

Sermon

Preacher | The Rev. Dr. Simon J. Mainwaring

The Gospel | John 3:14–21

Date | March 14, 2021



**ALL
SAINTS'**
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Eddie Lamb was one of my best interviews. Not only could he talk for hours, his voice was spellbinding - slightly raspy, strong yet a little higher pitched as if to match his tall slender frame. I was writing a book tracing the first hundred years of the school in India Eddie had attended as a boy in the 1930's and 40's. We met in his very modest public housing home in east London, where he had gone to live following his school days, as many Anglo-Indians did of his time. We ate curry, of course – really good curry – and he gifted me two jars of potent lime pickle to take home.

Eddie never had a lot. His biological parents left him at the school he grew up in, changing his name to 'Lamb' so he would never be able to trace his father. Tragically, it was a common cruelty meted out upon unwanted children of mixed race in British India at the time. School was everything to Eddie, but it was also harsh in those days, bounded by an austere version of Christian zeal that the school's missionary staff saw as their duty to instill by word and deed in the children in their care. Amid all of that, though, Eddie also encountered a way of life that fostered a deep generosity amid all the struggles of the world at that time. It was from one of those missionaries, Kitty Wilson, that Eddie learned the £500 rule. Back then it was much less, and today it would be more, but the principle was the same: to set an amount of money to have in the bank as the maximum he needed, and then whenever Eddie had more than that, he would give it away to where it was needed most. As it happened, I had already learned the £500 rule from Jean Burns, the last missionary still there when I joined the school staff, whose generosity of living was simply radiant to me. All of them had endured years of challenge and trial, in some cases decades, yet they had been shaped by those years in India to deepen their sense of God's grace flowing through their lives. Together, these remarkable people taught me to find abundance even in the scarcest of times.

As we mark the first anniversary of when we started to live distanced from one another because of Covid-19, I wonder, what has been shaping your life this past year?

Now doubt there has been many a reason to notice scarcity. To date, over two and half million people have died of the Coronavirus across the world, a fifth of them here in the United States. Millions in this country have been forced out of work or have lost businesses. Many who have remained in work have endured almost incomprehensible levels of stress especially those working in hospitals who have witnessed wave after wave of people needing critical care.

Yet as has been well-documented, Covid's spread met a series of preexisting conditions. To quote the Gospel of Matthew, 'For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.' This has been a year of watching how the so-called 'Matthew Effect' operates across almost all sectors of society. The barely concealed fractures of American life have been laid bare by this pandemic as deep inequities of race, schooling, housing, healthcare, wages, and legal protection have determined who has been most vulnerable to the ravages of this virus.

Even the rush for the vaccine has become an operation of power. For truly vaccines are not being distributed they are being acquired, as those with economic privilege use their power to get their shot in the arm, while people without the ability to search and travel elsewhere to get vaccinated who often also have accompanying pre-existing medical needs, languish. We've opted for a free-market solution to a national health need, the problem being that some people are clearly more free than others.

It would be easy to have been shaped this year by a narrative of ever-decreasing circles and come to see life in this world as a battle over scarce ends. Yet, this has also been a year when the abundance of our capacity for goodness has surfaced just when we needed it most. I wonder if you remember Captain Tom Moore in Britain, who in the run-up to his 100th birthday walked 100 lengths of his garden aiming to raise £1,000 for the National Health Service. Something about this simple act of generosity caught the public's imagination, and Captain Tom ended up raising over £30 million, receiving a knighthood from the Queen and the admiration of a nation in need of a good story to tell one another in hard times. You may have known your own Captain Tom this past year, and there have been a myriad acts of human kindness expressed across this nation and around the world. We've needed those to remind ourselves of the pivotal truth about the circumstances of our lives: that to see scarcity or abundance is always a choice, not because we can elect to be pollyanna about the world, but because we choose to find God within it.

How then do we find the abundance of God in the world?

First, we must be willing to talk about the world. For us to wish that the church would to leave aside consideration of the world's challenges, what some people might call 'politics in the pulpit', would be to leave our faith dislocated from its living context. We need to have our eyes wide open to the life of faith in the world if we are to offer anything of God back to that world.

Second, not only must we be prepared to talk about the world's concerns we must also be willing to contribute to the solutions to those problems. Take for instance, the conversation we are having as a nation about wages. I rejoice that finally we are beginning to ask ourselves as a society what it means to earn a living wage in America let alone a minimum one. Yet the debate about a living wage is not for economists to have alone. The church belongs in that conversation. Economists and politicians would do well, I believe, in learning from the great voices of Christian social theology like William Temple and Walter Rauschenbusch, Gustavo Gutiérrez and Martin Luther King, like Paul of Tarsus and Jesus of Nazareth.

For us to see the greater depth of God's abundance in our world will need though more than merely seeing humanity's brokenness and naming God as the solution. Our faith must mature such that it does more than merely offer the flaccid theological maxim 'love God and love your neighbor' to whatever ills of the world are currently in view. For this kind of growth to take place, we have to allow our search for abundance to become personal.

For my own part, I have found that one of the questions I have had to confront for my own faith to mature has been that of control. Some of the challenges of my childhood shaped me to become very independent quite early in life. I was presented with a world of scarce means, and believed that the only way through that barren place was by assuming control of my own destiny. It took four years living in India among people whose generosity of spirit put my scarcity mindset into perspective and opened my eyes to an abundance I so needed to experience. I had started to loosen my grip on the controls of my life and began what has to be that life-long journey of surrender to the goodness and grace of God's will.

Control is an age-old impediment to Christian discipleship, especially in times of challenge. I wonder whether part of the failure of our collective responsibility through the course of this pandemic as a society - manifest for instance by our incapacity to all agree to wear a mask, or to maintain social distancing - is due to our tendency to keep the control to ourselves when we feel most is at stake. It is entirely natural to want to do that, part of our survival instinct, yet it is to an opposite kind of freedom that Christ invites us into.

For all of its exclusionary subtexts, the heart of John 3:16, from our gospel reading today, says that God so loves the world that he submits his will to the vagaries of that world. God gives over control, and elects to be born and suffer and die at the hands of others' control. The incredible theology John proclaims here says to us that love for the whole world is only possible by surrendering control. God cannot love the whole world unless God gives Godself away to that world. And we can only learn to love like that, and know that love flow through us like that, when we allow ourselves to be shaped by God's power and not our own.

My prayer for you in this hardest of years is that you too will discover what you need to do to deepen your search for God's abundance such that you might love the world even more fully than you already do. We can live by a gospel truth that promises to set us all free. 'For God so loved the world'. You already have all the abundance you will ever need to love it too.