹ Kotter, 9.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 72.

Successful groups spend significant time and energy telling their stories. They fill their conversations and gathering spaces with signals that articulate, “here is where we are, and here is where we want to go.”²¹ In a brain scan, a few isolated areas in the brain light up in response to hearing facts. When the brain hears a story, however, the lights go off in every direction. The brain gets to work connecting causes and effects and creating meaning. Stories are the most powerful way to impact our mental processes in ways that direct our behavior.²²

Thus, seeking to change a group’s culture must start not with “what” or “how” questions, but with “why” questions. All companies know what they do. Many people in most companies even know how they do it. But few people in most companies really know why they do what they do. They fall short of knowing the purpose behind the organization to which they belong. If this is lost on them, then they do not really know why they get out of bed in the morning. They do not have a good reason for why they will not jump into another organization when the opportunity arises. Inspired companies and inspired leaders think, act, and communicate from the inside out. They start with “why”.²³

Why start with “why”? Once again, we turn to neuroscience for clues. Decision making happens in the limbic brain, while language and rational thought come from the neocortex. Feelings come from the limbic brain, as do those things we attribute to our heart or to our gut. That is why it is difficult to come up with the words to describe our

²¹ Coyle, 180.

²² Ibid., 182.

²³ Simon Sinek, *Start With Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*, 39.

love for someone or to explain why a certain situation makes us uneasy. These gut feelings and following the heart decisions always refer to the limbic brain. That is where the “why” of an organization lives. The “what” is in the neocortex.²⁴ The limbic brain is incredibly powerful. It not only helps us monitor which decisions are good decisions, it also influences us to do things that might seem illogical or irrational. The limbic brain challenges us to leave home and try a new adventure. It is what calls us to leave a stable job in order to start something from scratch. It is not driven by logic and facts, but by dreams, heartbeats, and gut feelings that move us to try new things.²⁵

If an organization has a clear sense of why, it will be able to passionately articulate the purpose of its existence passionately. When the why is clear, people who share the same belief and vision will want to work together to bring it to life. When a group of believers rally around one common purpose amazing things can happen. Real change can happen.²⁶

Transforming Culture: A Perspective from Psychology

Fixed Mindsets and Growth Mindsets

Carol Dweck is a professor of psychology at Stanford University whose work on the growth mindset is helpful for this conversation on leading change in seemingly

²⁴ Simon Sinek, *Start With Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*, 57.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 62.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 136.

entrenched people and systems. Dweck divides all people into two categories: those with a growth mindset, and those with a fixed mindset. She says to enter a mindset is to enter a world. In the world of the fixed mindset success is about validation. Failure is a setback. Effort is something negative because it means you are not smart enough or talented enough to achieve something naturally. In the world of the growth mindset the focus is on stretching yourself to learn new things and develop yourself. Failure simply means you are not fulfilling your potential and represents an opportunity to grow. Effort is positive. It is the very thing that makes you smart or talented. Every person or group favors one of these mindsets. The good news is that there is a choice to be made. Mindsets are just beliefs, and powerful as they are, with the right tools at your disposal, it is always possible to change your mind.²⁷

People with the growth mindset thrive most when they are challenging themselves, whereas those with fixed mindsets prefer for things to remain safely within their qualifications. They lose interest when things get too challenging. The former feel smart when they are learning and working hard to figure something out. The latter feel smart when they are doing something quickly and easily that takes others more time. The fixed mindset fears failure more than anything. It can cause permanent trauma. The growth mindset, on the other hand, sees failure as a problem to be faced and from which to learn. It may be painful, but it need not be defining.²⁸ It makes sense, then, that the growth mindset allows people to love what they are doing even in the midst of

²⁷ Carol Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, (New York: Random House, 2006), 15-16.

²⁸ Dweck, 22-24, 32-33.

difficulties, while the fixed mindset is all about the outcome. In the fixed mindset, failure means everything has been wasted.

Leaders with a fixed mindset have a need to be validated, while leaders with a growth mindset start with a belief in human potential and a desire to develop themselves and others. These leaders use the language of being on a journey full of lessons and adventures along the way. Parents are encouraged to develop a growth mindset in their children by offering praise for what they accomplished through practice, study, and persistence more than what they achieve through intelligence or talent. They should teach their children to love challenges, be intrigued by mistakes, enjoy effort, and keep on learning. These are actually helpful principles for anyone leading a group of people, regardless of their age. An understanding of the mindsets and how our brains work can enlighten leaders in learning how to mobilize people to prepare for challenges up ahead.²⁹ Groups stuck in a fixed mindset can be moved into a growth mindset. They just need someone to reframe the stories of success and failure to free them from their fears and give them permission to fall, learn, and get back up again.

The Psychology of Stories

Our mindsets affect the stories we tell ourselves about risks, successes, and failures. The stories we hear also impact the way we relate to a group. In a 1965 study by Harvard psychologist Robert Rosenthal, California public elementary school teachers were told Rosenthal would test the school's students with a newly developed intelligence identification tool which would predict which students would excel academically in the

²⁹ Dweck, 48, 125, 177, 224.

next year. The teachers were provided with the names of children (about twenty percent of the student body) who had high potential for intellectual growth. The students were not informed of the results.

When Rosenthal returned at the end of the year to measure how the high-potential students had performed, it was exactly as he predicted. The first graders who were singled out gained twenty-seven IQ points (versus twelve for the rest of the class), and second graders gained seventeen points (verses seven points for their classmates). In addition, the high-potential students excelled beyond academics. Their teachers described them as more curious, happier, better adjusted, and more likely to have success as adults. The catch is this: the test was fake. The high-potential students were selected at random.

Rosenthal was actually studying how narratives drive the relationships between teachers and students. He discovered that changing the story from “these are average kids” to a new one, “these are special kids, destined to succeed,” reoriented the teachers, causing them to act in ways that guided the student toward that favorable future. Rosenthal described the changes in four categories: warmth (the teachers were kinder and more attentive to the high-potential students), input (the teachers provided more material for learning), response-opportunity (the teachers called on those students more often and listened more carefully), and feedback (the teachers provided more, especially when the student made a mistake). These changes were small, consisting of thousands of tiny behaviors over the school year. *A changed story changed a future reality for both teachers and their students.*³⁰

³⁰ Coyle, 184-185.

The Psychology of Motives

Along with mindsets, motives impact a changing culture. What drives people to perform any given activity can be divided into three direct motives and three indirect motives. Direct motives increase performance and sustain energy and growth. The direct motive that yields the highest performance is play. Play occurs when people engage in an activity simply because they enjoy doing it. At the heart of play is curiosity. Leonard Sweet often says that all creativity comes not out of work but play.

Right behind play on the spectrum of motives that result in high performance is purpose. This is when one does an activity because of the value of its outcome. It is one step removed from the work but is still a powerful driver of performance. The third direct motive for engaging in an activity is potential. You do the work because it will eventually lead to something you believe is important. An example of this is a job one views as a steppingstone. It is necessary to do today, so that one day he might arrive at the job he really desires.³¹

There are also three indirect motives that drive people to do a task. With each of these motives, performance is diminished more and more. The first indirect motive for work is emotional pressure. This is when emotions such as shame or guilt compel one to perform an activity. High performance cultures reduce emotional pressures. The next is economic pressure. An activity is done solely to win an award or avoid punishment. Finally, there is inertia. That is work one does today simply because she did it yesterday.

³¹ Neel Doshi and Lindsay McGregor, *Primed to Perform: How to Build the Highest Performing Cultures through the Science of Total Motivation*, (New York: Harper Business, 2015), 7-9.

She is not even aware where her motive comes from. Groups comprised of inertia-driven members have the lowest performance and unhealthiest cultures.³²

When it comes to changing a culture, the more closely connected people's hearts are to the work they are doing, the more potential there is for real, lasting, healthy change. *More play and less guilt wins the day in lasting cultural change.*

Transforming Culture: A Perspective from the Church

The church is one of the longest standing institutions in the world. For over 2,000 years the church has played a lively, embodied role in almost every culture in the world. It has been through drastic changes, and too often, has been too slow to change. It makes sense that the church has something to say about leading cultural change. While there is no blueprint for how to transform the culture of a particular congregation, the following insights are shared by many pastors, scholars, and faith practitioners.

Culture Changes through Abiding

As we have seen from the insights of business and psychology, people are changed more through experiences and encounters than through logical arguments and theories. In the same way, all of scripture is about real people who have real encounters with a real God. From Adam and Eve's walks with God in the Garden of Eden to Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus, these divine-human encounters result in changed lives. Still today, people in the church are changed most by encountering the real

³² Doshi and McGregor, 9-12.

presence of God in their midst. There is a difference between knowing about Jesus and actually knowing Jesus in an intimate, relational way. In John 15 Jesus emphasizes an abiding theology, stating eleven times that his desire is to make his home *with* his disciples. From that place of abiding with Christ comes the subsequent call to love one another and bear fruit. Jesus knows that living in his presence is the only thing that truly enables us to love sacrificially and join God's risky mission in this world.

Peter Scazzero identifies the first mark of a church culture that truly transforms lives as one which emphasizes "slowed-down spirituality." Church cultures that change people in today's frantic world refuse to let the culture set the pace of living. They form people in rhythms of life that are slower and more deliberate, so that people are actually giving time each day to immersion in scripture, silence, and solitude: all essential practices for communion with Jesus.³³

Churches that prioritize abiding with Christ understand that it is better to experience God's presence for one day than listen to one hundred sermons about God for many days.³⁴ These churches create space for people to share their stories of experiences with God, believing that stories stir up hope and expectation in communities.

Pastors of presence-driven churches prioritize their own abiding with Christ above all. Their first responsibility is to cling to the Lord in love, adoration, and faithfulness.³⁵ Like Moses, they do not want to lead their people anywhere unless God is already there. They know where and when to go by first knowing how to simply be at home with the

³³ Scazzero, 6.

³⁴ John Pippo, *Leading the Presence-Driven Church*, (Bloomington, IN: WestBow Press, 2018), 8.

³⁵ Scot McKnight, *Pastor Paul: Nurturing a Culture of Christofromity in the Church*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2019), 16.

Lord. All of this makes the church community one great experiment in being led by God. A presence driven church will gladly move with the Spirit into places beyond human control.³⁶

As people learn to encounter God and hear God's voice through practicing the spiritual disciplines (i.e. prayer, Scripture study, confession, sabbath keeping, service, worship, etc.), through the care of a pastor who draws near to the heart of God, and through engaging in risky mission as God leads, they will be transformed from those who know about God to those who really know and walk with God.

Culture Changes at the Table

Jesus spent countless hours of his ministry at the table. Jesus' ministry has been summarized as going to a meal, being at a meal, or coming from a meal.³⁷ It was at the table that he called tax-collectors his friends. It was at the table that he gave the marginalized seats of honor. It was at the table that he said, "This is my body broken for you." Lives were changed at the table with Jesus. Lives are still changed when we gather with Christ at the table.

Jesus' disciples were not ignorant of the sermon Jesus was preaching as he gathered with any and everyone at the table. Jesus' ministry constantly reimagines the table, making it a place where not only God's chosen people get to dwell with God, but now, even our enemies are invited to come, eat, and be changed. Jesus dined with

³⁶ Pippo, 26.

³⁷ Greg Mamula, "Welcome to the Family Table," <https://welcometotablelife.wordpress.com/welcome-to-the-family-table/>, (accessed April 6, 2020).

Pharisees, government workers, prostitutes, soldiers, zealots, and cheaters. At the table, Jesus made space for those who were most unlike him to come and dwell with him. Lives were transformed at the table.³⁸

Lives are still transformed in that sacred table space. Dan White Jr. tells this powerful story of what happens when strangers meet at the table:

In May 2011, at about 20,000 feet, Nadav Ben Yehuda, a 24-year-old law student, was almost on top of the world. He only had 300 more meters to go from the peak of Mount Everest, which would have made him the youngest Israeli to summit the highest mountain in the world, but something stopped him short. He noticed a man lying in the snow with no gloves, no oxygen, no shelter. Climbers know instantly that 26,000 feet is the death zone where the lack of oxygen kills even the best climbers. Exposure in that zone quickly leads to acute sickness and hypothermia. Other climbers streamed past the unconscious man in the snow in their quest for the summit, but Nadav couldn't. The man was a Turkish climber named Aydin. Nadav relinquished his summit bid and rushed to rescue Aydin.

Nadav tied Aydin to his harness and began the descent- about a nine-hour journey to the nearest base. Because of the rescue attempt, Nadav suffered frostbite in four of his fingers, as well as in two toes, and lost permanent sensation in his left hand. Nadav saved the life of Aydin.

The irony of the story cannot be missed that Israel and Turkey have long been nations with relations harsher than the mountains of Everest. Nadav's act not only saved a life, but also bridged a distance between two enemy countries. When asked why he relinquished his dreams of getting to the summit Nadav answered, "Because we had shared a meal together." Earlier in the trip, at base camp, at the community table, Nadav found himself sitting across from Aydin. At first it was awkward, but they began to talk and even share about their countries' standoff with each other. This meal helped them humanize each other.³⁹

What happens at the table is sacred. The God of the universe who speaks galaxies into being and heals the blind with a simple touch is willing to spend an evening sitting at the

³⁸ Dan White Jr., *Love Over Fear: Facing Monster, Befriending Enemies, and Healing our Polarized World*, (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2019), 169.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 170.

table with messy, hypocritical people, quietly showing them there is another way. Jesus took his place at the table to reveal where God's activity begins.⁴⁰

The table is where Jesus paints a picture of a better world. It is where the people of God are invited to eat with God alongside strangers and foes who become brothers and sisters. Greg Mamula has launched a program that invites small groups to gather around the table for a common meal, immersion in scripture, storytelling, and Communion. In these simple but intimate gatherings, communities are learning to embody kingdom teachings together. Mamula proposes that the table is a safe place for people to be seen and known. This gathering pushes against the world that tells people to protect themselves and walk alone. They affirm that each one is worthy of being known, and each one has unique beauty and goodness to offer. True identities come to life at the table.⁴¹ With Communion at the center of the table, individual stories join the God story in a way that brings hearts to life and changes them for good.

In the Gospels, the mealtime moments with Jesus created new family identities among his followers. It is during a meal when Jesus is told his mother and brothers are waiting for him. He looks around at the people at his table and says, "Who are my mother and brothers?" (Mark 31:35). At the table, not only do we embrace our identity as sons and daughters of God but also as brothers and sisters to one another. We act as a family together by breaking bread, listening to the other, sharing stories, and passing the cup.

⁴⁰ White Jr., *Love Over Fear: Facing Monster, Befriending Enemies, and Healing our Polarized World*, 171.

⁴¹ Mamula, "Welcome to the Family Table."

Those who practice these things in community are changed by the power of God's presence and by the gift of belonging.

Culture Changes as Language Changes

“Words matter. Images shape. Metaphors live.”⁴² In churches, as in all organizations, the language utilized by those in leadership shapes the entire system. “When a way of speaking changes, culture changes.”⁴³ Pastors’ words directly shape the way people perceive God and the world around them. Leading a congregation toward a growth mindset that seeks the presence of God most of all requires serious attention to language. John Pippo describes the words that have changed in his church over the years. Rather than speak of success, they speak of faithfulness. Language of influence replaces that of numbers, abiding replaces striving, discernment replaces decision making, and relationship takes precedent over rules of order. The language of followers replaces attendees, and formation prevails over function.⁴⁴

The apostle Paul understood the power of language. He often referred to the people in his churches as siblings. When the people were called brothers and sisters, they heard within that language a call to love one another and to care for the mutual development of one another. It carried with it a call to forgive and to deal with “family” conflict as quickly and honestly as possible. The language of siblingship came with a responsibility to uphold one another’s dignity and work together for the common good.

⁴² McKnight, , 62.

⁴³ Pippo, 108.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 108-109.

As siblings, each person was equally invited to participate in the act of worship. The simple choice of kinship language shaped the entire way the churches understood their relationships to God, among themselves, and with the world. Language shapes culture.⁴⁵

Culture is formed by a group's behaviors and beliefs. Being intentional about how language is used in moments of crisis and celebration, in requests for nursery volunteers and youth leaders, in tweets and emails, from the pulpit and around the coffee bar, is a sure way to slowly but surely shape the culture of the church.

A Common Theme: Change the Story, Change the Culture

Business experts, psychologists, and church leaders all agree on this: stories have the power to change cultures. "Stories make, prop up, and bring down systems. Stories shape how we understand the world, our place in it, and our ability to change it."⁴⁶ What makes stories so powerful? They have a direct route to our emotions, and thus, to our decision-making. They create meaning out of patterns and bring communities together. Stories cultivate empathy where there might otherwise be division, and they enable what is merely possible to seem probable in ways that sometimes defy logic. They can give us the power and imagination to rewrite the narratives we have believed about our lives and world along with the courage to choose a different way forward. Stories can change the values, mindsets, rules, and goals of a system like nothing else can.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ McKnight, 62-75.

⁴⁶ Ella Saltmarshe, "Using Story to Change Systems," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Feb. 20, 2018, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/using_story_to_change_systems.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

Since the building blocks of culture are behaviors and beliefs, these must be tackled head-on for changes to endure. Too often, leaders try overwhelming people with facts and statistics about why they should make a change. Most of the times this approach is unsuccessful. People who smoke are not unaware of its dangers to their health. Most of them know the facts. It takes something more for them to choose a total life change. If we want to influence people in those deepest places where decisions are made, we will tell better stories. Notice television commercials do not use their thirty-second segment scrolling facts but telling stories. You might get a few seconds of the facts at the very end. That is because marketers know what psychologists and church leaders know. Stories are sticky. They are character-driven, and thus, give people a way to relate what they are hearing to their own contexts. Stories move beyond telling us what to do, to answering those deeper questions of why and how we should do it. People are not changed by being told what to do. They are changed by being awakened to why and how they are to do it.⁴⁸

Business experts say if you want to change the culture of a company, change the story of why people should come to work. Give them a sense of urgency, assure them of their belonging in the system, and articulate a clear vision that goes beyond saying what the company does to telling the story of why we do it. Psychologists revealed how teachers who were told a certain story about a few students, treated those students in such a way that the story became a reality. The growth and fixed mindsets are really just the stories we tell ourselves about what the failures and challenges in our lives mean. And the church is calling people back to the table, to gather around the bread and the cup;

⁴⁸ Wortmann, 134-141.

remembering God's Story and opening our hearts to hear the stories of our brothers and sisters. In telling the story of Jesus, over and over, in as many ways and places as possible, the pastor seeks to create a culture of people actually becoming who Jesus says they are. Beloved. Free. Known. Chosen. Called. Holy. As the story goes, so the culture goes. Could leading a cultural transformation be as simple as telling better stories? At Belfair Community Church, we are realizing that perhaps it is.

CHAPTER 4:

CHANGE THE STORY. CHANGE THE CULTURE.

GOD’S STORY PROCLAIMED IN A NEW WAY OF PREACHING

“The power to change the world belongs to the storytellers. The world is story shaped. The stories we tell shape the world we live in. So, we better tell the right stories.”
Leonard Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm for Preaching*

There are fifty-two Sundays in any given year. Every seven days Christians around the world join their local congregations for worship. If you drop into any one of these services, regardless of location or denomination, you will likely encounter some sort of sermon. A portion of the story of God will be heard. Christians return to the scripture story because we actually believe God speaks into our lives through it. We actually believe the story reveals the truth about the world, the Creator, and our own identity and purpose here. We look to the story for hope, conviction, wisdom, guidance, peace, truth, healing, salvation, and even transfiguration. In a world flooded with stories that compete for our attentions, affections, and devotions, the people of God gather to remember the Holy Spirit-inspired story that connects our lives to the Living God.

If God’s story is already central to Christian worship, then it only makes sense that the way worshipping communities understand God’s story will shape their cultural attitudes and practices. As we saw in Chapter 3, changing the story changes the culture.

Adopting a new story is the precursor to living a new life. All communities share this in common: their identities and behaviors are shaped most of all by their narratives.¹

Leonard Sweet says, “If I could translate John 1:1 anyway I wanted, I would render *Logos* this way: ‘In the beginning was the Story, and the Story was with God, and the Story was God.’”² Scripture reveals not just God’s word but God’s story. That Spirit-inspired story is sacred, holding the power to transform the world. That is because the stories we tell in community shape us more than the ideals we formulate together. It is the stories that move values from the lines of a church’s mission statement to commitments in the hearts of God’s people. Consider the last time you were moved to action or correction in your life. Did the change come from new information gained or from a story told? In all likelihood, you were moved by a story.

If the church is to be God’s missional people in this world, we must tell God’s story. It is an odd story, one that can easily be replaced by easier, more conventional stories if it is not told time and again. Both the Israelites and the early Christians were often tempted to adopt the dominant stories of the cultures that surrounded them. The priests, prophets, and apostles warned that when God’s people ceased to question the stories around them, they were at risk of forgetting God’s story altogether. If their communities forgot their foundational stories, odd and unconventional as they may be, it would not be long before they were just the same as the people who did not know God at all. If the foundational stories were forgotten, soon enough God would be forgotten too.

¹ Alan Kreider and Eleanor Kreider, *Worship and Mission after Christendom*, (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2011), 61.

² Leonard Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm for Preaching*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 116.

Thus, through the biblical writers, God invites his people to be re-storied into a community that clings to a truer, better, and completely different way to live.³ In these communities that are shaped by the Bible's story, what once appeared as odd is revealed as the good news we all need in order to live abundantly.

Change the story, change the world. If that is true then each time the preacher approaches the pulpit, she is engaging in a potentially revolutionary act.⁴ Eugene Peterson reflects on this power that story has to change a community:

Somewhere along the way, most of us pick up bad habits of extracting from the Bible what we pretentiously call "spiritual principles" or "moral guidelines" or "theological truths" and then corseting ourselves in them in order to force a godly shape on our lives. That's a mighty uncomfortable way to go about improving our condition. And it's not the gospel way. Story is the gospel way. Story isn't imposed on our lives; it invites us into life. As we enter in and imaginatively participate, we find ourselves in a more spacious, freer, and more coherent world. We didn't know all this was going on! We never noticed all the significance! Story brings us into more reality, not less, expands horizons, sharpens both sight and insight. Story is the primary means we have for learning what the world is, and what it means to be a human being in it. No wonder from the time we acquire the rudiments of language, we demand stories.⁵

I long to see a cultural shift among the people of Belfair Community Church. Many of us have accepted the narrative of the culture that surrounds us. This narrative tells a story of scarcity: *There is not enough money to serve others well. There is not enough time to share our gifts with God's people. There is not enough love to risk being fully known.* God's story, however, says there is always enough to serve, share, and love. God's story, moreover, invites God's people to trust and take risks in ways that are

³ Kreider and Kreider, 67.

⁴ Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm for Preaching*, 101.

⁵ Eugene Peterson, *Leap Over a Wall: Earthly Spirituality for Everyday Christians*, (San Francisco: Harper One, 1998), 4.

beyond reason and convention. The people cannot receive this invitation until they hear the story anew. But will simply telling the story more guarantee that hearts will be transformed by it? *How* we tell the story matters just as much as the fact that we are telling it at all.

Are We Telling the Story Well?

Almost every church in America gives a substantial portion of the weekly worship service to telling God's story. The styles and approaches vary, but parts of the story are heard every week. The most common way sermons are preached is as a monologue. The audience sits down in rows facing the stage. The preacher stands front and center, spending the next twenty to forty minutes speaking the message. The people passively listen and receive. This is common. But is it working?

According to the Barna group, more than half of millennials raised in church are leaving it behind. Only two out of ten in this age range say that church involvement is important. Millennials have identified relationships as what they need first to engage them in church, and yet thirty-six percent of those surveyed named frustration in the church's inability to create these relational spaces where they can ask life's most pressing questions.⁶ Another alarming statistic indicates that while most all evangelical Christians believe they should be sharing their faith, only a third say they do.⁷ The majority of people in the majority of American churches are not actively engaged in any ministry or mission inside or outside the church. Only two out of ten Christians are involved in any

⁶ Larry Peabody, *Curing Sunday Spectatoritis*, (Skyforest, CA: Bakke University Press, 2016), 78.

⁷ Nathan Rouse, "Creating Dialogical Preaching Experiences," (Doctor of Ministry dissertation, Portland Seminary, 2018), 6.

kind of discipleship activity.⁸ As Leonard Sweet says, “passivity reigns.”⁹ Most Christians are passive spectators in worship rather than active participants.

In 1932, Jay Nash invented the word *spectatoritis*. He warned then that America was becoming a nation of onlookers where the average person would rather watch someone else do something than do it themselves.¹⁰ Unlike other diseases that end in “itis,” spectatoritis in the church leaves its victims pain free and comfortable. Almost a century after Nash’s warning, the American church is reaping the results of spectatoritis in our congregations.

Our consumeristic culture is part of the reason the American church has fallen into the spectatoritis trap. Consumers acquire things. Spectators acquire experiences. Both absorb what is offered without participating in its production. Americans absorb unfathomable amounts of information every day. Our minds and bodies are conditioned to quickly receive and digest what comes at us. “Americans consume 100,000 words of information each week. This is the equivalent of two books via snacking on social media, blogs, cable news, memes, etc. Additionally, it has become fully acceptable to separate our consumptive habits from any deeper introspection. It is okay to completely and ravenously consume.”¹¹ What does this mean when these same people come to church? They are already primed to be hearers and not doers of the sermon. They are conditioned to leave worship knowing more about God’s story, while actually experiencing less of it.

⁸ Rouse, 6.

⁹ Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm for Preaching*, 24.

¹⁰ Dan White Jr, *The Act of Dialogical Preaching*, PDF file, September 10, 2020, <http://danwhitejr.com/books/dialogical-preaching>, 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

For the most part, American Christians come to church to “watch the show” rather than participate in it. They are more apt to consume a service than they are to leave worship more committed to serving Jesus in this world.¹²

Mark Jung-Beeman, a neuroscientist at Northwestern University, says brain imaging techniques show how specific areas of the human brain light up when new information arrives. Similar to the ways our brain reacts to sexual arousal, new information stimulates our pleasure sensors giving us an urge of satisfaction. Thus, we can become dependent on this one-way transfer of information.¹³ How often have you sat through a sermon or engaging lecture, even vigorously taking notes, only to have forgotten the gist of the message an hour or a day later? Or if you still remember the content, how many times have you neglected to actually put the information you received into practice? As Dan White Jr. reflects, “the gap between information-consumption and interactive introspection is wide and has debilitating consequences on discipleship.”¹⁴ The most common methods the American church is using to tell God’s story seems to send thousands of people into their communities stuffed with information that is not actually affecting their lifestyles. The majority of Christians are living as asymptomatic carriers.¹⁵ We have the information about God’s story inside of us, but we are unaffected by the many sermons we ingest. There must be a better way to preach if real transformation is what we are after.

¹² Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm for Preaching*, 24.

¹³ White Jr, *The Act of Dialogical Preaching*, 5.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 6.

Doug Pagitt, pastor of Solomon’s Porch in Minneapolis, agrees. He acknowledges that the preacher’s impulse to tell God’s story is right, but making speeches is not the way to do it. In this Google age, we have access to more great preachers than ever before. People can access incredible sermons in a thousand different places. Each week in North America more people listen to sermons than at any other time in history.¹⁶ But are we seeing more authentic faith as a result? With sermons filling our iPhones, cars, and homes, one would think Christians today would be living more in the ways of Jesus than ever before. This is not the case. Perhaps great preaching alone is not sufficient in changing hearts.

Pagitt has given the name *speaching* to preaching that only ever comes by way of a speech. He identifies five effects of speaching: Speaching creates one seat of godly authority, insinuating that only a few know God’s truth and get to tell about it. It provides one clear message that misses the many ways the gospel connects to individual lives. Speaching offers a sense of control, even though we tell of an untamable God and unpredictable Spirit. It creates distance between the hearers and the story itself. And it sets the pastor apart as the one uniquely tasked with telling the story.¹⁷

Pagitt utilizes what he calls a progressional dialogue in his preaching. We will look at the specifics of this style later in the chapter, but it aims to invite the people participating in the sermon to ask, “If this is our story, what will this mean for our lives?” The hope of engaging people in the telling of the sermon is that they feel implicated by

¹⁶ White Jr, *The Act of Dialogical Preaching*, 19.

¹⁷ Doug Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined: The Role of the Sermon in Communities of Faith*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 29-32.

the story of God. They become not just an interested hearer but an active part of the story itself, and they actually start to arrange their lives around that story.¹⁸

David Lose reminds us that a generation ago the Scripture story was part and parcel of everyday life, as more people attended church regularly throughout the week. This is no longer the case. Sundays may be the only time the average Christian thinks about the story of God. The performative model of preaching worked well when the culture was predominately Christian. Today God's people need to be able to master the skills of knowing, interpreting, and connecting God's stories to their own lives. Lose says, "Part of learning is watching. But sooner or later, you've got to get in the game." If a child goes to violin lessons and only watches the instructor, he will gain valuable information about technique and theory, but he will not be able to play the violin. Likewise, in preaching, we can ask the people to watch us connect God's story to our lives, or we can invite them to jump in and play along as we learn the skills of living out the God story together.¹⁹

We are in a participatory world. People want to be a part of the action. People are not needing more information, but rather, an experience. They need from church what they cannot find on Google: a real connection to the living God. Church is still functioning in a way that asks people to come and receive passively. If transformation is what we are after, pastors must make the shift from being less of the expert to more of the coach. David Lose compares the preachers we need today to Julia Childs. She worked

¹⁸ Pagitt,36.

¹⁹ David Lose, "An Evolution in Preaching: From Performative to Participative," Church Next, April 15, 2013, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TbR-Fka7bhc>.

very hard to learn something mysterious and beautiful, namely the art of cooking. Then she spent the rest of her life in good-spirited teaching of a whole generation, bringing others along to master cooking too. In the end, the mark of competency is not just that the preacher is good at connecting the God story to his life, but it is that those in the congregation are getting really good at it too.²⁰

How Did We Get to the Monologue?

A Brief History of Preaching

The current way of monologue preaching is not the only way God’s story has been proclaimed. Leonard Sweet reminds us that the word *homiletics* is based on a Greek verb meaning “to converse,” while one of the Greek words often translated “preaching” in the New Testament is *dialogizomai*, which means to have a dialogue between people.²¹ Paul’s epistles are part of this ongoing dialogue. Paul writes to various communities answering questions they have asked and offering advice for dealing with circumstances unique to them.²² He often ends the letters by telling his readers that he will see them soon, and they will keep the conversation going (1 Corinthians 16:5-6). In Acts 20, when Paul talked until midnight and the boy Eutychus fell to his death, Paul did not bore him to death by an endless monologue. He was facilitating a time of questions and answers, which would have involved everyone in the conversation.²³ In Paul’s first letter to the

²⁰ Lose, “An Evolution in Preaching: From Performative to Participative.”

²¹ Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm for Preaching*, 250.

²² Pagitt, 52.

²³ Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm for Preaching*, 250.

Corinthians, he paints a vision of a multi-gifted body of Christ, in which all members play their part to make worship whole. In the earliest churches preaching was shared extemporaneously in intimate gatherings. The homilies were approached in a collective, conversational way which resulted in the community discerning together the ways in which the church's story connected to the story of God.²⁴ The worshipping community did not rely on professionals to make the worship event happen. Each one, led by the Spirit, shared his own gifts as his offering to the community.²⁵

However, by the third or fourth century, Christian preaching was being directly impacted by the culture surrounding the church. Emperor Constantine's conversion brought the church out of the homes and catacombs and placed it in the center of the palace. The Christian church was now celebrated by the larger culture. Preaching moved from intimate conversations among a few households to presentations among large groups of people. It moved from private homes into the public square.

Now that Christians were no longer persecuted, they were able to enter into the Roman educational system where they learned oratory skills once unattainable for them. It was also during this time that preaching took on the role of correcting heresies that had crept into the church. Strong, persuasive sermons coming from preachers who were trained in the Greco-Roman rhetorical strategies found their place in the church. Preachers began to incorporate more formal rhetorical devices such as introductions, points, and conclusions into their messages. Preaching took on the form of speeches rather than free-flowing conversation. Both the Eastern and Western church popularized

²⁴ Kreider and Kreider, 122.

²⁵ Ibid., 128.

written sermons that offered a deliberate exegesis of Scripture. It was during this time that preaching started to be viewed as belonging to those who were professionally trained in theology and rhetoric.²⁶

Fast forward to the Great Reformation. Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536) edited the first Greek New Testament translated for the purposes of being printed in 1516. This brought the Bible one step closer to the common layperson, as nearly one thousand years of a professionalized priesthood had created an immense gulf between the common believer and the story of God.²⁷ Martin Luther's translation of Erasmus' New Testament into the German language combined with the printing press made biblical literacy possible for the average layperson for the first time since the New Testament had been canonized. In the same way, with The Great Awakening, the evangelical preaching movement was breaking the molds of the institutional church as it sought new ways to reach the masses with the gospel. Heralding preachers with charismatic personalities, confident voices, and passionate messages took center stage.²⁸

In the United States the role of pastor, the role of parishioner, and even the nature of the church experience changed drastically in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In her book *When Church Became Theater: The Transformation of Evangelical Architecture and Worship in 19th Century America*, Jeanne Halgren Kilde describes how changing social dynamics brought a shift to the church from the cathedral and meetinghouse models to a stage-centered system that is still being used today.²⁹ The

²⁶ Rouse, 14-15.

²⁷ Ibid., 17.

²⁸ Ibid., 18-19.

theater had become so powerful in Western culture that the churches' buildings began to imitate it. While this change in metaphor had a huge impact on church architecture, it had an even greater impact on the role of the pastor. The preacher was now the main player on the stage, and the congregation was the audience.³⁰

During this same time the population was rapidly shifting to the cities. Rural communities could no longer support their full-time pastors, thus, increasing the prominence of the itinerant preacher which had been the norm in Methodism since the 17th century. Rural believers went from having a small church filled with people, as well as their own pastor, to meeting in large tents set up in random locations intended to attract large numbers of people from a wide area. A preacher who did not know the audience, but who did know the Bible would take the stage. He talked about scripture with energy and passion. These dynamic preachers who connected the stories of the Bible to the everyday lives of the people changed the face of preaching for the next two centuries.³¹

This professionalization of preaching was useful in its time and place. But might preachers today dare to be as courageous as the tent preachers of the Great Awakening? Is it time to create new ways of communicating God's story to people who live in a rapidly changing, increasingly challenging time? Looking to shifts in America's educational system might help us answer these questions.

²⁹ Jeanne Halgren Kilde, *When Church Became Theatre: The Transformation of Evangelical Architecture and Worship and Nineteenth-Century America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

³⁰ Pagitt, 62.

³¹ Ibid.

Rupert Wegerif reflects on how the internet has changed education. Previously information was gleaned from a single source, such as a textbook, encyclopedia, or expert. Today information is obtained from countless hubs and outlets of information. It comes from all directions and in varied forms. Wegerif calls this *dialogical learning*. “Dialogical assumes that meaning is never singular but always emerges in the play of different voices in dialogue together.”³² People have quickly evolved to learn best in dialogue rather than under a monological, once size fits all, model. The church lives in the midst of rapid advances in technology and pedagogy. If our society is learning in a whole new way, might it be time to proclaim God’s story in a whole new way as well? What might we do to proclaim God’s word in a way that initiates Spirit-activated change in today’s listeners.

A New Approach to Proclaiming the Story

If you were to obtain the syllabus of a seminary preaching course, odds are you would see an emphasis on exegeting words and phrases, while creating strong introductions and compelling conclusions, with three clear points in between. The preacher would learn how to balance each point with a measure of biblical interpretation, application, and an illustration to bring it home. The student would be graded on eye contact, pace, and tone. When the day approached for her to preach to her class, her fellow classmates would quietly take notes while she talked through what she had

³² Rupert Wegerif, *Dialogic: Education for the Internet Age* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 24.

diligently prepared. If you were to obtain the syllabus of a seminary preaching course from fifty years ago, it would look much the same.

While the last few decades have brought dramatic changes through rapid advances in technology, preaching has by and large remained unchanged. The way people receive information outside of the church is completely different today than it was just thirty years ago. The way people are expected to receive God’s story on Sundays, however, is often the same as it was before Google even existed. Teenagers who have never known life without tablets are hearing God’s story proclaimed the same way their great-grandparents heard it. Movies have changed. Music has changed. Advertisements have changed. If we are hoping to change a culture by the stories we tell, it is time for preaching to consider a change as well.

From Words and Points to Images and Metaphors

“If you want people to think differently don’t tell them how to think, give them a tool. The best tool is a metaphor.”³³

The heart of a sermon is not just getting something said or heard but giving people something to experience that will transform their lives in God. Leonard Sweet encourages what he calls *EPIC preaching* for this end. He says each sermon should be “an experience of God that is image rich, participatory, and connectional. Each moment, a life-giving, Christ-infusing beat of the heart in the body that is the church.”³⁴ On average, a person is exposed to three thousand advertisements a day. Each image is a

³³ Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm for Preaching*, 157.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

story calling for our attention and response. In a world bombarded with noise, preachers must preach sermons that invite their hearers to talk, walk, and dance with the gospel. EPIC preaching brings together thoughts and feelings, giving people something to see, hear, touch, taste, and smell. In all of this, God's Story is applied to lives in ways that invite people not only to learn about but to actually experience forgiveness, healing, and a change of heart in that very space.³⁵

Images and metaphors are cornerstones in this kind of sermon. Jesus was a master of metaphor and legendary storyteller. He captivated thousands through healing actions communicated in signs, images, and gestures. To understand Jesus' way of communicating in the gospels, we must learn how to exegete not merely words but images, metaphors, and stories. EPIC preaching centers on *narraphors* (metaphors, stories, and images) that make the familiar strange. It seeks after great metaphors that take common images and experiences and gives them a twist to usher the hearer into an unfamiliar vision. That unexpected twist is the power in Jesus' parables. The father running out to meet his prodigal son, offering grace rather than a lecture, was the twist that ushered the first listeners into their own encounter with the God of grace. Hearts are changed in these encounters with grace. The Good Shepherd not only leads his sheep but lays his life down for them. That is the unexpected twist. Ordinary shepherds do not die for their sheep. This shepherd is different. This shepherd is *our* shepherd. Upon hearing this parable, listeners were in the presence of a love they had never known. Lives are transformed in the presence of such love. EPIC sermons find their foundations in great metaphors.³⁶

³⁵ Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm for Preaching*, 44, 49.

Metaphor leads to metamorphosis. Sweet proposes, “Change your metaphor and you change your world. Change your metaphor and you change your body. Change your metaphor and you change your mind. Everyone has the choice of what metaphors to build life around.”³⁷ Our responsibility toward an immigrant struggling to find a new home is different if the metaphor we use for him is *stranger* and *foreigner* than if it is *neighbor* and *brother*. Are our bodies just temporary shells, or are they temples? The image directly affects how we care for them. What does a wall do? Does it keep bad people away or does it keep good from being shared? Metaphors have the power to change how we think, and thus, how we live. This is why the Bible offers countless metaphors upon which to build our lives. Metaphors move beyond the mind to the heart. They connect the left brain to the right brain. In so doing, metaphors are not just another tool for communication. They are the very building blocks that give shape to how we make sense of our world. Our actions are directly tied to our metaphors. Metaphors create a culture. Biblical metaphors create a biblical culture. The preacher is called to be a landscaper, an architect, and a potter of these images that connect the human heart to the heart of God.³⁸

Jesus taught that as you think in your heart, so you are (Luke 6:45). Thus, in his teaching, Jesus sought to get to the heart so the mind and actions might be changed for good. “By using the art of metaphor, Jesus rearranges the molecules in your body. Metaphor is a metamorphosis that becomes morphological.”³⁹ There is unparalleled power in metaphor. To use it responsibly, the preacher must always look for those

³⁶ Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm for Preaching*, 27-28.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 156.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 162.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 157.

metaphors that are motivated by the heart of Jesus and mediated through the Spirit of God.⁴⁰

EPIC preachers are constantly looking for the root metaphor in a given text. The root metaphor is the controlling image that changes the conversation or situation. It can come in the form of a character, a moment, an object, or a word that conveys an image. “Metaphors are not the sermon’s seasoning; they are the very meat of the sermon itself, and they are the mediators that carry the incarnational story of Jesus.”⁴¹ Once this metaphor is found and shared, it invites the people into a new reality where the current reality is momentarily suspended and they consider the next steps that might really lead them into a deeper walk with Jesus. If those steps are taken, then the revolution begins, and reality as they know it makes a turn.

Change the metaphor, change the story. Change the story, change the culture. A people living in a mindset of scarcity need better metaphors of abundance. They need to hear of Good Shepherds, and manna, of fish and loaves and leftovers, of banquet tables with extra seats and cups overflowing. An exegesis of the word “abundance” in Scripture and three points to tell people why they should trust in God’s goodness might intrigue their minds for a half hour. But metamorphosis happens in the heart. Metaphors get to the heart.

From Consuming to Participating

“People today do not just want to talk about dancing; they want to dance. To preach narraphorically is to teach people to dance with the Lord of the Dance.”⁴²

⁴⁰ Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm for Preaching*, 157.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁴² Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm for Preaching*, 130.

Metaphors come alive as people participate in them. Hearers become doers when they take an active part in the sermon. EPIC preaching is an interactive experience that moves from a listening paradigm to a participating paradigm. EPIC preachers encourage their congregations not only to attend worship but to contribute to it. They count participation rather than attendance.⁴³ There are many ways to encourage participation in our proclamation.

At Solomon's Porch, Doug Pagitt uses a progressional dialogue model for his sermons. During the week he meets with a group from the church for an in-depth conversation on the next Sunday's text. Then, on Sunday, an open discussion happens during the sermon. Pagitt talks for a while. Then he invites others to share their ideas about what has been said.⁴⁴ The goal is for each person to find themselves in the story of God. They are not merely applying a preacher's three application points to their own life, but they are entering into the story themselves, seeing how it connects with their own circumstances and realities. While each Sunday looks different, Pagitt says the following elements are always present to some degree: dialogue, immersion in the story (of the Bible, the world, and the people's lives), listening, experimentation, disagreement, and openness to others.⁴⁵ Preaching through a progressional dialogue model assumes God's truth resides in all people and allows God's story to be understood more fully as it is encountered by every life in the room. It also shifts the control of the sermon from the

⁴³ Ibid., 50, 247.

⁴⁴ Pagitt, 24.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 39.

preacher to God, allowing the Spirit to set the agenda rather than the one behind the pulpit.⁴⁶

Pagitt pushes against the idea that only trained professionals should speak about God with any kind of authority. He says this goes against a great deal of what we find in scripture. Pagitt challenges us to imagine a church where every person believed his or her gifts, ideas, and experiences were as inspired by God as the preacher.⁴⁷ People would no longer need a preacher to stand in the gap between their stories and God's story. They would see their own lives implicated in the very truths Scripture reveals.

Dan White Jr. is another preacher who advocates for dialogical preaching in place of a monologue. He looks to Jesus and notes how his teaching primarily consisted of interactions between himself and the crowds. Jesus asked a lot of questions, engaged hearts around the table, and used object lessons such as blessing children, pulling coins out of fish, and holding out a mustard seed. Peter and Paul both preached dialogically. Even Peter's long sermon in Acts 2 had room for listeners to ask questions and hear the apostle's response. When Paul preaches so long that young Eutychus falls out of the window, the Greek says that Paul preached (*dialegomai*) until midnight. Then after bringing Eutychus back to life, Paul breaks bread, eats, and preaches (*homileo*) until daybreak. *Dialegomai* is translated as "to ponder, to converse, dispute, discuss, to reason with, to discourse in a conversational manner." *Homileo* is "to be in company with, to

⁴⁶ Pagitt, 43-45.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 153.

converse with.”⁴⁸ Both of these words describe Paul’s communication as a dialogue which invited the church to participate in hearing the word of God.

This dialogical preaching style seen in Jesus’ ministry and in the apostles’ teaching reflects the Triune nature of God. The members of the Godhead are in constant communication with one another. Paul told the Ephesians to be imitators of God (Ephesians 5:1). In the Bible, God mostly speaks to people through dialogue.⁴⁹ God is not threatened by questions or discussion. Rather, God interactives with humans, inviting their responses. As our Creator, God knows the best way we learn. Preachers do well to rediscover what God has shown to be a powerful teaching-learning process: participatory, dialogical teaching.⁵⁰

White put the dialogical preaching model to the test. He convinced a pastor friend whose church had multiple services to let him conduct an experiment. White preached the first service on caring for the poor from the book of Matthew using a monological approach. He exegeted the text and delivered a passionate, heart-felt message. The Gospel was clearly proclaimed. While the service was happening, two actors posing as homeless individuals took their positions on the sidewalk, laying between the sanctuary and parking lot. Staff members stood in the distance, taking note of each time someone

⁴⁸ White Jr, *The Act of Dialogical Preaching*, 8

⁴⁹ Examples: Cain in Genesis 4:6-8. God deals with the first murderer by means of conversation. God asks Cain no less than five questions. Cain asks God one question.

Abraham: Genesis 12-22

Moses at the burning bush: Exodus 3

⁵⁰ Larry Peabody, “Why Participatory Preaching and Teaching?” February 5, 2019, accessed September 15, 2020, <http://www.sharedchurch.com/blog/2019/1/30/why-participatory-preaching-and-teaching>.

stopped to interact with the homeless actors. When the early service dismissed only one person engaged the homeless person. For the next service, White preached the exact same message, but this time he included dialogue. The response was radically different. The staff counted forty-six people (about thirty percent) of those who attended the service offered some kind of interaction with the homeless actors. White reflects, “Certainly this is an anecdotal study, but I think it offers us hints about kinesthetic learning- it feels tangible. It gets into us. Could it be that dialogical preaching opens up something for the Spirit to inhabit? Maybe our minds and bodies are more available to change when some level of interaction occurs.”⁵¹

Neuroscience tells us that humans remember things by way of making relational connections. When we experience an event, our brains tie together all of the sights, sounds, smells, and feelings of that experience and bring them into a tangled relationship. It is the relationship of those things that become a memory. So, whether or not we remember and retain something has a lot to do with how we first learned it. Communication that includes dialogue increases the spark of neurotransmitters that result in bodily reactions. We remember something because neurons in our brain have formed a new pathway. That means we remember because real physiological change has happened in us. God has wired our body’s chemistry to be changed more by dialogue than diatribe.⁵² This makes sense when we remember that God’s heart is fundamentally one of loving relationship. Dialogue is at the heartbeat of relationship.

⁵¹ White Jr, *The Act of Dialogical Preaching*, 10.

⁵² Ibid.

The learning pyramid developed by the National Training Laboratory says that people only retain five to ten percent of what they hear in a lecture or monologue, and the retention rate plummets to one percent when tested one week later. However, nearly fifty to seventy-five percent is retained if dialogue is included with the teaching. This carries over into the church. When people were interviewed immediately after a worship service, between seventy-five and ninety percent could not say what the main point of the sermon was. It is time for pastors to take the work of remembering seriously. Educators have been trying new approaches for decades. Why must the church cling so tightly to monologue as its primary form of communication?⁵³

White divides a dialogic sermon into four movements. The first ten minutes are spent in the Investigative Stage. During this portion, the preacher speaks into a passage without interruption. The text is explained in its original context. The preacher sets up the main point, without giving any easy answers. A bit of tension is created, and the preacher shares a personal story to connect his story to the scripture story. After this introduction to the text, the preacher leads the people in a few minutes of silent reflection. They are to consider two questions; where they felt conflict and where they had clarity in the passage.

The second movement is the Expressive Stage. For the next ten minutes the congregation responds to the two questions about conflict and clarity in the text. People are given clear parameters to keep their sharing to under a minute and to practice listening well even when they disagree. As people share their insights, White writes what he is hearing on a whiteboard.

⁵³ White Jr, *The Act of Dialogical Preaching*, 11.

From here, he leads the congregation into the Collective Stage. He draws attention to the whiteboard and begins to make connections. The preacher talks about the themes that are on the board. He considers feelings that have been shared and notes what has been intriguing. Finally, the preacher wonders out loud with the congregation, “What might God’s Spirit be saying?”

In the final ten minutes, the preacher proclaims the Good News using material prepared beforehand while connecting it to what has been shared publicly. In this Declarative Stage, God’s Story is proclaimed over the lives in the room and people are invited to join in it.⁵⁴

Beyond the dialogical sermons exemplified by Pagitt and White, there are numerous ways to increase the congregation’s participation in our proclamation. Sweet encourages getting participants to finish the preacher’s sentences. If they finish it before you, it’s no longer your sentence but theirs. Even better, if preachers can get participants to finish their sermon, it becomes the hearers’ sermon.⁵⁵ Furthermore, the virtual nature of our culture leaves people hungry for more multi-sensory, tactile experiences. Sermons that are infused with things to touch, see, smell, and taste bring the words to life. Preachers should give people something to hold and behold. “When you hold something in your hands, your brain stands at attention.”⁵⁶ Along with these, Sweet encourages making sermons more interactive and participatory by leaving the pulpit and playing from the center, having the congregation help exegete metaphors, allowing them to

⁵⁴ White Jr, *The Act of Dialogical Preaching*, 15-17.

⁵⁵ Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm for Preaching*, 94.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 162.

answer questions, and creating space for their own stories to be added to God's story via testimonies.⁵⁷

Some pastors may choose to create space for discussion groups during or after sermons. Others might change the seating in the sanctuary in order to help the people see and connect with one another dialogically. Pagitt has the chairs in his sanctuary set up in a circle. Some Sundays might lend themselves to two speakers debating an issue, with the congregation participating along the way. The congregation could be given the next week's text in advance with encouragement to do some preparatory reading beforehand, so they come ready to contribute. Participation should even go beyond sermons and be encouraged in baptisms, communion, and prayers.⁵⁸ Even contemplative prayer, in which everyone participates in silent reflection, is a powerful way to connect individual stories to the God Story.⁵⁹

For most preachers the hardest part of moving from monological to participative, dialogical proclamation is the surrender of control. The aim of participation in preaching is to create space for the Spirit to blow in and intersect the lives of each hearer. Only the Spirit knows what each heart needs to hear. Dialogical preaching brings an element of unpredictability into Sunday mornings. For the preacher to make this courageous change, prayer is the key. Rather than preparing manuscripts, the preacher will need to prepare herself. She must be immersed in prayer and in the passage throughout the week, pondering the truths found there from every angle, so she has a deep well to draw from

⁵⁷ Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm for Preaching*, 262.

⁵⁸ Peabody, 82-85.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 198.

when the questions and comments arise.⁶⁰ Leonard Sweet says, “To embrace participation is to embrace imperfection over control, to leave lots of breathing room for God’s Spirit to work, to go in directions you did not plan to go. Transductive worship is more slot machine than gumball machine: worship where you never know what’s coming up next versus putting a quarter in and the same thing comes out except in different colors.”⁶¹ The preacher enters into a journey not *for* the people of God but *with* the people of God. The story of God becomes their story together, as they participate in its telling and in its living. Participation, not the conclusion, is the climax of the sermon. Sermons are never finished. They go beyond the doors of the church and into the world. As preachers prepare for sermons that change the hearers from the inside out, Leonard Sweet gives these altering questions to hold near: “What do I want my people to experience? What questions do I want to tantalize them? What images do I want them to keep sensing all week? What healing do I want to take place? What part of discipleship do I want people to be challenged by? With what truth of Jesus do I want them to stand?”⁶²

Proclaiming the Story of Abundance at Belfair Community Church

When I stand in the pulpit of Belfair Community Church on Sunday mornings, I pray the same prayer most weeks. “Spirit of God, help us hear what you want us to hear, so you might help us be who you want us to be, so you might help us do what you want

⁶⁰ Rouse, , 45-46.

⁶¹ Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm for Preaching*, 94.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 262.

us to do.” My heart’s desire is revealed in this prayer. This sermon moment may be the only time the majority of the people in that room are opening their lives to the Word of God that week. In less than an hour they will return to their ordinary lives, where many struggle to pay their bills, marriages are crumbling, parents are exhausted, and addictions lurk at the back door. They will return to those voices in their heads and in their world that tell them there is not enough. There is not enough money in the bank. There is not enough love in the home. There is not enough time in the day. There is not enough strength to overcome. I have thirty minutes to offer a message that challenges this lie of scarcity with the promise that in God’s kingdom there is always enough. It is not enough for this message to just be heard. It must be experienced. It must be felt in the deepest places of the hearts gathered. If it is going to send the people of Belfair Community Church into the world with less of a spiritual buzz and more of a true transformation that will impact how they respond to the stories of scarcity all week long, the Word must move from their heads to their hearts, and then, from their hearts to their hands and feet. Here is how I am proclaiming the story with the hopes of transformation in Belfair, Washington.

Increasing Dialogue

The conversation around the story begins before Sunday’s sermon. For two years, I led a class the hour before the worship service. In this class anywhere from ten to twenty people would gather around the morning’s text. Using a guide from my friend and fellow pastor, Heidi Husted Armstrong, participants would be encouraged to momentarily forget what they already knew about the text and to pay attention to what the Spirit of

God was bringing to the surface in a fresh way today. We would slowly proceed through the story with questions that took us a little deeper, step by step. The first question was simply, “What grabs your attention in this story?” The questions build on each other: Does this text feel connected to or disconnected from your everyday life? How does it make you want to think or act differently? No matter which ways the conversation went, we would always conclude with this one question: If you were going to preach this story this morning, what would be your sermon? A dozen people who have never called themselves preachers would proceed to offer up a sermon idea to the group. They had spent an hour living into the story and were now ready to share it with the world. I noticed that the same participants who gathered around the table before service, were the ones leaning in, taking notes, wide eyed and anxious to hear where my sermon would take us. Would I see what they saw? Would their revelations be shared with the entire congregation? Had they actually played a part in making God’s Story known? (Heidi Husted Armstrong’s *Questions for Engaging the Text* can be found in Appendix A).

While my sermons have not become fully dialogical, I am taking steps in that direction. Questions are incorporated into every sermon. Some require the congregation’s audible response, and others encourage personal reflection that connects our stories to God’s story. Sometimes during the sermon an individual will share a testimony of how this part of God’s story is connecting to their own life. Their connection helps others connect as well. Other times these testimonies are shared before or after the message, or even as a video testimony online during the week. For the past six months, I have visited one family’s home each week to record an episode of what we call Front Porch Talks. The idea is to bring back the old front porch where neighbors would casually gather after

a long day to drink tea and talk about life and faith. During these interviews, participants reflect on their journey with God, how they are currently experiencing God, and what hopes and dreams God is giving them. While church members love watching these episodes, they are most powerful for the participants. They receive the questions a week in advance, and spend time reflecting on how God's story has intersected their story up until now. When they begin to tell me about how God's fingerprints are on their story, they are recognizing God's promises have actually been true for them. When they tell their story with God at the center, they remember their lives are held by One bigger than their bank account, stronger than their fears, kinder than their regrets, and more loving than their heartaches. Change the story, change the culture. In sermons, I am hoping to tell a better story. In Front Porch Talks, I am hoping to nudge people into telling their own story through a better lens.

After each sermon we move immediately into a time of silent reflection. In this space each hearer is encouraged to simply sit with Jesus and offer up one response based on what the story is doing in them. Cards are provided for participants to write their response for personal accountability throughout the week. If they turn it in, I make every effort to reach out early the next week and walk alongside them in their next faithful step. While we are not technically in dialogue during this portion of the sermon, something powerful happens as one hundred hearts turn away from the noise and turn toward dialogue with Jesus together.

EPIC Sermons

In each sermon I try to engage as many senses as possible, remembering that seeing, feeling, tasting, and smelling work together to move what we are hearing from our heads and short-term memory to our hearts and long-term beliefs and actions. Many sermons have a coinciding PowerPoint presentation, but the slides projected never include words. They are images that change with each movement of the sermon. As participants hear the story, they are also seeing it play out before them in images that bring the faces of biblical characters to life or that connect seemingly ancient words to a modern reality. The images add dimension to the story, and without a word, they connect it to the stories in the room. Sometimes these images move off the screen and onto our tables or into our hands. During Advent the manger sits on our stage empty. Each Sunday, Mary and Joseph come closer and closer to the stage, until they finally arrive on the scene at Christmas Eve. As we reflect on where they are in their journey, we also reflect on our own journeys. Which of God's promises seem far off? What are we waiting for? How has God been faithful to us when we were not sure what God was doing?

When Sunday's story reminded us that Jesus is the bread of life, tables all around the sanctuary were covered with bread in many forms. We could see the story, smell the story, feel and even taste the story, all while hearing the story. The story of the Israelites drinking bitter water at Marah was coupled with a children's message in which I presented the children with some "very special chocolate" that could only be found in "very special stores." Their eyes opened wide as I handed each one a tiny square. What I actually gave them was pure cocoa (followed by a Hershey's kiss so they might forgive me). With one taste they spit and screamed. One little boy ran back to his parents shouting, "I hate this!" It was perfect. The Israelites, who were so excited to see some

water in the desert and so quickly began to curse God at the first bitter taste of it were back. This day their story was replicated in the children of Belfair Community Church. Ask any child at BCC about the story of bitter water and they will tell you every detail. They will even tell you that if you do not stomp off when you are most angry at God, there just might be a Hershey kiss nearby to make what is bitter taste sweet again.

Just recently the sermon text included Isaiah 49:16, “See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.” Each participant was given a permanent marker, and as the sermon concluded they were encouraged to draw the cross on the palms of their hands. They would see that cross countless times throughout the day. Each time was an invitation to keep company with Christ and remember his nearness. Later that night on our church Facebook page, a participant posted a picture of her palm with the faded black cross and these words: “I loved the sermon today!! Here is a picture of what my cross looks like at the end of the day. God just gave me a great analogy of how the trials (or handwashing) throughout my day can trick me into thinking he has forgotten me, but it is my responsibility to get up the next day and renew my mind, redraw that cross, receive my daily bread through His word and soak up every drop of love He has for me. That’s where our strength is! Just felt it on my heart to share!” The sermon had concluded seven hours prior, but the people were still preaching it to one another. The story had moved from the pulpit, to their palms, to their hearts.

These examples of images becoming opportunities to participate in God’s story are numerous. One sermon was about responding to God’s voice. We noticed how God speaks most often when God’s children are making an intentional effort to be present to God and listen. In the middle of the sermon, participants were asked to pull out their

phones. Then they were instructed to open the calendar application and actually plan a date with God that week. Across the congregation, one hundred people were penciling in an appointment to meet with God and see if God might have something to say to them. Those who kept their appointment were practicing living into God's story. One Easter, inspired by Leonard Sweet, the sermon focused on the linens in the tomb. Peter and John only noticed laundry, whereas Mary saw angels sitting in that same place. We were encouraged to have eyes to see God's redeeming presence in our most ordinary of places. Each participant received a strand of linen as they entered worship. Throughout the sermon they were invited to hold that linen in their hands. Was it just laundry or could it be something more? By the end, these strands of linen were tied to our wrists with a challenge to remember as often as we saw it, that our God shows up in the ordinary places of our lives. If we have eyes to see beyond the laundry, we can encounter God's redemptive love every moment of every day. Two years later, a couple of folks still wear those linen strands around their wrists.

One sermon was about the Christian's call to generosity. We took a financial risk that Sunday. Every person who came to worship (ages four and older) received an envelope with a ten-dollar bill in it. At the end of the sermon, the only instruction was to use that money as a generous gift for someone else that week. As participants left church, the sermon was just beginning. They approached the world with eyes and hearts wide open to who God might lead them to bless. I have heard of several families who continue to keep ten dollars in an envelope in their car, and they watch and listen together as God shows them how to share it. This is God's story changing our stories. A people who have

long believed there is not enough, now drive around with some cash in an envelope, asking God how to show another that there is love enough to save us all.

No two Sundays are the same, but each week I am learning that the more people can see and touch the story, the more their hearing of it will move them to actually live it. There are fewer Sundays where people just sit back and listen to me preach. Instead, they come expecting to participate in God's story. God's story is becoming their story. Change the story, change the culture. Change how you tell the story; change how they receive it. Change how they receive it; change how they live it. In hearing more EPIC stories, the people of Belfair Community Church are beginning to live the God story more and more.

CHAPTER 5:

CHANGE THE STORY. CHANGE THE CULTURE.

GOD'S STORY EMBODIED IN A RENEWED WAY OF TABELING

Wherever we break bread together, Jesus is always at the table. And we are to remember him, bring him to life in every heart. Because the life of your table becomes the preeminent art of your life. You become a disciple to the Master Artist for your time spent together at Jesus's table. Leonard Sweet, From Tablet to Table

When I was in fifth grade my mother married my stepfather. Our family of three became a family of five. I was ten years old; my sister was fourteen, and my stepbrother was eighteen. The house was a lively, chaotic place with five busy schedules, teenage hormones, new parents, and the typical sibling drama. There were fights and tears aplenty in those first months and years. In the midst of the chaos, however, we came together for dinner every night. That was nonnegotiable. No matter who was angry, who was stressed, or who was struggling to find their place in this new family system, we were all expected at the table. For that one sacred hour we would talk and laugh. We would see and hear one another. We would address the tensions that had arisen during the day. At the table we became a family.

I was twenty-one on my first visit to the Middle East. I would be working in a Palestinian refugee camp teaching English for the summer. The weeks before my departure, I had nightmares almost every night. These nightmares were filled with images of terrorist attacks. Though I knew God was calling me to the Middle East, I was afraid. Arabs were the people on the evening news who threw rocks and bombs. The news called them the enemy. I had not been in Jordan for twenty-four hours before the first Arab

Muslim family invited me to dinner. They saw a young woman far from home and invited me into their home to be a part of their family. We sat on the floor around bowls of hummus, babaganoush, stuffed grape leaves, fresh pita bread, and kofta. As we ate, we talked about life in America and life in Jordan. We talked about our families. We shared recipes, jokes, and laughter. Two days before, these were the faces in my nightmares. Around the table, they became my friends. The table is the setting for stories of change.

At the table we encounter the mystery of God. In Babylonian creation myths, Marduk made man to bring food offerings to the gods. In Genesis 1, God gives food as a gift on the sixth day of creation (Genesis 1:30). In pagan myths humans exist to provide for the gods. The Bible story tells of God providing for people. While idols demand we meet their needs, God delights in meeting our needs, and God created us with a need to eat. At the table, we acknowledge our dependence on God and each other. Eating reminds us that we are embedded in creation, dependent on the fruits of the earth and the work of a larger community to survive. At the table, a self-sufficient people come home to the truth of their need for a generous God.¹

Tim Chester proposes that the heart of what it means to be human is to eat in the presence of God. We were not created just to contemplate the ways of God, but rather, to share a meal with our Creator.² The entire Scripture story is bookended by this meal. Leonard Sweet recalls the first command God gives to people in the Bible; “eat freely” (Genesis 2:16). The last word God speaks in Scripture is “drink freely” (Revelation 22:17). Everything in between these two commands is essentially a table where we learn

¹ Tim Chester, *A Meal with Jesus: Discovering Grace, Community, and Mission Around the Table*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 69-70.

² *Ibid.*, 73.

to feast with Jesus Christ.³ Thus, Sweet proclaims, “the most important thing anyone can do to change our world for the better is to bring back the table- with Jesus seated at his rightful place.”⁴

The particular pocket of the world I hope to change is Belfair, Washington, and the story I most long to see redeemed is the story of scarcity. Of the many stories challenged at the table, God directly addresses the lies of scarcity there. Throughout the Scripture story, a people afraid of starvation meet the God of leftovers at the table. A people frantically rushing through life, worried there is not enough time in the day to cultivate relationships are invited to slow down at the table. A people who have put limits on who is invited to God’s banquet are challenged to pull up more chairs at the table. Whether it be a picnic table in the garden, a blanket table in the wilderness, or a Passover table in the Upper Room, every time God’s people gather to eat a story is being told. This story tells something of who God is and who we are in him. In Scripture, a meal is never just a meal. It is always an invitation into a bigger, better story. The lies of scarcity are challenged at the table. People who came alone with nothing, leave with leftovers and a new place among kin. Stories are told and cultures are changed at the table.

This chapter will follow the stories of the table through Scripture, acknowledge the crisis of the table in America today, and then reflect on how the table is changing the culture of Belfair Community Church.

³ Leonard Sweet, *From Tablet to Table*, (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2014), 18.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

The Table in the Old Testament

Throughout the Old Testament, food traditions reflect a people's understanding of who God is and what God's expectations are for their life in community. We will follow this thread from Genesis to the psalms and prophets in order to uncover the stories that were told and the culture that was shaped around the table.

The Table in Genesis

Meals in Genesis are never just meals. They always have greater significance. In the garden, Adam and Eve are invited to eat in the presence of God. Their only warning has to do with what not to eat. The meal is an opportunity to share intimacy and trust with God and others. In Genesis 18:1-8 Abraham feeds three visitors at the entrance of his tent. He offers the guests three seahs of flour, along with curds, milk, and tender calf. These reflect Abraham's wealth as well as his desire to serve his guests the finest of fare in order to honor them.⁵ This meal at Mamre tells the story of God's people who are known by how they share their abundance and offer hospitality to the stranger.

Many of the feasts in Genesis celebrate special family occasions. In Genesis 21:8 Abraham throws a banquet to celebrate Isaac's weaning. In 24:50 Bethuel's family shares a meal to celebrate the engagement of Rachel to Isaac.⁶ Furthermore, meals are often in the background of covenants being formed and broken. Jacob stole Esau's birthright and blessing over a meal (Genesis 25:29-24, 27:1-10). These inappropriately eaten meals

⁵ Craig L. Blomberg, *Contagious Holiness: Jesus' Meals with Sinners*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 34.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

destroyed a family bond and undermined the established rules of inheritance.⁷ Covenants are made and broken around the table. “Adam fails in eating, Noah fails in drinking, and Isaac in tasting.”⁸ Conversely, Isaac and Abimelech eat together in Genesis 26, making a pact of peace between them as they do. The men came to the table as enemies, but they leave the table reconciled. Jacob and Laban deal with their animosities toward one another at the table. They make a truce by means of a sacrificial meal in the presence of their family (Genesis 31:54). When Joseph reveals himself to his brothers in Genesis 43, he provides a banquet as the first step toward reconciling a painfully broken relationship.⁹

The meals described in Genesis are never just ordinary meals. They are the means by which people trust and choose God or do not trust and choose God. They are avenues toward reconciliation in estranged relationships, opportunities for hospitality to be extended to strangers, and celebrations in which God’s gifts are enjoyed. At the very beginning of our story, the people of God discover who they are called to be in relationship to God and to others at the table.

The Table in Exodus

The most significant meal in Exodus is the Passover meal found in Exodus 12. On that night, God called the Israelites to prepare a special meal just before God set them free from slavery. Passover was the beginning of a new nation coming to be.¹⁰ At this

⁷ Mamula, 16.

⁸ Blomberg, 35.

⁹ Ibid.,35-36.

¹⁰ Mamula, 17.

meal, the Israelites were empowered to step into a new reality as God's people. Around the table God's people remembered their true identity: a people set apart from the nations of this world.

More than any of the other Jewish festivals, Passover was centered around a particular meal of remembrance celebrated by family units. At Passover, family ties were strengthened and solidarity among neighbors was promoted as each participant understood that he or she was joining in communion with God.¹¹ This meal was God's doing. God set the menu. God reserved the venue. God chose the time. God created the guest list. "By participating in this unique meal in family units, Israel claim[ed] a group identity centered within the family and [began] the slow process of creating distinct boundaries between themselves and the rest of the world."¹² Passover was a call for God's people to eat in the presence of their Lord, and as they ate to remember who they really were so they would be up for their unique journey ahead.

On the other side of the Red Sea, the Israelites found themselves in the wilderness with nothing to eat. The fear of starvation tempted them to return to slavery. Exodus 16-17 shows God's response to the threats of scarcity. In a place with no food or water, God provided manna, quail, and fresh springs from which God's people could eat and drink. God set a table for his people in the wilderness, adding another chapter to the story of a God who provides for his chosen people.¹³ Slaves, once at the mercy of an evil ruler to

¹¹ Blomberg, 37.

¹² Mamula, 17.

¹³ Blomberg, 37.

feed them, were showered with more food from heaven than they could eat. At a table in the wilderness, God was changing the identity and culture of an entire nation.

In Exodus 18:12, Moses and all the elders of Israel embraced their new identity with a celebratory meal to signify their fresh start as the free people of God.¹⁴ Then in Exodus 24:9-11, they ascended Mount Sinai, where they ate, drank, and saw God. God joined his people at the table.

The Table and the Law

Deuteronomy 14:2 declares, “out of all the people of the face of the earth, the Lord has chosen you to be his treasured possession.” This comes just before a litany of laws naming foods as clean and unclean. The food laws are intended to help the Israelites remember their identity as God’s treasured possession. Several times a day, as God’s people followed the dietary laws they were “developing deep in their consciousness an attitude of obedience to God.”¹⁵ In their shared practices, every meal reinforced the story that united the Israelites in their common identity as God’s special people. The food laws brought the Israelites closer to one another and distanced them farther from their neighbors.

By the time one reaches the New Testament era, keeping a kosher table was one of the top three or four boundary markers that visibly set Jews apart from their neighbors and kept them from most table fellowship with Gentiles. The significance of the fact that Jesus would set the stage for the abolition of these laws in early Christian practice can scarcely be overestimated.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 39.

¹⁶ Blomberg, 39.

At the table, God's people became who God said they were. His treasured possession.

At the Table with the Kings of Israel

With Israel's kings, meals were often indicators of God's commissioning and blessing. In 1 Samuel 9:12-24, Saul is commissioned to become king of Israel following a sacrificial meal. Saul, Samuel, and about thirty guests gather for a meal arranged by Samuel. They have designated seats and a carefully planned menu. It is a coronation banquet even though only Samuel recognizes it as such.¹⁷ The meal tells a story of what is coming to be.

1 Kings 4:22-28 and 8:62-66 detail the vast amounts of food and animals that Solomon attained as a result of his faithfulness. There is a theology to the table that says God showers blessings on his people, and especially on their leaders, in response to covenant obedience.¹⁸ When Solomon completes the temple in 1 Kings 8, the people celebrate for two weeks. A massive amount of food is consumed, and when everyone leaves they are singing praises to God. Those two weeks at the table unified Israel as one people, under one king, devoted to one true God.¹⁹ In the days of Israel's kings a plentiful table was assurance that God was pleased with his people.

¹⁷ Ibid., 43.

¹⁸ Ibid, 44.

¹⁹ Mamula, 18.

At the Table with the Prophets

In 1 Kings 17 Elijah is fed by ravens, and the widow of Zarephath receives the miraculous provision of ever-flowing oil and flour to see her and her son through a famine. At these tables, Yahweh works in the homeland of the Baal-worshipping queen, Jezebel, to reveal his power over Baal's impotence.²⁰ The table is never just a table in scripture.

Elisha's miracles in 2 Kings set the stage for some of Jesus' miracles. In 2 Kings 4, Elisha feeds 100 people with twenty small barley loaves and a few ears of corn, and there are leftovers after the meal. Through Elijah and Elisha, God shows up at the table to emphasize his power and to demonstrate his care for widows and orphans. At the table, God paints a picture of an ideal society in which care for the hungry is commonplace and justice for the marginalized is executed. It is at the table God gives glimpses of how things should be.²¹

Most of the prophets arise during the Exile, when Israel's best and brightest were deported to places like Assyria and Babylon. Hope is at an all-time low. The people of God are cut off from the temple and the land flowing with milk and honey. The misuse of the table takes on special language during this time. Amos 4-6 accuses the wealthy of hosting raucous parties with loud music, fine wine, and large meals while ignoring the poor. Isaiah 5:11-12 echoes these accusations of excess food and wine, claiming the partiers have "no regard for the deeds of the Lord." The prophets declare the people are

²⁰ Blomberg, 45.

²¹ Ibid., 46.

in the wrong, not because they are enjoying good food and drink, but because their eating and drinking in excess has blinded them to the needs of the poor.²²

The most important meal depicted in the prophets is what developed into the concept of a messianic banquet. It is derived from a vision of all of creation being restored on earth. Isaiah 11:6-9 envisions animals who were formally enemies, enjoying meals side by side. The wolf and lamb, leopard and goat, calf and lion, and infant and cobra live happily together. These images follow a promise of a new divine ruler who will deliver God's people from all oppression and sin.²³ In Isaiah 25:6-9 this vision is on full display:

⁶ On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples
 a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,
 of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.
⁷ And he will destroy on this mountain
 the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
 the sheet that is spread over all nations;
⁸ he will swallow up death forever.
 Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces,
 and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,
 for the LORD has spoken.
⁹ It will be said on that day,
 Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us.
 This is the LORD for whom we have waited;
 let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

These verses led God's people to look for the day when God alone would rule from his high mountain in Jerusalem, and an elaborate meal with the finest of fare would be enjoyed. What is unique about this banquet is that everyone is invited to God's table.

²² Mamula, 19.

²³ Blomberg, 58.

Representatives from every nation are present. At the messianic banquet, the death that has ruled the earth since Adam and Eve's failure at the table is defeated.²⁴

The messianic banquet reveals a God who is always doing something new. God is setting a table that shows his delight in cosmic reversals. At the table, God is transforming the reality of what his people have experienced up to this point. The great banquet celebrates the reversal of the effects of sin and death. Isaiah's banquet table comes with an open invitation not only to Israel, but to all the nations. At the table, everyone has a choice to make. They can respond to the Lord's invitation and join the peaceful fellowship at his table, or they can continue in violence and oppression and miss it altogether. But people be warned, Isaiah declares: life eternal is only found at the banquet table with the Lord.²⁵

The Table in the Psalter

In the Psalms the dominant theme around the table is that of Yahweh's provision. Perhaps the most famous table in the Psalter is found in Psalm 23. God as the shepherd prepares a table for the sheep in green pastures. Then as the good host, God prepares a table for the psalmist in the presence of his enemies. The first thing the person walking through shadows and storms encounters is a set table and an empty chair. Leonard Sweet emphasizes, "those walking through the darkest valley are promised an unhurried, sit down meal to eat in peace."²⁶ In both images, God looks after the needs of his vulnerable

²⁴ Mamula, 20-21.

²⁵ Ibid., 22.

²⁶ Sweet, *From Tablet to Table*, 44.

sheep and children, and God not only meets their needs but gives them rest and honor in the process. At the table the fearful take a deep breath. The despised are attended to by a generous host. The vulnerable are held in God's care. Realities change at the table.

Conclusion

As seen in Abraham's meal with the strangers and in the messianic banquet, some meals in the Old Testament have a measure of inclusivity in which sympathetic outsiders might enjoy the feast alongside faithful Jews. The majority of meals in the Old Testament, however, serve as a way of drawing boundaries around God's people. Only those who belong are included, and outsiders are not welcome for fear they might threaten the purity of God's treasured possession. At the table, the Israelites celebrated their unique God-given identity, participated in God's call to hospitality and charity, acknowledged their dependence on God for daily provisions, and anticipated a coming kingdom of peace and welcome to all. The Hebrew culture was formed and reformed at the table.

The Table in the New Testament

Most contemporary New Testament scholars agree that Jesus' practice of sharing table fellowship with the marginalized and sinners is one of the most historically reliable assertions that can be extracted from the gospels.²⁷ New Testament professor Robert Karris has summed up Jesus' ministry with this statement, "Jesus is either going to a

²⁷ Blomberg, 19.

meal, at a meal, or coming from a meal . . . Jesus got himself killed because of the way he ate.”²⁸ Early in Luke’s Gospel the Pharisees and scribes complain to Jesus, “John’s disciples, like the disciples of the Pharisees, frequently fast and pray, but your disciples eat and drink” (Luke 5:33). Jesus spent much of his time eating and drinking. As far as the Pharisees were concerned, he was quite the party animal. Jesus’ mission strategy seemed to be gathering for a long meal that stretched into the evening. Jesus did discipleship around a table.²⁹ According to Leonard Sweet, “Jesus was never more original than at the table.”³⁰ He ate where he wanted to eat, with whom he wanted to eat. At the table, Jesus declared himself the Messiah for all of humanity: refugees, prostitutes, lepers, and all other kinds of sinners. Not only did he challenge *who* could be at God’s table, Jesus also broke all the dining rules for *how* to eat at God’s table. Jesus ate on fast days. He ate with dirty hands. He took a drink given to him by a Samaritan woman of questionable reputation. When Jesus came as a guest, he turned the table and acted as the host. Every time Jesus showed up for dinner, the menu changed. No longer was good food the only thing being shared. The guests at the table were now receiving “God’s presence in the super food of faith.”³¹ The Gospel of Luke has a continual thread of stories that find Jesus at the table.

- In Luke 5 Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners at the home of Levi.
- In Luke 7 Jesus is anointed at the home of Simon the Pharisee during a meal.
- In Luke 9 Jesus feeds the 5000.
- In Luke 10 Jesus eats in the home of Mary and Martha.

²⁸ Robert Karris, *Eating Your Way Through Luke’s Gospel*, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006), 97.

²⁹ Chester, 13.

³⁰ Sweet, *From Tablet to Table*, 62.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

- In Luke 11 Jesus condemns the Pharisees and teachers of the law at a meal.
- In Luke 14 Jesus is at a meal when he urges people to invite the poor to their meals.
- In Luke 19 Jesus invites himself to dinner with Zacchaeus.
- In Luke 22 Jesus serves the Last Supper.
- In Luke 24 the risen Christ has a meal with the two disciples in Emmaus.³²

It makes sense then, that Jesus' mission strategy in Luke is found in table fellowship:

“The Son of Man came eating and drinking” (Luke 7:34).³³ A meal with Jesus was never just a meal. At the table, Jesus was always inviting people into a better story. At the table, Jesus was challenging hearts and transforming culture. In this section, we will consider the stories Jesus is telling at different tables in the gospels.

The Symposium

Jewish meals during the time of Jesus were influenced by the Greek and Roman cultures that surrounded them. Formal banquet meals in the Mediterranean were common. These banquets created and solidified social bonds. The basic Greek symposium consisted of male guests who would gather for a celebratory meal. Guests sat according to social rank. After dinner, they would transition to the symposium portion of the banquet. This began a round of political or philosophical debates coupled with musical entertainment. By the first century, these symposium meals had degenerated into opportunities for drunkenness and gluttony. The servants at the meals were often abused, quarrels were common, and oftentimes the entertainment gave way to prostitution.³⁴

³² Chester, 13.

³³ Ibid., 15.

³⁴ Mamula, 34-35.

Roman banquets were equally known for their extravagance and excess. In a Roman banquet, three couches were placed at the perimeter of the room with low tables in front of them. This U-shaped seating arrangement became known as the *triclinium*. Like their Greek counterparts, the meal would be followed by conversation and entertainment.³⁵ These formal meals strengthened the social bonds between those who participated while also establishing clear boundaries among those present as well as those not included. “By emphasizing social order around the banquet table, participants proclaimed the social order of the world around them and their place in it.”³⁶

The Jewish banquet table in the Second Temple period was similar to the Greco-Roman banquet. Jews also reclined on couches during the meal and followed it with drinking wine and discussing controversial topics while enjoying entertainment.³⁷ Amos 6:4-7 describes such a scene.³⁸ One key difference between the Jewish banquets and other banquets of the time would have been the dietary restrictions. These caused the Jews to have banquets amongst themselves, while refusing to dine with Gentiles.³⁹ Leonard Sweet acknowledges an even more striking difference that lies in the theology behind these Mediterranean banquets. The excess partying in the Greco-Roman banquets was really a decoy designed to distract their pantheon of moody gods from any punishment

³⁵ Ibid., 35.

³⁶ Ibid., 36.

³⁷ Blomberg, 21.

³⁸ *4 Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall...; 6 who drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph! 7 Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile, and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away.* Amos 6:4-7

³⁹ Mamula, 38.

they may want to bestow upon the pathetic human population. The Romans used the distractions of the meal, the heated conversation, and the questionable entertainment to keep the gods a good distance away from human affairs. Dining for first century Jews, however, did not exist to keep God away, but rather, each meal was an opportunity to invite God to come and dwell among God's people. The Jewish meal was made sacred by the very presence of the divine that met them at the table.⁴⁰ This is the world in which God takes on flesh and enters the neighborhood. These are the meals Immanuel joined in as he walked this earth. We will follow Jesus' journey from banquets to ordinary tables in the remainder of this section.

The Table at Levi's Party: Mark 2:13-17, Luke 5:27-32

In Luke 5:27-32, Jesus calls a tax collector named Levi to follow him. In response to the invitation, Levi hosts a banquet with his friends and Jesus. When the Pharisees grumble, condemning Jesus for eating with such undesirable people, Jesus responds by telling them, "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance." The religious leaders' concerns reveal one of the burning questions of the day: "With whom can I eat?"⁴¹ Present holiness and future expectations were bound up in this inquiry. Doing dinner was doing theology!⁴²

Jewish food laws had effectively established and maintained cultural boundaries. It was difficult for Jews to eat with Gentiles because one could not be sure if the food was

⁴⁰ Sweet, *From Tablet to Table*, 69.

⁴¹ Chester, 21.

⁴² Ibid.

prepared in a kosher way. So long as Jews were faithfully following their food laws, they could not enter into intimate relationships with outsiders that shared meals create.⁴³ Even though Isaiah's great banquet envisions a meal shared between "all peoples, all nations, all faces, and all the earth" (Isaiah 25:6-8), in the Second Temple period Gentiles had all but fallen off the guest lists of Jewish banquets. Jewish leaders under foreign rule proposed stricter, more exclusive laws. The Pharisees believed Israel had to be pure before she could be restored. Their purity laws extended beyond the temple and moved into Jewish homes.⁴⁴ Thus, the question, "With whom can I eat?" was also a question of "With whom can I neighbor?"

When Jesus eats with Levi, his response to this question is clear. Jesus has come for the marginalized, the messy, the failures, the corrupt, and the ordinary. Jesus has come for all. His meal at Levi's home is an anticipation of the messianic banquet that will, once again, be for all. If Jesus' table has room for the likes of Levi, it has room for anyone. Levi was a tax collector who gained wealth at the expense of his fellow Jews and gave it to their Roman oppressors. Jesus not only enters into the home of such a man, but at the table invites him to become one of his twelve disciples.⁴⁵ With the eating came a calling. At the table, Jesus proclaimed that even this sinner could repent. While the Pharisees were concerned about being defiled at the table with sinners, Jesus told a new story at the table. His holiness and grace are what is most contagious. At Jesus' table, sinners became disciples. At the table with Jesus, everyone experiences God's grace.

⁴³ Ibid., 20.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Mamula, 42.

Change the story, change the culture. Change the culture, change the person. Stories are changed at the table with Jesus.

A Table in the Wilderness (Feeding the 5,000): Matthew 14:13-21, Mark 6:30-44, Luke 9:10-17, John 6:5-15

The feeding of the 5,000 is the only miracle recorded in all four Gospels. When Jesus is surrounded by a multitude of hungry people in the wilderness, he takes a few loaves of bread, blesses the loaves, breaks them, and shares them until all are fed with leftovers remaining. In so doing, Jesus becomes the host of a great feast on a mountain, just like the messianic host from the banquet in Isaiah 25.⁴⁶ Death itself is on the menu in Isaiah 25, and God swallows it up, thus initiating a perpetual feast that no one ever has to leave. In Luke's telling of the feeding miracle, the disciples want to send the crowds away, but Jesus makes it possible for them to stay. No one needs to leave. In fact, there is more food at the end of the feast than there was at the beginning. Jesus is instituting a perpetual feast. It is a glimpse of the messianic banquet coming to be. "God's Messiah will defeat death, put the world right, and enable us to enjoy God's presence."⁴⁷ God's coming world will be a world of provision, abundance, and satisfaction for all. At the wilderness table, Jesus declares this world has come.

Mark's gospel compares the crowds to sheep without a shepherd, echoing the cries of Ezekiel 34. For too long God's people have roamed aimlessly in the absence of

⁴⁶ Ibid., 25.

⁴⁷ Chester, 59.

godly leaders. Since those words were penned in the sixth century BC, the Jewish people waited for a messianic replacement to come and rule Israel properly. This feeding miracle rings of messianic hope.⁴⁸

The references to the desert place in which the feeding occurred stirs up memories of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness, and Jesus' gift of bread has clear connections to God's gift of manna from heaven. The Jewish tradition expected the Messiah to come as a new Moses who would once again partner with God to provide bread in the wilderness.⁴⁹ Along with that, the feeding of the 5,000 calls to mind Elisha's miracle which was smaller in scale but similar in nature. Elisha fed one hundred men with twenty small loaves, and there were leftovers remaining (2 Kings 4:42-44). At the wilderness table, Jesus is presenting himself as the new Moses and the new Elisha.⁵⁰ Even more, he is presenting himself as the first and only Messiah.

The crowd on this day would have been comprised of farmers, fishermen, and homemakers. The meal's location in the outdoors makes the guest list open to any and all who were in the vicinity. Those participating in this impromptu messianic feast are ordinary people, with plenty of "undesirables" present as well. There is no way around this in a crowd of thousands. In fact, the guest list stands not only in direct opposition to proper Jewish banquets, but also to the parties of the king. Mark puts the feeding of the 5,000 immediately after the story of a party in Herod's palace. Herod had a birthday banquet to impress his nobles. The climax is an erotic dance by his stepdaughter, which

⁴⁸ Blomberg, 103.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 105.

turns into a rash agreement to have John the Baptist murdered. Herod's party is only open to the social elite. It is motivated by his pride, and it ends in death. In the very next scene, Mark shows Jesus motivated by compassion, welcoming everyone to his feast. While they eat, Jesus proclaims the good news. The party ends in satisfaction and life for all.⁵¹ At the table in the wilderness Jesus is revealing a kingdom that challenges the kingdoms of this world. While the crowds eat, they are invited into a story not of status but compassion, not of death for some but of life for all. The story changes at the table.

Not only is Jesus' wilderness feast different from Herod's, it also goes against everything the Pharisees require of a banquet meal. The guest list cannot be confined to the ritually pure. There is no way to observe proper washing before partaking in the feast. There is no clear seating plan to indicate status and rank.⁵² How can they be sure the meal was prepared correctly? There are men, women, and children present. Who is going to separate the Jews from the Gentiles and the men from the women? All of these questions that must precede a Jewish banquet are strikingly absent from this scene. That is what makes this meal extraordinary. Jesus intentionally goes against all of the Pharisee's rules. He organizes the people and feeds them. At the wilderness table, Jesus presents himself as the long-expected Messiah; the new Moses and new Elisha, with an inclusive table that has room for sinners and unclean. He tells a story of a God whose care for his people is without limits.⁵³ God will care for whom God wants, how God wants, where God wants, when God wants, and God will see to it that there are leftovers. God's care is abundant,

⁵¹ Chester, 60.

⁵² Mamula, 44.

⁵³ Mamula, 44.

and God's grace includes anyone in need of it. When the thousands are fed at the table on the hillside, all of them become Jesus' family.⁵⁴ There is no fear of scarcity when you belong to the family of God. This is the story told at the table in the wilderness.

Jesus Anointed at the Table: Luke 7:36-50

Luke 7:36-50 finds Jesus at one of the symposium meals. Large homes in the time of Jesus had openings to the courtyard where outsiders could enter. Visitors could see what was happening at the dinner, and they could even contribute to what was being said. It was common for people to come into the banquets from the streets in order to pay their respects to the host. The poor might even hang around hoping for leftovers. This helps us envision how the story unfolds. A woman is likely passing by in the public area, sees what is happening at the dinner, and then slips into the dining room and begins to rub Jesus' feet as they stretch out behind him. This woman treats Jesus with an unprecedented degree of intimacy. She lets down her hair and wipes her tears from Jesus' feet. In that culture, a woman would only let her hair down in the bedroom. She continues to kiss Jesus' feet and pours costly perfume on them. Some would have interpreted her actions as a prostitute treating Jesus as a client. Perhaps this is the only way she knows to relate to men. In essence, everything about this woman is wrong. She does not belong in that home. According to anyone's standards her actions are inappropriate for someone

⁵⁴ Sweet, *From Tablet to Table*, 14.

like Jesus. And yet, Jesus does not stop her. Instead he recognizes her actions as real acts of love and worship.⁵⁵

Jesus even uses her as an example of a true host. Jesus tells Simon, “You gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.” Jesus is in Simon’s house, but this woman has been his true host. At the table roles are reversed. Identities are sifted. Hearts are exposed. And sinners become Jesus’ most intimate companions. Stories change at the table with Jesus.

The Great Banquet: Luke 14:1-24

Jesus did not use food as a boundary maker, but instead, as an entry point into God’s kingdom.⁵⁶ His mealtime practices were marked by an openness to anyone who would hear and receive his invitation to come and eat. At every meal Jesus was redrawing social, religious, and cultural boundaries.⁵⁷ These truths are never clearer than in Jesus’ parable of the great banquet. As Jesus watches the guests in a Pharisee’s home vie for seats of honor, he decides they need to hear a story.

Jesus tells them of a man who prepares a great banquet and invites many guests. When the food is ready, most of the ones invited offer up insulting excuses for why they cannot attend. Jesus is giving a stern warning. The long-awaited messianic banquet is

⁵⁵ Chester, 38-40.

⁵⁶ Mamula, 40.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

quickly approaching, but many whose places are ready will not come and eat. At their refusal, the invitation goes to the outsiders of Israel and even to the Gentiles. These final guests are people whose work requires them to dwell outside the city walls. We can imagine undertakers, tanners, butchers, squatters, prostitutes, and any assortment of refugees and aliens, beggars and runaway slaves.⁵⁸ These people have to be compelled to come because they can hardly believe the invitation is true. They have never been the invited ones.

The great banquet mirrors the messianic feast, and the only way to participate in that meal is through heeding the call from Jesus. The Messiah's banquet is ready. The question is whether or not we will come to the table. Jesus is offering up a feast, whether we come or not. If you dare take your place at this feast, you will find a scandalous alternative to the social reality of the world. You will be at the table among the people you have avoided. This banquet turns everything upside down and inside out.

The Last Supper: Luke 22:7-38

The night before he was crucified, Jesus presided as host at a Passover meal with his disciples. Each year the people of Israel would share this meal to remember the night God freed them from slavery. Children would ask what the meal meant, and their story would be told again. Theology was served on the table.⁵⁹ The Israelites were not only

⁵⁸ Blomberg, 147.

⁵⁹ Blomberg, 107.

rescued through an event commemorated *by* a meal, they were also rescued *for* a meal. They were called to eat in the presence of God.

When the prophets warned of coming judgment, they often did so in terms of food. In Joel, fifteen of the twenty verses in the first chapter refer to food. The absence of food is judgement. The abundance of food is gladness and blessing. “God’s judgment undoes Eden. It turns the provision and plenty of the garden into a wilderness.”⁶⁰ Even so, Joel presents a dim hope that the people might eat with God again. The prophet says, “Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and drink offering for the Lord your God? (Joel 2:14). Even in their wilderness place, God leaves behind grain and wine so his people can participate in community with him. Joel equates eating with God to the removal of shame.⁶¹ Salvation is essentially an abundant feast enjoyed in the presence of God.

This brings us to the heart of Scripture’s story where we find another meal. Jesus is the host. He has told his disciples that he is going to prepare a place for them (John 14:3-4), and they will soon realize this place is prepared through the cross. Jesus is the Passover Lamb. Through his blood the Lord’s judgment will pass over us, and we will be redeemed from all of the chains that keep us from God. The Messiah presides over the Last Supper, giving a final glimpse into the messianic banquet that is coming to be. This meal looks back at that first Passover, while simultaneously pointing the way forward to what is to come. Through the cross of Jesus, the people of God are redeemed so they can eat and drink with God in that place Jesus has prepared.⁶²

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Chester, 111.

At the table, Jesus proclaimed, “This is who we are. This is who we will be . . . This is who God was, and is, and will be.”⁶³ As the disciples ate with Jesus, they were participating in God’s redemption story. They were responding to the invitation to come back to the table and eat with God. When we share in the Lord’s Supper, we are doing the same. At the Communion table we share in God’s story, Israel’s story, the apostles’ story, and the church’s story. The Communion table enjoins us to the family of God.⁶⁴

The Communion table gives us a role in God’s great drama unfolding here on earth. This meal tells the story again and again of who we really are because of who God really is. It tells us again of our redemption through Jesus, God’s Passover lamb. And it sends us out into the world to proclaim this grace and victory far and wide. It is amazing what stories can be told at one table, and how lives can be utterly transformed in the breaking of bread and pouring of wine.

At the Table in Emmaus: Luke 24:13-35

After Jesus is crucified two dejected disciples embark on a journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They are greeted by a stranger on the road, who asks why they are in despair. This stranger is the resurrected Jesus, but they do not know it. They arrive in Emmaus late in the evening and compel this stranger to come and stay with them. At their table Jesus, once again, becomes the host. When he breaks the bread, the disciples’ eyes are opened. They recognize Jesus for who he is, and for the first time, they marvel at

⁶² Chester, 113.

⁶³ N.T. Wright, *The Meal Jesus Gave Us*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 13.

⁶⁴ Wright, 22.

what it means that he is alive. Jesus disappears, and the two head back to Jerusalem to tell the good news.

This story is not one in which Jesus eats with notable sinners or outcasts. Instead, he joins two who had followed him. They were at the very least confused. It is likely they had given up on Jesus altogether. They had left the other disciples behind and headed back to their old life. Jesus sets a table for them in that place of despair.⁶⁵ At that table a new, better story revives weary hearts and encourages fearful souls. At that table those who were wandering aimlessly, are sent back out with purpose; with a message of hope to tell the world. The table was for them an encounter with Christ, and therefore a call to action. Meeting the risen Jesus, meant a radical change of plans for the two disciples. They do the very thing they encouraged Jesus not to do. They take the dangerous road at night, determined to get back to the city to share some hope.⁶⁶ Hearts are lifted and plans are changed when we meet with Christ at the table.

Conclusion

At the table Jesus forgives sins and invites the unrighteous into the family of God. At the table the marginalized are given seats of honor. At the table Jesus becomes the host and gives us a foretaste of the messianic banquet that brings all nations together in worship and kinship. At the table we learn that the holiness of Jesus is more contagious than anything. He rubs off on us, not us on him. At the table we participate in the

⁶⁵ Blomberg, 159.

⁶⁶ Chester, 137.

Kingdom of God. This kingdom defies all religious, social, and ethnic backgrounds. Its only requirement is that we come and eat in the presence of the Lamb. At the table there is no them. There is only us. At the table we commit to be witnesses to the Jesus who holds us together. At the table we eat in the presence of God, joined by our true family, the people of God, so we might go into the world with the good news that there are more seats open at God's abundant feast where Jesus the host waits to welcome them home.

A Call to Return to the Table

Leonard Sweet begins his book *From Tablet to Table* with this stark warning: "When any species undergoes a reproductive crisis, a name is given it: 'endangered.' Arguably Christianity has entered such a crisis; our inability to reproduce the faith is the number one problem facing our families and churches today."⁶⁷ He goes on to propose one response to this threat of the church's slow death: bring back the table. If the people of God would come back to the table, the world around and within us would be dramatically changed, and we would once again find our rootedness in Christ.⁶⁸

We have already seen the significance of the table in the Old Testament and Gospels. If we read on in Scripture, we discover the centrality of meals in the life of the apostolic churches as well. Acts 2:46 says, "day by day, attending temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts." Furthermore, a requirement for being an elder in the early church was displaying

⁶⁷ Sweet, *From Tablet to Table*, 1.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

hospitality (1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:8, Romans 16:23). The meetings in these first churches were centered around shared meals.⁶⁹

Somewhere along the way, the American church and American Christians have forgotten the power of the table. In his book *Bowling Alone*, published in 2000, Robert Putman pointed to a 33 percent decrease in families eating together over the previous three decades. Along with that decline, there had been a 45 percent decrease in dining with friends in the home. The average American household was eating dinner together only three times a week, and the average dinner only lasted twenty minutes.⁷⁰ Leonard Sweet's 2014 *From Tablet to Table* shows these trends have only gotten worse. Sweet revealed that Americans eat one in every five meals in their cars. And the average mealtime is now under twelve minutes, whereas it was ninety minutes just sixty years ago. One of the tragedies that accompanies the loss of the table is seen in this reality: the average parent spends only 38.5 minutes per week in meaningful conversation with their children.⁷¹ It is imperative that we get back to the table.

Sweet goes on to share the results of sociologist Cody C. Delistraty's compilation of recent scientific studies that consider the relationship between the table and its connection to families' physical and emotional health. Here is what Delistraty discovered:

- What is the number one factor for parents raising kids who are drug-free, healthy, intelligent, kind human beings? "Frequent family dinners."
- What is the number one shaper of vocabulary in younger children, even more than any other family event, including play? "Frequent family dinners."

⁶⁹ Chester, 51.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 46.

⁷¹ Sweet, *From Tablet to Table*, 9-10.

- What is the number one predictor of future academic success for elementary-age children? “Frequent family dinners”.
- What is one of the best safeguards against childhood obesity? “Eating meals together.”
- What is the best prescription to prevent eating disorders among adolescent girls? “Frequent family dinners” that exude a “positive atmosphere.”
- What is the variable most associated with lower incidence of depressive and suicidal thoughts among eleven to eighteen-year-olds? “Frequent family dinners.”⁷²

If the church wants to promote a way of life that will decrease emotional and behavioral problems in children, while promoting greater emotional well-being and wholeness, then the church will be at the front lines of bringing families back to the table.

What is it about the table that changes people, not only physically but emotionally and spiritually as well? For one, meals slow things down and reorient a task-oriented people toward what matters most: namely, people. It is possible to remain at a distance from someone in a public gathering. Even in a Bible study one can be in the same space, partaking in the same conversation with another, while remaining disconnected from them. Meals bring us close together. At the table, we see each other for who we really are as we connect and communicate in that intimate space.⁷³ Everyone needs to belong. This happens at the table. Think of how Jesus won people over. He did not stand against them and argue with them. Nor did he lecture them in a Bible study. Jesus got to the heart of people by walking alongside them and inviting them to the table.⁷⁴ We love our neighbors when we, like the disciples, respond to the hungry by reaching out and giving

⁷² Sweet, *From Tablet to Table*, 12.

⁷³ Chester, 47.

⁷⁴ Sweet, *From Tablet to Table*, 126.

them something to eat (Matthew 14:16).⁷⁵ At the table we tell another, “You belong. I see you. I want to know you. Families gather at the tables. You are invited to be a part of my family.” Relationships are the focus at the table, and relationships are the focus of God’s heart. We get back to our Father’s heart at the table.

At the table, reconciliation is made possible. In the upper room, when Jesus ate with his disciples, he was recreating those first days when Adam and Eve ate with God. Jesus said by his body, the bread, and by his blood, the wine, we could be reconciled to God. Each time we gather at the table, we are surrounded by broken people who have been battered and bruised in a broken world. Our culture promotes competition over grace. It spreads the lies of scarcity, which make us anxious to get ahead. Our hearts turn against one another. We hold grudges, envy others’ success, and protect ourselves at all costs. We become quick to anger and slow to forgive. A culture of shared meals, however, is a culture where grace is dished out every day.⁷⁶ We gather with the spouse who has disappointed us, and in the breaking of bread proclaim that we are still in this together. At the table, we share a cup of coffee with the friend who hurt us. As we get to the heart of the matter healing begins. We pass a piece of cake to the coworker who got the promotion we wanted and remember the truth. There is room enough for all of us to prosper. At the table fractured relationships are healed by the grace of Jesus, offered up each time the bread is broken and shared.

Even in secular contexts, the reconciling power of a shared meal is real. Leonard Sweet tells a great story about reconciliation at the table. Magic Johnson and Larry Bird

⁷⁵ Ibid., 138.

⁷⁶ Chester, 50.

were archcompetitors on the basketball court. As their rivalry grew over the years, so did their dislike for one another. When they were asked to do a commercial together for Converse shoes, Bird requested it be filmed at his farm in Indiana. They broke for lunch on that first day, and Bird's mother announced she had prepared a meal for everyone. They were all asked to come to the table. Larry Bird said, "It was at the table that I discovered Earvin Johnson. I never liked Magic Johnson very much. But Earvin I like, a lot. And Earvin didn't come out until I met him at Mom's table."⁷⁷ It is at the table where we finally slow down enough to see God's fingerprints on one another. Rivals and enemies experience the power of friendship at the table. In a culture that seems as divided as ever, it is urgent that the church gets people back to the table. I am convinced that we will not find healing without it.

The table is also where identity is formed as stories are shared that tell a new generation who they are, where they come from, to whom they belong, and to what they are called.⁷⁸ The meaning of one's life is discovered at the table. A Jewish child becomes an adult at age thirteen, when he or she is mitzvahed. By this point, the teenager has formed an identity based on the story learned at the table. The teen is ready to take on the world and explore other stories because he is well-grounded in the story of his people and his God. His sense of self already has a strong foundation because it has been carefully cultivated for the previous thirteen years at the table. When a Christian child enters adolescence, she is often told "now go find yourself."⁷⁹ This is a daunting task for a child

⁷⁷ Chester, 141.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 8.

⁷⁹ Sweet, *From Tablet to Table*, 55.

who has not been given even the most basic stories of identity and meaning. The broader culture is eager to tell our children who they should be. Marketers seek to capitalize on our children's confused identities for their own material gain. At the table, however, the family helps to develop a child's soul by passing on the stories that tell them who they really are.

At the table we become who we really are. The marginalized cease to be marginal. The lonely ceases to be alone. The alien finds his family. Strangers become friends. The church has replaced the table with programs, resolutions, and bylaws. It was the Pharisees who lived by their system of rules, exclusions, and laws. Jesus appeared and showed us how to live by grace, love, and inclusion of all. At the table we do not just accomplish another task of the church. We are not just feeding people. At the table we are joining hands with Jesus and his beloved children, building relationships, sharing stories, and making memories. At the table we become agents of healing, hosts that initiate belonging, storytellers who give the gift of identity, and family that unifies a broken people in a broken world. At the table, we create space for God's kingdom to come. Jesus compared the kingdom of heaven to going to a party where you do not have to prepare the food or clean up after it. If this is Jesus' picture of his kingdom, we should be sharing that image with the world. According to Jesus, the foretaste of what heaven will be like is found at the table.⁸⁰ Could there be a more convincing reason to get back to it?

⁸⁰ Sweet, *From Tablet to Table*, 138.

Bringing the Table Back to Belfair Community Church

Change the story, change the culture. At Belfair Community Church, we are learning the power of the table to change the story. Recall the story that opened this paper. During my first week at the church, Sunday's bulletin had the announcement in bold and all caps, **"URGENT! WE ARE OUT OF COFFEE CREAMER!!! BRING SOME NEXT WEEK OR WE WILL GO WITHOUT IT!!!"** There was a real perceived crisis that centered around the table. The message screamed out, there is not enough and that makes us very anxious. If there is not enough coffee creamer to go around, then what else is lacking? It was an overly anxious plea for coffee creamer, but it was so much more. It was the cry of a people who for too long have faced the realities of scarcity in relationships, in finances, in resources, and in time.

I asked the chair of the fellowship team if being low on coffee creamer was a recurring problem. She could not recall a time we did not have any. "It always shows up eventually," she remarked. Interesting. So why the anxious plea? "Because that's what they respond to!" was her response. It was my very first week, and already I wondered if we were really facing a problem of scarcity or if we had just become comfortable with the manipulation that accompanies the lies of scarcity. I feared a church that would utilize all caps and bold font over coffee creamer might not have any tools left to convey true urgency for the times we wanted to stress healing the sick and proclaiming the good news to the lost. If coffee creamer remained our crisis, then what bigger problems that were likely closer to God's heart might we be missing? And if we feared there was not going to be enough creamer for worship next week, how small had our image of God become? If God is small, then what of us? If the creator and sustainer of the cosmos cannot provide some coffee creamer, then how could we dare dream of providing a safe place for at risk

teenagers with dinner on the table every night? If God cannot provide creamer four days a month, could God really provide pizza four nights a week? You see, the coffee creamer crisis was about so much more than coffee creamer. It was about a church that had allowed the stories of scarcity to win the bulletin and win the day. It was time to start telling better stories. What better place to tell them than around the table with plenty of coffee and creamer to go around?

Almost immediately we began planning monthly potlucks after the worship service. The church had shared potluck meals years before, but they slowly faded away because people were not bringing enough food to go around. The older ladies were upset at the younger ladies for not doing their part, and the younger ladies were hurt that older ladies did not seem to remember the chaos that comes with just getting a family to church without adding a trip to the grocery on top of it. Rather than serving as a unifying event, potlucks had become a source of contention. This was an easy fix.

We decided that the church would provide the meat and main side dishes for the meal. Others could bring desserts and extra sides. This took the pressure off of the congregation, and those who found joy in the kitchen could share their joy with us. My one requirement when ordering the food was that we purposely ordered more than we knew we would need. There would be leftovers at every Belfair Community Church potluck going forward. The fellowship team worried that we could not afford to do that. I assured them that there are worse ways for a church to go broke than by feeding people. Even so, I told them I had a hunch God would provide as we took a risk to bless and honor our people with a good, sufficient meal. That first year of potlucks was a sight to behold. The same dozen people would rush to the front of the line and pile their plates so

high with fried chicken that the fellowship ladies broke out in a sweat, sure there would not be enough to go around. They would bark at them to put some back. Scarcity was still winning the day on both ends. Even though we had leftovers at the end of all of these meals, regardless of who took more than their share, the assurance that we could simply sit back, love our neighbor, and enjoy eating in the presence of Jesus was slower coming.

I do not know when it happened. It was gradual to be sure. But the theme of our potlucks has changed. There is no longer a rush of adults to be first in line. Only a few people still pile their plate with more chicken than they can possibly eat. Those who bring a dish do so out of love for the congregation and not obligation. Over time, one shared meal with leftovers at a time, we have been learning that the screams of scarcity might get us some creamer but taking a risk on generous hospitality and trusting the provision of an abundantly good God might actually give us back a spirit of family and enjoyment in the church.

From the potlucks, we have begun to incorporate food into every gathering. There have been seasons where I hosted a soup and story night in my home. Everyone was invited. Children and adults would gather around tables for a soup dinner, and as we ate we would tell stories around a certain theme. Some of the themes were stories about lessons learned in adolescence, stories about best friends, stories of growth through pain, and stories of victories and failures. On these nights people who had only ever worshipped in the same room now laughed and cried together. People found connections with each other that had never come up in their decades of attending church together. The story of scripture was coming to life in us as our stories connected us to one another and to our God. Belonging, intimacy, compassion, and grace were happening in that room.

We were eating together in the presence of God, and there was attention and love enough for everyone to be filled.

We started small groups in homes with the requirement that participants would share a meal at the table before anything else. Leaders were trained in hospitality, so all who came to their home experienced the blessing of being an honored guest. So many of the people at Belfair Community Church come from dysfunctional homes, and they carry with them significant pain from broken relationships. Some of them have experienced the power of being part of a loving family for the first time at a table in their small group. Some have been asked to share their story for the very first time in these gatherings. The world has told them they are too broken to be loved. At the table with their small groups, they have heard that they are too beautiful not to be loved.

The table even extends to our children and youth. When children come to Sunday School, they have a full breakfast buffet waiting for them. Before starting a lesson, we share a meal together and acknowledge that Jesus must love us very much to give us such good things to eat.

Mason County leads Washington state in high school dropout rates, poverty, and in depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts among teenagers. These are the young people in our own church and community. We could not ignore this. Belfair Community Church started a youth center. I will share more about that in chapter six, but one of its promises was to provide a home cooked meal for teens every night the center was open. These meals initially took place around a pool table covered with a large piece of plywood and a nice tablecloth. Four nights a week, at-risk teenagers gather around a real

table in a room filled with the aroma of a freshly made meal, surrounded by adults who loved them.

At this table we give God thanks. Then we share about our day. Those who come carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders have room to talk about it at the table. Those who are celebrating a good report card have a chorus of celebrations to join their own. At this table, teenagers who are growing up surrounded by the lies that tell them they are not impressive enough, lovable enough, or significant enough to have a hope and a future hear another story. At this table, they are part of a family. The church's table is trying to make up for the table that has been lost in these teenagers' homes. Sometimes it does not feel like it is enough to overcome the lies that threaten to take our young people down. Sometimes it feels like it is the very thing that has always been enough.

Over the past five years, the budget lines at Belfair Community Church have changed. Less money is going into programs and curriculum and more is going into food. We are starting to be known as a church that eats together. The same church that was begging for coffee creamer now provides a breakfast buffet for children. And these children are being raised in a church that tells a story of a God who must really love us a lot to take such good care of us. They are picking up on this story really quickly. Following behind are the adults who just keep taking home leftovers. At the table, we are discovering that in Christ we are loved enough, good and beautiful enough, worthy enough, and embraced enough to go from the table and take some risks on participating in God's abundant grace in a world that still is not convinced there is enough of that grace to go around. At the table, we eat with our brothers and sisters in the presence of

God. The people of Belfair Community Church are challenging the mindset of scarcity and embracing the life of abundance as we keep gathering at the table.

CHAPTER 6:

CHANGE THE STORY. CHANGE THE CULTURE.

GOD’S STORY INCARNATED BY ENGAGING IN RISKY MISSION

We can tell God’s story in a way that helps people better connect with it, but I am learning that a culture will not really change until that story is incarnated—put into action in the lives of the people. God’s story reached its climax when Jesus took on flesh and moved into the neighborhood (John 1:14 MSG). His life among us showed the abundant way to live. It was not based on comfort or material resources but, rather, on love poured out through relationships, service, sacrifice, and faithfulness. In the Incarnation, Jesus lived the abundant life, and each step of the way, he invited disciples to do as he was doing (John 13:15). As disciples in our own time and place, people still need real opportunities to incorporate Christ’s new, better story in their daily lives if their culture is ever to change. This chapter examines how engaging in risky mission is leading the people of Belfair Community Church to incarnate God’s story, and in turn, is moving us away from a mindset of scarcity and into lives of true abundance.

A Tale of Two Towns

First, I want to show how the presence and absence of a clear mission led to different realities for two small Washington towns. The community without a shared mission lives in the scarcity mindset, while the one with a clear communal mission flourishes both economically and relationally.

In recent years Leavenworth, WA has earned the title of “Christmastown, USA.” All of the buildings downtown are constructed to look like a Bavarian village, and on weekends in December the whole town comes together for the Christmas tree lighting. Community members take on the roles of Santa Claus and Father Christmas, greeting children with cider and cocoa as they break from sledding. The shops turn their usual merchandise into Christmas décor where one can find hand painted nutcrackers, Turkish delight, and nativity sets from around the world. During the Christmas season this quaint town of 2,000 sees over one million visitors. Leavenworth is thriving. The average tourist making their way through the jam-packed town square might be surprised to learn that Leavenworth was once just a couple of buildings shy of becoming a ghost town. Consider the backstory.

Settlers arrived in Leavenworth at the end of the 19th century. In 1885, the Great Northern Railway Company laid its tracks there. The economy boomed in response. Unfortunately, in the 1920s the sawmill, which was the headquarters of Leavenworth’s thriving logging industry, was closed and the GNR moved its main operations to a town twenty miles away. The Great Depression followed in the 1930s, leaving Leavenworth with more than twenty empty storefronts along its two-block commercial district. Leavenworth was dying.¹

Shelton, the county seat of Belfair’s Mason County, was also a thriving community. Its glory days were more recent. With the close of WWII, the victorious warriors returned to civilian life looking for what they had imagined while away at war: a

¹ “History of Leavenworth,” Accidental Bavarian, accessed March 4, 2020, <http://www.accidentalbavarian.com/History.php>.

life with steady jobs, families, and affordable homes. President Franklin D. Roosevelt had arranged to use the nation's natural resources to create massive job programs. This resulted in what was called the *sustained yield initiative*. Federal forests would be used to create jobs and stabilize communities. The agreement was that the Simpson Logging Company would be given a great deal of the Olympic National Forest acreage, so long as they cut 100 million board feet annually, processed 80 percent of the logs in the Shelton area, and employed 1,000 people for 100 years. The sustained yield initiative took effect on December 12, 1946.²

Over the next forty years, Shelton was a thriving community. Simpson employed a diverse group of veterans, college graduates, and local loggers. The company reflected the spirit of postwar optimism that believed America could solve any problem with science. The town began holding annual festivals to celebrate logging. Simpson even saw to the social needs of the community. The logging company sponsored bowling leagues, pinochle clubs, fishing derbies, and camps. As new employees and their families flocked to Shelton, new schools, parks, churches, and stores were erected. "These abrupt social and economic changes transformed Mason County into a modern, industrial forestry community."³ By 1950, Shelton's population was over 5,000 and 65 percent of residents owned their homes. The community was tight-knit, proud of their shared identity, and successful. They shipped out more Christmas trees every year than any other town.

² Michael Fredson, *Logging in Mason County 1946-1985*, (Charlston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2015), 8.

³ *Ibid.*

People entering Shelton today are still greeted by the sign, “Welcome to Christmastown, USA.”

In the 1960s, however, a new generation arose that was skeptical of national policies on a variety of issues including United States Forest Service policies. Initiatives were passed that granted outdoor recreation the same priority as timber production. Simpson Logging Company began outsourcing to California and Chile, reducing the company’s reliance on Shelton. Added to that, the spotted-owl controversy led to cumbersome legal challenges and delays in logging.⁴ By December 1974, Simpson had closed its major plants and mills in Shelton. In 1984, the local unemployment rate had jumped to 15.9 percent, and many of the remaining Simpson operations shut down in 1985.⁵ Shelton was dying.

In the early 1960s, business leaders in Leavenworth saw their town on the brink of extinction and they met together to come up with a plan. They decided to try something drastic. They would give the entire community a new identity and culture. They would change the look of the town to resemble a Bavarian village. The whole town

⁴ “For hundreds of years, a dark-brown owl with white spots has made its home in the lush, "old-growth" forests of the Pacific Northwest. But the towering cedars, firs, hemlocks, and spruces which have served as the owl's habitat, also have become a primary source of timber for a multi-billion-dollar logging industry. Over the last 150 years, as a result of heavy logging, these ancient forests have dwindled. Only about 10% of the forests remain, most on federally owned lands. And as the forests have dwindled, so too has the number of spotted owls.

In 1986, a worried environmentalist group petitioned the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to list the owl as an "endangered species," a move that would bar the timber industry from clearing these lands. In June 1990, after years of heated negotiation and litigation between the government, environmentalists, and the timber industry, the northern spotted owl was declared a threatened species. Under this provision, timber companies are required to leave at least 40% of the old-growth forests intact within a 1.3 mile radius of any spotted owl nest or activity site, a provision that is vehemently opposed by the timber industry.”

<https://www.scu.edu/environmental-ethics/resources/ethics-and-the-environment-the-spotted-owl/>

⁵ Fredson, 10.

agreed to participate in bringing this vision to life. Besides the complete renovation of the downtown area, community members worked together to plan festivals that would draw visitors throughout the year. A whole community, on mission together, saw the once dying Leavenworth become one of the top tourist destinations of the Pacific Northwest.⁶

What has happened in Shelton since 1985? It's a more difficult story to tell. There has not been one overarching community movement to reimagine and recreate a new identity. Terri Drexler, a county commissioner in Mason County from 2009-2018, moved to Shelton in 1986 when "people were still licking their wounds." She came to raise her children in a quiet community but was not expecting there to be such a heavy, depressed feeling all around. Neighborhoods were declining, and the stores in town were slowly disappearing. She remembers the sadness in Shelton on the day JCPenney closed, followed by the roller rink. The signs of a once vibrant community were quickly fading. Those who did not leave for other jobs, stayed with heavy hearts lamenting all that was lost. Shelton was hurting, and in their despair they could only see all that was lost.

Terri reflected on her days as county commissioner. Her big "aha" moment came when she saw how the business owners who had stuck around after the collapse responded to newcomers. They wanted nothing to do with them. As new people with fresh ideas moved in, the local businesses refused to help them. Terri tried to encourage shared marketing ideas and basic community support. They were not having it. They did not trust anyone enough to work together, and they were holding on so tightly to the few customers they had that they were threatened by any competition. She remembers how impossible it felt trying to change this mindset to encourage a spirit of cooperation. They

⁶ "History," Enzian Inn, accessed May 4, 2020, <https://enzianinn.com/history/>

preferred to sit back and watch new businesses try to make it, secretly hoping they would fail just as they themselves were failing.

But nothing breathed fresh air and new life into Mason County like the new people, with creative ideas who would keep pushing forward no matter how hard the community leaders pushed against them. Drexler senses the heaviness is finally starting to lift as more new people are moving in and sticking with the community long enough to try something different. She credits outsiders for bringing hope into Shelton. In reflecting on a new restaurant owner, she said, “He’s here because he believes in this community. He says they don’t believe in themselves, but he is going to believe for them.” It is outsiders who are rewriting a story that is slowly healing a hurting community. Outsiders are bringing a sense of mission into Shelton, taking a risk on starting something new in a town that needs them. Their willingness to engage in risky endeavors for the people of Shelton is slowly changing the mindset of an entire community. This past Christmas, a new resident and business owner in Shelton put together a huge project which got Shelton in the record books for the most lit Christmas trees in one place at one time. An outsider with a vision for what could be and a willingness to stay on mission until the vision became a reality got Shelton back that name that once gave it so much pride:

Christmastown, USA.

Two different communities faced one similar crisis. The industry that fueled their economy and sense of community disappeared. They would have to figure out a new way of life together when there were no longer enough jobs to go around. One community used its problem of scarcity, the loss of one huge resource, to notice what other resources were in their midst. It was the removal of the logging industry that opened business

leaders' eyes to the mountains and rivers, and to the vision of a tourist destination that local families could work together to create and sustain. It took the community dreaming together, working together, and changing their own lives and careers together to see their new vision come to be. They were all taking a risk on this new story together. The community of Leavenworth is stronger than ever because its great crisis invited its people to imagine something better and then to become the keys players in this dream becoming reality.

I have yet to hear a story of any one leader who rose up in Shelton in the 1980s and 1990s when the town most needed a vision of hope for what might be. One newspaper article said that, in the absence of vision, the logging industry in Shelton has been replaced by the marijuana industry.⁷ Terri Drexler says there really is not one thing that holds the community together. Some unite over the beauty of the place. Others unite over smaller jobs and schools. But when leaders like Terri have tried to encourage development and growth, it has been consistently shut down. There is a fear of change, a distrust of leaders, and a slow warming up to newcomers who bring new ideas with them. When Shelton faced its crisis, the immediate response was despair and holding on tightly to what little remained. This has prolonged the pain and slowed the healing.

I wonder what might have happened in Shelton thirty years ago if a group of leaders in the community refused to write off the whole town's future along with the logging industry. Shelton is surrounded by mountains just as beautiful as those in Leavenworth. It is on the Puget Sound with ample opportunities for industry and

⁷ "Marijuana's Boost in City Where Timber Was King," King 5 News, August 1, 2017, <https://www.king5.com/article/news/local/marijuanas-boost-in-city-where-timber-was-king/460983159>.

recreation. Shelton was once a vibrant logging town, but surely there is still more it can be. The leaders in Leavenworth were able to bring the whole town together around a new vision, one that would require them all playing their part to see it come to fruition. Their mutual risk led to a shared new life. Engaging in mission completely transformed this community's culture in just a few years. Is it too late for Mason County to come together around a new, shared vision that calls for full participation? Is it wishful thinking to hope that a people who have settled into a mindset of despair might actually find the energy and desire to be a part of something new? Could the two hundred or so people who make up Belfair Community Church be the beginning of an entire community stepping into mission and taking the first steps into a new, better future? That is the hope that drives the rest of this chapter and inspires the crux of my ministry here.

Risky Mission in the Scripture Story

Throughout the Scripture story when God wants to change the way an individual or group understands their identity and purpose, God gives them meaningful, risky work to do. It starts in Genesis 12 when God calls Abram to leave his home and family and start a new life in a place God will show him. Leaving all that is known for an unknown future is risky, but it is the first step in Abram accepting his call to be the father of many and a blessing to all. God's people are changed as they take those first steps into risky mission.

In Exodus 3, Moses encounters God at the burning bush. He is hiding out in the wilderness of Midian quietly watching after his father-in-law's sheep, hoping to stay off of Pharaoh's radar. When God speaks, however, Moses learns his true purpose. He will

be the leader of Israel; the one who will go straight to Pharaoh and demand freedom for the slaves. God shows the timid, insecure Moses who he is by giving him the riskiest mission of all: making demands of a ruthless king. Each time Moses approaches Pharaoh, his confidence in God's calling grows. By the tenth visit Moses is ready to lead his people out of Egypt. The way Moses views God and himself is totally transformed as he joins God in risky mission.

Risky mission is the theme of the Israelites journey to the promised land. They have to flee from Egypt at a second's notice, rushing into the wilderness with an Egyptian army at their back. That leads them to a dead end in the form of the Red Sea. When the waters part, the people must move forward trusting God will hold the walls of water back until they make it safely to the other side. Their arrival on the other side of the sea is just the beginning of more danger. The people wander in a wilderness with no food or water. They wake up each morning with only one hope; that God will provide again. It took forty years of this new life for Israel to finally believe they are who God said they are: God's chosen people and treasured possession. The entire nation is changed as they walk with God across a sea and around a barren desert, giving their lives daily to risky trust and obedience. When it is time to enjoy their new home, they finally believe they are more than just slaves. They are the beloved children of God. Participating in God's risky mission got them there.

The boy David dares to join God's work by standing up to the Philistine giant, Goliath. When the mighty warrior falls, David and those around him see hints of what is true. This boy is set apart to be a king. David begins to believe his true identity as he engages in a risky battle with God by his side.

Risky mission continues in the New Testament. Jesus passes by a few young fishermen. Peter, Andrew, James, and John are all carrying on their fathers' businesses. The course of their lives is more or less set for them, but Jesus has other plans. "Come follow me," he says, "and I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19). These four leave their families and trades because a rabbi sees them, chooses them, and invites them into a new, risky mission. Their lives have a purpose greater than they imagined, and they discover it by leaving everything behind and following Jesus wherever he might take them.

In Luke 10, Jesus sends seventy disciples out on their first mission without him. They are warned that they are being sent like "lambs in the midst of wolves" (Luke 10:3). That sounds risky. To make matters more intense, the disciples are instructed not to carry any bags or extra clothing and to stay in whichever home they are welcomed into first. They are going out into the world with good news to share and a whole lot of danger to overcome in the process. The seventy return from their mission ecstatic. "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!" (vs. 17). They realized what power God had given them when they engaged in risky mission for Jesus.

In Acts 4, Peter and John are arrested for proclaiming Jesus' resurrection from the dead. The authorities threaten them with future punishment if they refuse to be quiet about Jesus. The apostles tell the church about these threats, and the people pray for one thing. They do not ask God to take the danger away. They do not ask God to remove the element of risk that seems to accompany their new calling. Instead, the church only asks for the boldness they will need to keep spreading the good news of Jesus in a hostile environment. The same people who were huddled together in a locked room scared for

their lives just months before are now asking for courage to stay on mission. They no longer see themselves as orphaned followers of a crucified messiah but as emboldened witnesses to the resurrected Lord. Their entire identity was transformed as the apostles engaged in risky mission for Jesus.

These stories go on. I have chosen only a few to illuminate a common theme in Scripture. When God wants to transform a people from the inside out, God often does so by inviting them into risky mission. As they try something for God that they never could have imagined attempting on their own, they become someone new. They become who they were truly created to be.

A Church Engaged in Risky Mission

Almost every church can identify some way they engage in God's mission. As Christians gather, they remember they are called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matthew 5:13-16). Many can quote Jesus' final command in the Great Commission: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). Most Christians are familiar with the Apostle Paul's plea in Romans 10:14-15:

"How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? ¹⁵ And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

The church knows that it is called to share the good news of the resurrected Jesus with those who have not yet heard or believed. The church is called to participate in God's coming kingdom in every location and in every generation. One would be hard pressed to

find a Christian church that claimed to have little or no interest in being a part of God's mission on earth. That is because most Christians know that participating in mission is a fundamental part of the church's identity and purpose, and thus, of their own identity and purpose too.

Even still, many churches view mission as just one of the things they do, rather than seeing it as a descriptor of who they actually are. The church is not just called to *do* mission, the church is called to *be* missional. Missions is often one line in the church's budget, and a specific minister and team are responsible for choosing the church's mission projects. The majority of church members remain unengaged.

If God changes people as God invites them into risky mission, then the people of Belfair Community Church need more than a creative mission team. We need more than a few more dollars in the mission budget. A people who are moving away from a mindset of scarcity and embracing the God of abundance need to heed their own invitation to join God on risky mission. The whole church, and everything the church does, must be missional. What, then, are the marks of a missional church?

Darrell L. Guder offers an important word to begin this conversation. He proposes that modern biblical scholarship views mission not as an activity of the church, but as a result of God's initiative. God is the one moving to restore and heal creation. Mission is God's working out these purposes on earth. Guder traces God's mission in these terms, beginning when God calls Israel to receive God's blessing in order to be a blessing to the nations. God's mission unfolds in the histories of God's people over the centuries recorded in the Old Testament, and it reaches its climax in the incarnation, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. God's mission continues today in the witness of

churches, and it will move forward through the churches until God's final salvation of all things in the eschaton. God is a missionary God, and the church is comprised of sent people.⁸ Just as the Father sent the Son, and the Father and Son sent the Holy Spirit, so the Holy Trinity sends the church into the world.⁹ "The church [has been] redefined as the community spawned by the mission of God and gathered up into that mission."¹⁰ Mission is not just one thing that some people in the church do. It is everything the church is about. Jesus left his disciples with these words, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (John 20:21). Jesus was sent with three main tasks to accomplish before his crucifixion and resurrection: preaching, teaching, and healing.¹¹ The church lives into its apostolic, *sent*, calling when it embodies Jesus' ministry and patterns its actions after Jesus' mission; preaching, teaching, and healing in Jesus' name.

A Missional Church Pays Attention to What God Is Already Doing

There are a number of ways a church gets back to its original calling of being the sent people of God. In his book *Nudge: Awakening Each Other to the God Who's Already There*, Leonard Sweet challenges the church to view evangelism less as convincing the unbeliever that they are missing God, and more as an opportunity to

⁸ Darrell L. Guder, *The Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1998), 4.

⁹ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 390.

¹⁰ Guder, 81.

¹¹ Guder directs us to these texts for examples on Jesus' preaching, teaching, and healing ministry: "Many of the Gospel writers summary statements name all three of these activities (Matthew 4:23; 9:35), and other passages include two of the three (Mark 1:39; Matthew 4:24-5:2; Luke 6:6-11, 17-19)." Guder, 133.

uncover the image of God that is already in each and every one.¹² In order to do this, the church must learn how to pay attention. We remember that God is present in every person and place, and God's kingdom is near. The church leads the way in seeing, hearing, tasting, feeling, and touching God's presence, so we might then nudge others to experience God too. Each day, the people of God are called to wake up with a sense of wonder, knowing God is on the move and curious about how to join in what God is already doing. The church comes back to its missional calling when it slows down, quiets down, and pays attention to how God is revealing himself in the lives of others and in our communities.¹³ The missional church pays attention to the heartbeat and footsteps of God, and simply seeks to join in what God is already doing.

A Missional Church Is Deeply Committed to Its Zip Code

On the day that the church was born, the gospel was heard in the native tongues of every person gathered in that place (Acts 2:1-12). Since its inception, the church has been tasked with translating the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection so the surrounding culture can understand it, while simultaneously helping believers in every context move toward their new life and identity as God's missional people.¹⁴ Every church exists in the midst of a surrounding culture. Churches are called to both engage these cultures while taking care not to become controlled by them.

¹² Leonard Sweet, *Nudge: Awakening Each Other to the God Who's Already There*, (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2010), 29.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 46, 54.

¹⁴ Guder, 114.

Karl Vaters is a small church pastor who believes small churches can have a big kingdom impact as they focus less on imitating larger, better known churches and focus more on their unique kingdom opportunities in their own context and culture. He has led the small churches he has pastored to adopt two ideas early on: they would not see other churches as competition, and they would not try to be smaller versions of the larger churches around. Instead, the church would discern what they could do that no one else was doing, and then they would do it well. Vaters reflects on times his congregation began something significant in their community, only to see another church pick up the same idea and do it even better. At that point, he says, they realized their time with that ministry was done, so they would start looking for other areas of need that no one else was filling. The churches came to understand their unique identity in their contexts as such: “We’re starters. When others pick it up, we leave it to them and move on. It’s not that we have to be original and cool . . . We aren’t more creative than others, we just don’t see the need to duplicate what others in the neighborhood are already doing. One of the advantages of being small is that we can start and stop ministries quickly.”¹⁵

Whether small or large, missional churches are comfortable in their own skin. They realize their unique personality and giftedness is for the purpose of joining God in specific ways in their own zip code. They understand the culture around them and look for ways to celebrate what is good and bless others who are seeking the welfare of the community, all while participating in their own unique expression of God’s kingdom coming to their corner of this earth. Vaters gives this great word for leading a church not just to do mission projects but to be missional: “Ask yourself what makes you (and your

¹⁵ Karl Vaters, *The Grasshopper Myth: Big Churches, Small Churches, and the Small Thinking that Divides Us*, (New Small Church, 2012), 95.

church) come alive, and go do that, because what the world needs are more people that have come alive.”¹⁶ Missional churches are full of missional people who are choosing the life that really is life in their own context.

A Missional Church Possesses the Six Elements of Apostolic Genius

Alan Hirsch believes there is a hidden power in all of God’s people that is just waiting to be unleashed. It is a power that was built into the original DNA of the church, put there by the Holy Spirit. This is a power that has often suffered under abuse or neglect, but which emerges during certain seasons of the church’s life, such as persecution. If the American church can tap into this hidden power again, it will have all it needs to propel itself into the twenty second century and beyond.¹⁷ Hirsch sees this power at work in the persecuted house church movement in China. What is happening there mirrors much of what drove the early Christian movement. Christians in both of these contexts discovered their truest nature as apostolic- that is, as *sent-* people. When they realized their true identity, they moved forth in the world with the full power and conviction of the Holy Spirit. Hirsch is convinced that the American church can learn from our ancestors and from Chinese brothers and sisters. As they help us remember our apostolic identity, we can unleash the power that is already within us to change the world with Jesus.

¹⁶ Vaters, 105.

¹⁷ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 1.

Hirsch has sought to identify the quintessential elements that work together to create “apostolic genius.” These are the “absolutely irreducible components that are common to *every* Jesus movement that experienced exponential growth and had a transformative impact on society.”¹⁸ There are six marks of a church that is living into its identity and calling as the sent people of God.

First, at the center of every Jesus movement is the confession that Jesus is Lord. Apostolic Genius is centered on the lordship of Jesus Christ, and this core conviction is felt throughout the movement.¹⁹ The persecuted church is often driven underground and forced to adopt a more cell-like structure that relies on trusted relational networks to spread the message. In such times, the message must be condensed to just what keeps the people faithful and hopeful. When unnecessary complexities are let go, a miracle often happens. The people rediscover the power of their core message, and a movement is born. “Faith is once again linked in utter simplicity to Jesus.”²⁰

Second, Jesus movements that change the world focus on making disciples. This means the people in the movement are engaged in the lifelong task of actually becoming like Jesus by embodying the message of Jesus. Disciple making is a core function of the church, and everyone participates in it, not just those who are new to the faith. In seeking to grow the church, American churches have too often tried to make the gospel high on attraction and low on commitment. We have forgotten that the heart of discipleship is to actually become like Jesus. Jesus’ mission strategy on earth was to get countless little

¹⁸ Hirsch, 12.

¹⁹ Ibid., 90.

²⁰ Ibid., 91.

versions of himself filling every square inch of society.²¹ This is a call for full participation, full commitment, and total surrender.

Third, churches that are coming alive to the power of the Spirit within them have a missional-incarnational impulse. They cast their nets far and wide to reach as many people as possible, while also focusing on the deep formation of those who come. The missional impulse follows after the *Missio Dei*, the heart of the sending God of whom Jesus says, “As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you” (John 20:21). At our core, we are a missionary people. God’s mission compels the church to look beyond itself and move into a lost world.²² Furthermore, in the incarnation Jesus is for us the human image of God. He reveals to us how God wants us to live. In the incarnation, God chose through Jesus to be present with us, near to us, vulnerable with us, and truth telling for us.²³ The church follows Christ in incarnational ministry by living faithfully with our neighbors, by being genuine and humble toward them, by suffering on their behalf, and by speaking the truth in ways they can truly understand. The missional church is sent in the Spirit of God to live in the world in the ways of Jesus.²⁴

Fourth, Jesus movements always have within them an element of liminality and *communitas*. In this point, Hirsch recognizes how the most vigorous forms of community have come together in the context of a shared crisis where people in the group identify being part of a mission larger than their own survival. They have entered into a risky

²¹ Hirsch, 120.

²² Ibid., 137-139.

²³ Ibid., 142-143.

²⁴ Ibid., 149.

journey together. Liminality occurs when a person or group experiences disorientation, marginalization, danger, or humiliation that moves them out of their comfort zones and into unfamiliar territory. The American church's concern with safety, security, and comfort has too often numbed the missional impulse within us. In fact, Hirsch warns that "refusal to engage in essential risk leads to a fearful neurosis and the decline of living systems."²⁵ Christian communities that are actively moving with Jesus in this world overcome their instincts to "huddle and cuddle" and, instead, link arms and take off on a dangerous journey to unknown places. In these places, the church finally encounters the power of God and love of one another in a whole new way. There is a unique experience that only happens when a group of people become inspired with a vision of a better world, and they actually set out together to do something about it.²⁶

Missional churches also have "APEST" cultures: the active presence of the apostolic, prophetic, evangelistic, shepherding, and teaching functions in every congregation. Hirsch believes that the biggest missing link in awakening the American church to its missional identity is the apostolic ministry. The apostle is the one who is most responsible for leading the church into its "sentness." When the apostolic role is excluded the church's priority in being a missionary people typically goes away with it. The person in the apostolic role continually summons the church back to its essential calling as a missionary people, making sure that every function of the church speaks a transformative message to the world.²⁷ We have many teachers and preachers, and

²⁵ Hirsch, 164.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 189, 191.

shepherds and evangelists in the American church today, but where have all the apostles gone?

Finally, Jesus movements come out of organic systems. These powerful movements are not hindered by centralized institutions that slow the movement of the Holy Spirit who breathes where, when, and how it wants to breathe. Movements are living, responsive, adaptive, and always growing.²⁸ Missional movements are comprised of people who really believe their message and believe they are the ones actually responsible for sharing it, even if the sharing comes at great cost to themselves.²⁹ Because of their simple, compelling nature, movements quickly excite and enlist others to join in the mission.

Belfair Community Church Engaging in Risky Mission

Change the story, change the culture. At Belfair Community Church we are doing more than just changing how we tell the story. We are practicing the art of incarnating the story of Jesus. We are becoming real participants in that story as we engage in risky mission. It is one thing for a people entrenched in a scarcity mindset to say they believe God is a good provider. It is another thing for those people to take only enough manna for themselves, while leaving the rest for their neighbors, trusting there will be more tomorrow. It is one thing for Christians to sit in their comfortable pews and affirm a belief in a Good Shepherd Jesus who lays down his life for his sheep. It is another thing

²⁸ Hirsch, 225.

²⁹ Ibid., 237.

for those same Christians to go on an adventure with Jesus, in the places wolves and thieves may lurk, trusting that Jesus will lead them and protect them along the way. Over the past two years, I have found that preaching more interactive, participatory sermons and inviting people back to the table and into the stories shared around it are really just the preparation work for this final step in transformation. The people of God finally, fully grasp what it means to live in the abundance of God when they take all the stories they are hearing and put them into action. At Belfair Community Church, the people are moving out of a mindset of scarcity and into a living abundance as we engage in risky mission together with our God.

When I arrived at the church five years ago, I was thrilled to hear about a special endowment fund that was given to BCC fifteen years ago with the requirement that the interest from the principal payment be used for outreach each year. That meant that a church running on a \$150,000 annual budget was able to dream about how to use around \$20,000 every year to share the love of Jesus with our community. This gift could be such a game changer for a church of our size. I was shocked to discover that in the previous decade the money from that fund had gone largely untouched with the exception of a handful of scholarships to help send some children to summer camp. Every January there sat \$20,000 with the open invitation to use it to share the good news of Jesus in Belfair, and every December there sat \$15,000 untouched. Our community is one with incredible need. The churches in town only attract a tiny portion of the population. Belfair is a struggling community where most families walk through their trials totally apart from the hope of Christ. How could we let \$15,000 that was meant to bless them go unused year after year? The lack of mission at BCC was not due to a lack of resources.

The money was there. The lack of mission did not amount to a lack of need. Our town was in its darkest days. The lack of mission stemmed from a lack of identity and vision. The people had forgotten that the story of the God who moves in ordinary places, through ordinary people, to do extraordinary things was still their story. My goal in my first year was to come to December 31 without a cent left in the 2015 outreach fund. The money would come again in 2016. We were going to pray, dream, take risks, and get our hands dirty in 2015 living out the story of Jesus in our own zip code.

We started with a change to all church business meetings. When anyone would gather for church business rather than the obligatory prayer and short devotion to start the meeting, we would spend the first half of the gathering in prayer and conversation. The questions around the table were always these: “What do you see God doing at BCC and in Belfair in this season? How are we celebrating that, and how are joining it?” Then, “What are some blind spots in our church or community that you sense God cares about but that no one seems to be attending to?” Church leaders came to expect these questions, and so they began to walk through the church and town with eyes wide open. They would engage God in between meetings. “So God, what *are* you doing? What do you *want* to be doing?” We would get to the topics of budget items and facilities eventually, but not before we remembered our essential calling to pay attention to God’s heart and join in God’s dreams.

When I arrived at BCC, the youth ministry had not met for two years. We tried starting it back up on Wednesday evenings with a simple gathering in a room that was filled with donated couches, broken table games, and stained carpet. Even though the setting was less than inviting, teenagers came. In that first year, the youth group grew

from two students to forty. They were a rambunctious group of kids, most of whom had never stepped foot in a church. Many came from poverty and addiction-stricken homes, and they were all but raising themselves. The few adults that were helping in the youth ministry sensed God's presence as we ministered to the teens, but we were all completely overwhelmed. These students had incredible needs, little respect, and the couple of hours we had together often felt more like managing chaos than really sharing good news. We were sure we had already jumped into the deep end with God. Little did we know, God was inviting us into more.

We took thirty of these teenagers to summer camp after that first year of youth ministry. During that week many of them opened up about the pain in their lives. I heard so many say, "I want to believe that God loves me, but if God does then why . . .", and they would proceed to fill in the blank with their own stories of neglect and abuse. On the last night of camp, God spoke to my heart on behalf of these students. God showed me that two hours a week was not enough for the teenagers of Belfair. These students needed to see what God's love actually looks like. God gave me a vision of a house at dusk with the porch light on, the door unlocked, and inside the table was set. As the students entered, family was ready for them. Everyone knew their names, embraced them, and engaged them. They showed them to their place at the table.

I came back to Belfair that week and began sharing this vision with our youth leaders. These people were already stepping out of their comfort zones on Wednesday nights, and here I was telling them that I thought God was calling us to create a youth center. It would be open four nights a week, and every night a homemade dinner would be served, mentors would be in place to help with homework or just to listen, and each

youth would be celebrated. In that place we would worship, play, learn, and simply be at home together. I knew the questions that would come. How does a church like ours find enough volunteers for four nights a week? How can we afford to feed kids four nights a week? What about insurance? Can we even afford to renovate the space for them? All of those questions were asked, but right with them came more stories. We did some research on Mason County and learned that our county is one of Washington state's poorest, with one of the highest high school dropout rates. We learned that sixty percent of Mason County teenagers say they struggle with anxiety and depression, and that one in four sophomores have considered suicide. These were our children, and they were calling to us for help. With the vision of a home and the call to incarnate God's love story, over twenty people in the church eagerly signed up for a night to be with the youth. Different ministry teams and community groups volunteered meals. It turned out everyone wanted in on this risky new way of engaging the Jesus story together. We knew it was bigger than our budget and membership base could handle. We also knew it was a calling from God to trust his heart and move as he was moving.

The youth center continues to be open more nights a week than it is closed. The chaos of Wednesday nights has been transformed into smaller family-like groups where students are deeply known, seen and listened to in a safe, unhurried space. Entire families of some of these students have become active parts of the church. Generational struggles are being overcome because BCC chooses to care deeply for students. Last fall we sent our first youth to college. She was in the high-risk category coming from a poverty-stricken single parent home. The mentors worked together to advocate for her, keep her moving along in the admissions process, find scholarships, and send her off with a

carload of things she would need for her first dormitory room. The people of Belfair Community Church are on the front lines of God's transforming work in the lives of our teenagers, and in the process our own lives are being transformed too. The scarcity mindset would never let us try such a risky endeavor. It would warn us of running out of money, energy, or volunteers. The abundant life tells us there are worse ways to go bankrupt than by pouring into children, and odds are, following after the heart of Jesus, we will not go bankrupt at all. The people are changing as they live into the story through risky mission with God.

The church is constantly doing smaller but equally generous things to show the people of Belfair that there is a God who really does love them. Each Christmas we bless four local coffee stands with \$1,000 plus gratuity and a box full of coffee sleeves that simply say, "For God so loved the world. Merry Christmas from Belfair Community Church." On a surprise day in December, anyone who goes to the coffee stand gets a little gift of free coffee with a simple message of God's love. We do not try to sell them on coming to a church service but simply hope that they encounter the Jesus who finds them as they run their errands or drive to work. We are remembering that the missional church finds people where they are. Last Christmas each participant in worship received an envelope with a \$10 bill inside of it and a simple message on the outside about the gift of Christ at Christmas and the desire for this small gift to be an affirmation of God's love. The congregation was challenged to carry these envelopes with them during Advent, asking God to show them how to share it. The stories that came back were transformative. So many said that it was the first time in their lives that they walked through their workplace or the grocery store with a spirit of expectancy, wondering if

God might actually be moving in that place and inviting them to join him. Many bought their own envelopes and keep them stuffed with a \$10 bill at all times, now in constant conversation with God about who they are being called to love. The church has moved out of the building, as it participates in the story of a God who comes to us.

Many things that were traditionally done inside the church have moved into neighborhoods. The church's tradition of an annual fall festival was moved from the parking lot to a park in Belfair's lowest income community. Summer picnics for church members have become neighborhood block parties. The goal of everything is not just to grow the church, but to point people to the heart of Jesus in all the places Jesus shows up.

Belfair has a large population of Guatemalan families who have fled the violence of their home country. While many in our own church face financial struggles, we realize that our Guatemalan brothers and sisters struggle even more. A few years ago, BCC found a need in our community that no one else was meeting. We had plenty of food banks and a great giving tree for families in need who were able and willing to sign up for it. The problem was that many of our Guatemalan families are undocumented, and thus, fear signing up for anything that might put them at risk of deportation. So, their children and teenagers were going without each Christmas, and their requests were for the most basic things; winter coats, gloves, pillows and blankets. Working with the ESL teacher at the school, Belfair Community Church members have dug deep into their pockets to provide these gifts for seventy Guatemalan families the last three years. These are not Christians giving out of their abundance, but people who love Jesus who are sacrificing some of their own Christmas needs to care for a pocket of our community that

no one else sees. We may go without the newest gadget on our list, but we find great joy in buying a warm coat for a teenage boy. This is the abundant life.

Part of the risk that comes with being on mission is experimenting with forms of outreach that may or may not work. We have tried many things in an effort to share God's heart that were not successful. One morning we bought several hundred donuts and had a free coffee and donut drive-thru for people heading to work. Only three cars stopped by, and we had hundreds of donuts left. There are a dozen other stories just like this one, but that is okay. We are learning that no gesture of love is a failure. In each one we get to learn more about the heart of Jesus and the needs of our community. So, we are free to try some out-of-the-box things, that may or may not be well received, knowing that the sent people of God just keep moving, learning, and blessing.

In the same way, the church is learning to use social media as an avenue for mission. At Easter we took the story of new life to the community via our town's Facebook page. We hosted a "signs of life photo challenge," in which we invited anyone in our zip code to snap a photo of something that showed the promised new life. The most likes on a photo would win, and the winner would get a \$100 gift card. In a town where relatively few people celebrate the risen Jesus, a hundred were going outside looking for life. The winner of the contest was a practicing Wiccan who snapped a beautiful picture of an owl. Who would have thought that the person pointing us to new life during Holy Week was a self-proclaimed witch! Even she participated in the Jesus story that week.

Finally, in this past year mission has looked different. During the COVID-19 pandemic all those lies of scarcity have tried to resurface. We fear there is not enough

safety, not enough money, not enough ways to be together, not enough energy to be creative, not enough courage to love our neighbors who might be sick. While we have sought to be good neighbors by moving with responsibility and care, we also have remembered to ask God what he is doing right now, and how we might join him.

Amongst a dozen smaller things, the most exciting way BCC has engaged the story in the pandemic has been through the church's willingness to use our facilities for homeschool pods. We put together a system that allows parents to be present with their child just once a week so they can continue to work. Children work in small teams together and enjoy recess and lunch in community. We also share a Bible story each day at lunch, and the children are working on their parts in a Christmas pageant. Many of them just heard the story of Jesus for the first time this year, and already they are becoming a part of that story. This is a season in which their lives are being transformed because the church made the intentional choice not to lock up and turn in during a pandemic, but instead, dared to ask God what needs were around us and how we might take the risk of our own health to step into that place.

CHAPTER SEVEN:

CONCLUSION

When I arrived at Belfair Community Church in August 2015, I found a church that was stuck in the lies of scarcity. Fears of not having enough led to cancelled potlucks, locked cupboards, defunded youth ministry, undercompensated staff, and much longer lists of prayer concerns than prayers answered. Dreams about blessing our community or reviving ministries for children were initially met with questions of how we would afford the cost or how we would find the volunteers. The lies of scarcity had led the church into survival mode. If we could just get enough coffee creamer to sustain the people for another week, we would call it a win.

In the first year some things quickly changed. Attendance and baptisms were increasing. Along with that came more money in the offering plate. We were able to do some much-needed renovations on the sanctuary and foyer. Things at Belfair Community Church looked different, sounded different, and they even felt different. But when I really listened the stories were not changing. So many people were still stuck on the stories of those who hurt them. They still came to my office each month in a panic, afraid that they were going to lose their marriages, their incomes, or their health. The coffee ladies still panicked each time the supplies got low. Things on the outside were changing quickly, but the deeper transformation of the heart was going to take more time and intentionality. We would be changing a culture in Belfair, and that takes more than a fresh coat of paint

and a new youth ministry. That takes a whole new way of seeing one's God, oneself, and one's world.

Among many multi-pronged approaches to challenging the mindset of scarcity at Belfair Community Church, I have focused most on the power of changing the story. Stories get to the heart, and when we tell better stories we invite hearts into better realities. Stories are not only spoken, they are lived and experienced. I have spent the last three years inviting the people of my church into a bigger, better, truer story. I have done that in three key ways.

I have been intentional about *how* I tell God's story. I have sought to move from primarily monological sermons to more interactive, participatory, dialogical sermons. The hope is for the congregation to not only hear the word of God, but to feel it, hold it, and begin to live it even before they leave the worship service. What happens on Sunday morning is just the beginning of the God story coming to life in the people of God. They go home with practical ways to let the story move from their heads to their hearts. Slowly but surely, this new way of telling the story is inviting the church into a new way of actually living into the story of the God who loves them, holds them, and provides abundantly for them.

The people of Belfair Community Church have also been invited back to the table. We were created for life in Christ-centered community. Whether it be a potluck table, a table in a small group member's home, or a repurposed pool table in the youth center, at every table we are telling one another that we all belong in this place. At the table people who live in a frantic society, slow down, listen to one another, and remember the presence of Christ who is with them in that sacred place. At the table, children are

learning their real identities. Youth are finding healing from too many meals already eaten alone. And adults are allowing themselves to be known for the first time. After the meal, there are always leftovers. Hearts are filled to overflowing, and as people carry their leftovers with them, they remember that what they experienced at God's table with God's people follows them home. There is love enough, time enough, and grace enough for everyone to belong in the family of God and room enough for everyone to eat in the presence of Jesus.

Finally, we are engaging in risky mission together. We cannot really trust God's abundant faithfulness until we put it to the test. Once we jump into a calling that is bigger than our budget, more demanding than our skill set, and more complicated than our wits, we are finally in a place to encounter God in all God's glory. It is there that God can multiply loaves of bread. It is there that God can give rest to his sheep who are on the front lines of healing a sick world. It is when we come to the end of ourselves that God can finally show us the full implications of what it means when we proclaim that the same power that raised Jesus from the dead is living in us. Too often we had waited until we had all the numbers figured out and all the volunteers accounted for before we tried any new way of sharing God's love with our world. More and more, we are daring to dream with God first, take the first steps in obeying, and then asking those questions later. We are realizing that when we faithfully jump in, the questions that used to keep us from moving now get answered before we even thought to ask them. As people engage in the risky mission of God, they encounter the goodness of God at every turn. They are planting their lives in the places God has revealed that he is most passionate about. It is

no surprise that we keep meeting God on that path of faithfully dreaming big and taking one step forward with him.

Change the story, change the culture. Change the culture, change the world. At Belfair Community Church we are changing the story of scarcity and remembering the truth of God's abundance. We are doing that by proclaiming the story in a way that demands participation, by embodying the story at the table with God's family, and by incarnating the story and engaging God and the world in risky mission. We are asking questions now that are much bigger than where we might find some coffee creamer. We are asking what God's biggest, most absurd and scandalous dreams for Belfair might be and how we might get to join God in those. It is fun being with people who are daring to dream forward.

At Belfair Community Church over the last three years we have been telling better stories, eating better meals, and engaging in better work. Day by day our hearts are being transformed and we are tasting and seeing that God is good. God is abundantly good.

APPENDIX A

Heidi Husted Armstrong
 October 2015
Reading Scripture in Community

Questions for engaging the text

Here are some relatively “simple” or non-technical questions to consider for engaging the text in community. Try to forget everything you already KNOW OR THINK about the text and just PAY ATTENTION...

- What “hits” you in the text—what do you SEE—what grabs your attention? What taps you on the shoulder? What gets **bolded** for you? What have you never seen before? (What do you find surprising, shocking, or maybe even offensive, in the text? What do you find confusing or elusive? What do you find challenging? What do you find comforting?)
- Does it feel like the text is connected—or disconnected—from your everyday life? In what ways?
- How does the text make you think or want to act differently?
- Can you imagine how others who are different than you might hear this text? What would they notice or think or feel about it? How might they act?
- If you had to preach from this text, what’s your sermon? What’s the GOOD NEWS in the text (explicit or implied)?

Beware of taming the text. Welcome its authority, power and mystery (it’s the Word of the Lord!) – but also don’t be afraid to ask, *What in the Sam Hill is going on here?*

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