

Old Testament Lesson—Genesis 4:2b-16

Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground. In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. The Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it." Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let us go out to the field." And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" And the Lord said, "What have you done? Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground! And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth." Cain said to the Lord, "My punishment is greater than I can bear! Today you have driven me away from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your face; I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me." Then the Lord said to him, "Not so! Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance." And the Lord put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him. Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord, and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

New Testament Lesson—Matthew 19:16-26

Then someone came to him and said, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments." He said to him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The young man said to him, "I have kept all these; what do I still lack?" Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions. Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astounded and said, "Then who can be saved?" But Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible."

“Be prepared.” That’s, of course, the Boy Scout motto. And so, as a former Boy Scout, I know the importance of being prepared. It is the lesson that has stuck with me the most over the years.

Those who know me best know that I'm a preparer—some might even argue an over-preparer. I know it's impossible to plan for every potential circumstance and contingency, but that doesn't stop me from trying. Trust me.

The truth is I feel most confident when I'm prepared—when I feel ready for anything and everything—when I've got a plan. I'm sure some of you can relate. And this is all well and good—until it's not—until it's taken too far.

I can tell you that, in the context of worship: Sometimes, when I'm too focused on crossing every "T" and dotting every "I" (and then doing it twice)—when I'm too focused on preparation, it leaves hardly any room for spontaneity, for flexibility, creativity, improvisation, and perhaps most importantly: it tends to leave less room for the Spirit to move in new and exciting and unexpected ways.

But there's a more practical way that over-preparation can go awry. And I think it's relatable to many of us.

Do you remember during the height of the pandemic (when we understood a lot less than we do now)—there were entire grocery store shelves completely emptied of certain items. You couldn't find hand sanitizer and toilet paper to save your life! Do you remember this?

People were scared. None of us knew what was coming—when it would end—what the future would hold. And so many of us took more than we really needed. Acting out of fear, we hoarded certain things. We thought only of ourselves and our own.

Again, acting from a place of scarcity, we acted selfishly. We stocked up and stocked up—hoping we would get to the store shelves before our neighbors—a rat race for essential products.

We just had our first snowfall of the season yesterday. Can you imagine if animals who store their food for the winter took everything away from other critters? Imagine a squirrel that gathered not only enough food for itself, but took every pecan and walnut from every tree within a square mile or so—so that other squirrels had to either travel farther for food or starve.

Now, let me be clear: I'm not judging or condemning anyone for reacting this way—especially to a set of unprecedented circumstances that was the nationwide lockdown. None of us knew what was going to happen. It was terrifying. It worsened people's depression and anxiety. I'm sure I, too, took more than I probably needed.

I'm just pointing out that these actions were rooted in fear—fear of the unknown and fear of running out. We saw only scarcity—and we saw it everywhere.

Yes, sometimes, our need to be and feel prepared can take a wrong turn. And sometimes, when that's the case, our fears can become louder than our compassion.

Today's, of course, Consecration Sunday. Today, we're invited to intentionally offer our whole selves to the Lord. And when we do so, we'll acknowledge our total dependence on God's grace and abundance—on God as Provider.

Make no mistake: Everything we "have" is a consequence of God's love—full stop. I'm starting to sound like a broken record, I know. But it's the truth: We are blessed to be a blessing to others.

From the earliest days of the Church, my friends, we showed our love by sharing our resources—sharing so that no one would be left out—so that none would be neglected. In those days, all possessions were held in common.

Of course, we live in a vastly different world today. Particularly in the United States, we have become so individualistic that even the idea—even the prospect of commonly held resources seems almost un-American. It feels somehow blasphemous to our national ethos.

And I don't like that feeling at all. In fact, I resent it. I mean, shouldn't it be a thoroughly American value that we protect and care for the most vulnerable—that the United States, with all its riches, gladly shares those abundant resources with the poorest among us?

Corporate profits, after all, are at a seventy-year high—a seventy-year high!

Shouldn't this great country go overboard in its efforts to lift up the orphan and the widow and the foreigner and the veteran? Clearly, we can afford it. In this nation, we can afford to be our brother's keeper.

How wonderful would it be if our reputation around the world was that America takes care of those who struggle. Yes, that country values their downtrodden as much as their billionaires. Yes, they strive for the common good in the United States.

But instead...despite our wealth...despite our enormous stockpiles, we operate through a lens of scarcity. We presume there isn't enough to go around. We live in fear of going without. Yes, we're great. But we could be so much greater.

Siblings in Christ, when we act out of fear—not only are we likely making a mistake, but we're probably not doing what's right. When we react from a place of scarcity, we're probably not doing the Christlike thing—not doing what God wills.

Friends, I believe we're being called to do something that, at least within the United States and Western world, seems very countercultural: to live and move from a perspective of abundance—to believe—to know there's enough to go around.

Now, I'm not suggesting that all of us act with reckless abandon as if we have limitless resources—as if we'll never exhaust what God's given us. That's not what it means to live abundantly.

But I *am* suggesting that we trust in God—trust that God has given us enough to go around. Because, when we're fair and equitable stewards of God's gifts (lo and behold!), we have enough.

The scarcity mindset tempts us into believing we have to hoard. It causes us to make decisions out of fear and hold on to our earthly treasures with a vise grip. We're less generous. We keep what's "ours" close to our chest. We hold back. We hold back.

Both stories from Scripture this morning give us a very different take on the same lesson. Both are a kind of cautionary tale about holding on too tightly to material possessions. When we're unwilling to part with our resources—when we're unwilling to share our treasures, things don't end well.

Remember: The first act of worship in the Bible is an offering—two offerings actually—coming from a pair of brothers, Cain and Abel.

You know the story. The Lord is pleased by Abel's gift, but doesn't accept Cain's. Then, out of anger and jealousy, Cain rises up against his brother and kills him. As punishment, Cain is driven out of his farmland and becomes a lifelong exile—forever shamed and without a home.

Unfortunately, we don't get a crystal-clear answer as to why God finds Abel's offering acceptable, but denies his brother the same satisfaction. As I see it, there are two prevailing theories here. Either Cain is somehow improperly motivated—perhaps giving out of fear rather than love—giving begrudgingly rather than gratefully.

Or (and I lean toward this one)—or, Cain is holding back. In other words, Cain doesn't give what he could—not as much as he could—doesn't offer the best of what he has, but holds back—probably out of fear. "This quality of crop doesn't come around often, after all!"—a familiar sense of scarcity lurking about even then.

And then there's Jesus' words to the young man asking about eternal life. The short, blunt conversation Christ has here is incredibly difficult for many of us to swallow—especially modern-day citizens of the United States who exalt the American dream's version of success: earning wealth and respect and a massive estate.

The young man's questions are sincere. By most accounts, he's a good person—certainly a person of faith. He's kept the commandments. And...it just so happens he has a ton of resources—possessions to which he's clearly become attached and doesn't want to part.

Yet, he wants to follow Jesus. He's on the right track. Just...one more thing to do. Jesus says if you want to follow me, sell all your possessions and give them to the poor. Then you'll be prepared.

At this point, we're told the young man goes away grieving—grieving—the thought of losing his stuff—his earthly treasures was just too much for him.

Because, when it came down to it, he just didn't trust Christ enough to fill that void—that place in his heart that he and we try to fill with stuff and money and stocks and toys.

When we're unwilling to share our earthly treasures, it doesn't end well.

But I want to close my message this morning with another lesson I'm hearing in both stories today. That lesson is simple. The good news of the gospel is that there is grace everywhere and for everyone. There is grace everywhere and for everyone—both for Cain and for this young, wealthy man.

Yes, even though Cain is justly punished by God, he's never abandoned by God—not even after committing the worst of sins. Even in Cain's exile, God blesses him with a sign of protection so that no one would dare seek vengeance on him—so that he needn't be afraid.

As for the young man, well, it turns out he left Jesus' presence too soon. Christ uses the man's love of possessions as a teachable moment for his disciples. "Do you see what becomes of us when we love money and earthly treasures? It's easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye than for a rich person to enter God's Kingdom"

The disciples are a bit frustrated by his lesson. "Are you serious, Jesus? No one can live up to those expectations! If we've got to get rid of all we have and sell our stuff, then there ain't gonna be no one left who's worthy! Who on earth can be saved?"

And in that instance, Christ hits 'em with the gospel: *But Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible."*

In other words, God can take that tiny needle's eye and make an arched gateway big enough for every camel on earth. God can make a door great enough for everyone to walk through—even those who won't let go of their stuff—even a repentant murderer.

Yes, my friends, there is grace everywhere, for everyone. So don't hold back. Give all your love and gratitude to the God of grace. Give over all your talents—all your time—and yes, to the best of your ability—all your treasures.

Don't hold back because God doesn't hold back anything from us. Recall what Paul wrote to the Roman church: *God who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will God not with Jesus also give us everything else?*

God doesn't hold back—not ever. God's love is too strong—too great—too powerful to hold back. By its very nature, it overflows. And before you know it, we're absolutely inundated with grace and mercy.

Be prepared. It's a good motto to live by. Are we prepared to give it all?

Amen.