

HERE, TAKE WHAT YOU NEED...

On Wednesday of this week, Diane and I will travel with a group of people from 5 or 6 different churches, over 100 of us in all, to ECUADOR, where we will live in the HOMES of some extremely POOR families. The homes are no different than those we see the POOR in 3rd world countries living in on our TV sets. THESE are people who earn maybe \$3 or \$4 dollars per DAY at best. The man in the home where Diane and I stay spent 3 years saving up for a BICYCLE to help him get to and from WORK. And it's his PRIZE possession, because he KNOWS that he'll never own a CAR. And IN that house, there's just NO food. You open the refrigerator and it's totally EMPTY! What a SHOCK that was for me the FIRST year I went on this Mission Trip! It was just TOTALLY empty. These people LITERALLY live from day to day. Each morning, people come through their neighborhood on BICYCLES with TRAYS attached to the handlebars. And ON those trays might be FISH or chicken, FRUITS or vegetables. And EVERY day, these people living in poverty go OUT and BUY whatever FOOD that they can AFFORD for THAT day. While WE are there, they eat 3 meals per day, but I'm certain they DON'T when we're NOT there. And their meals are very SIMPLE, mostly RICE, with maybe a TAD of cucumber or tomato or very poor quality MEAT.

Well, I have a CONFESSION to make: I have had a HARD time this summer NOT overeating in order to COMPENSATE for this upcoming MISSION trip, even though I KNOW that it will just make me HUNGRIER while I there, and even though I REMEMBER how I took lots of GRANOLA bars and OTHER snacks LAST year and DIDN'T end up eating most of them, AND even though I was SURPRISED last year to find that I had PLENTY of food and was RARELY hungry. STILL, the WORK is HARD and the DAYS are LONG as we build concrete HOMES with them. SO, I am tempted to OVEREAT in order to COMPENSATE, and I'm FIGHTING that temptation.

I sort of feel like a DOG! Did you ever watch a DOG eat? Unlike a CAT, a DOG will CHOW down WHATEVER you put in his DISH, just as FAST as he CAN. And I am TOLD that ONE reason why dogs GOBBLE down their food so FAST is because, for the first FEW million YEARS, when dogs lived in the WILD, food was a RARITY. SO, when a KILL was made, ALL the dogs would gather around the carcass and WOLF down the meat (no pun intended). And it was important to eat it QUICKLY because, if they DIDN'T, OTHER dogs would GET it. And THAT'S why, millions of years later, dogs STILL gobble down their food as FAST as they can, EVEN though there are no OTHER dogs in sight and NO pressure to eat QUICKLY. Evolution has PROGRAMMED them!

Well, friends, THAT'S what I call a mentality of SCARCITY. And personally, I believe that we ALL come INTO this world with a *mentality of SCARCITY*. I think we're BORN with it! *It's MINE, and YOU can't HAVE it!*, shouts even the LITTLEST child. But THEN, SOME of us have life experiences during childhood which FURTHER develop our mentality of SCARCITY, so that we THINK that we have to GRAB and HOARD. We THINK we HAVE to ACCUMULATE and STOCKPILE. And THEN, we have to GUARD what we've collected. THAT'S why TWO of the fastest-growing industries in United States today are the STORAGE business and the SECURITY business. It's because we are LIVING with a *mentality of SCARCITY*, rather than a

mentality of ABUNDANCE. And the RICHER America becomes, the MORE we seem to HAVE this *mentality of SCARCITY*.

HOWEVER, if we read the BIBLE for very long, and particularly stories like TODAY'S Scripture Lesson, we soon REALIZE that there seems to be something about GOD that tends toward EXCESS, something about GOD that tends toward EXTRAVAGANCE. I mean: LOOK at today's Scripture Lesson! A HUGE crowd has followed Jesus into the wilderness. Jesus has heard that John the Baptist has been BRUTALLY murdered by King Herod, and He WANTS to be ALONE! He WANTS to get a BREATHER, to have a little VACATION from all the HURTING people, who ALWAYS seem to be pressing IN on Him. BUT, that's NOT what He GETS, is it? EVEN in the DESERT, THOUSANDS of people just INUNDATE Him. SO, Jesus HEALS them, BECAUSE He has COMPASSION for them. And THEN, as it grows LATE, His disciples URGE Him to send the crowds AWAY -- so that they can go and buy FOOD. But INSTEAD, Jesus tells His DISCIPLES to give them something to EAT. *Where in the world, they ask, do you expect US to get enough FOOD to feed all THESE people? There must be 5,000! And WE only have a couple of FISH and a few LOAVES.* But Jesus BLESSES what they have -- and everyone EATS and is FILLED! And even MORE than that, they have 12 baskets of food left over, FAR more than they STARTED with. I mean: the food just OVERFLOWS here! And to ME, this MIRACLE is a parable about God's EXTRAVAGANCE! EVEN though they're in a DESERT, the desert BLOOMS once JESUS arrives. There is HEALING for the hurting and FOOD for the hungry, and there's NOTHING scarce ABOUT it! It's ABUNDANT! It OVERFLOWS!

BUT, His DISCIPLES weren't thinking about ABUNDANCE, were they? THEY were thinking in terms of SCARCITY. THEY saw the vast NEEDS of the people and BEGGED Jesus to send them AWAY! Well, friends, those DISCIPLES are YOU and ME! We TOO look at the vast NEEDS of the world around us, and we TOO shout in despair: *Jesus, send them away! Jesus, work some kind of miracle and FEED them, but PLEASE don't ask US to do it!* Yes, His disciples are YOU and ME!

BUT, Jesus asks US the SAME question as He asked His FIRST disciples: *WHAT do you HAVE? Oh, We DON'T have MUCH, we reply; just a couple of FISH in our basket, and a few LOAVES.* But HE urges us to take WHATEVER we have and to be RECKLESS in SHARING it. HE asks us to be RECKLESS about GIVING it away, OR, as SOME people might say, even THROWING it away on the multitudes. And even though MOST of us don't BELIEVE this, when we DO dare to give it away, there WILL be ENOUGH, even for US! But THAT'S hard to believe, isn't it? You see: we STILL live with a *mentality of SCARCITY*, even though we all have SO much! And THAT'S why WE, in America, can SAY things like: *We better not let too many MEXICANS into this country; they might take AMERICAN jobs. OR, don't give TOO much to those folks on WELFARE; it MIGHT be a drain on our economy. OR, don't raise the minimum WAGE too high; because it MIGHT make my hamburger COST more.* Yes, we HOLD on TIGHT to what we HAVE, thinking that REALITY is somehow a FIXED commodity, and that LIFE is a ZERO-SUM game. After all: if I give to YOU, I MUST be diminished, right???

On the OTHER hand, I recently asked an ELEMENTARY school teacher HOW she has continued to TEACH for over 30 years. LOTS of teachers burn OUT and have NOTHING left to GIVE. WHY hasn't SHE burnt OUT or just given UP? And she

replied: *I've found that LOVE is a RENEWABLE resource. The MORE I give love away, the more I GET of it.* One of the largest GIVERS in my LAST church told me the SAME thing when I asked him what MOTIVATES him to GIVE so much. I mean: he's NOT one of that church's wealthier members, but he GIVES the church over \$200 per week. He said: *Well, I'VE found out that the more I GIVE, the more I GET.* Now at FIRST, his response BOTHERED me. Did he mean that IF we give money to the church, we get MORE money in return? He replied, *NO, I just know that my GIVING is NEVER as much as it COULD be, and that in giving MORE and MORE money for God's WORK, I receive SUCH great JOY and satisfaction, because I KNOW that I am PART of God's ongoing work, and that I am doing as MUCH as I CAN to HELP God's work, and that I am PART of a HUGE team, part of a GIANT movement, that is MUCH bigger than ALL of my OTHER interests and pursuits COMBINED. And THAT feels GOOD! It's VERY rewarding!* Friends, it just feels so GOOD to let GO of that *mentality of SCARCITY* that seems to PLAGUE us these days, and instead, take ON an AWARENESS of God's abundance, goodness and grace. But it's such a CHANGE in our mentality, isn't it?

A COLLEAGUE of mine, Thomas Long, tells the story of a student of his, who was talking with his father about the various problems of society which are being confronted by the CHURCH these days, problems like poverty, homelessness, AIDS, gambling and OTHER social ills. And AS they talked, they headed for a PAY phone. This was BEFORE the advent of CELL phones. They wanted to call home to see if they should to bring home a PIZZA for dinner. AS they walked, however, they were met by a HOMELESS man, who asked them, *Can you spare any change? I'm HUNGRY!*

Immediately the father reached into his pocket, pulled out a handful of change, held it OUT to the homeless man, and said: *Here, take whatever you need.*

Well, the homeless man just smiled and took ALL of the change, as the father and son KEPT walking and talking. SUDDENLY, however, the father REALIZED that he had given away ALL of his CHANGE and that he NEEDED a quarter to call HOME. Turning around, he called OUT to the HOMELESS man: *Hey, I FORGOT that I need to make a PHONE call. Can you give me BACK one of my quarters?* The homeless man SMILED, reached into his pocket, pulled out ALL the CHANGE that he'd been given. And then, he held out his hand and said, *Here, TAKE whatever you need!* Well, IMAGINE that sense of abundance and grace from a man who, on the face of it, had so LITTLE. He didn't HAVE a wallet full of CURRENCY like that father and son did. BUT, he was a man who experienced WHATEVER he had as ABUNDANCE rather than SCARCITY. And WHAT a difference that makes. I'll tell you: I've SEEN this to be true SO many times in my mission trips to Mexico and Ecuador. It seems that the POOR know something that WE, who are rich, DON'T know. You see: THEY don't seem to HAVE a *mentality of SCARCITY*. THEY have a *mentality of ABUNDANCE!* They MAY have NOTHING by OUR standards, but whatever they HAVE, they will give it to you without a MOMENT'S hesitation, and GIVE it to you HAPPILY.

Friends, WHEN will we learn to trust GOD? WHEN will we stop hoarding and guarding, keeping and clutching, and INSTEAD, focus on God's MIRACLE of extreme ABUNDANCE, so that we continually OPEN our hands to offer EXTRAVAGANT generosity to ALL God's children? I believe that we come INTO this world with a mentality of scarcity; that we come INTO this world holding on tight. But BY the GRACE of God and the LESSONS of Jesus, we can ALL learn ANOTHER way. And I

believe we're SUPPOSED to learn it! We can ALL come to realize that ALL that we HAVE, and ALL that we ARE, are GIFTS from the HAND of an incredibly generous and loving God. And IN return, God asks only ONE thing of us: that we respond to our sisters and brothers, both HERE and around the globe, with the SAME kind of EXTRAVAGANT generosity with which WE have been blessed. And I just HOPE and PRAY that, someday soon, we WILL. Not only is it good for our INDIVIDUAL souls, because as Samuel Johnson said: *it is better to LIVE rich than to DIE rich*, but it's ALSO in our BEST interest as a NATION.

Now, YOU don't have to AGREE with me. I don't preach to make you AGREE with me; I preach to make you THINK, and think in light of our SCRIPTURES and our FAITH. But it's TRUE! Extravagant GENEROSITY is in our BEST interest as a NATION. In fact, I believe it is the KEY to our national SECURITY, and I EVEN suspect to our very SURVIVAL as a nation in the long run. You see: it's not our MILITARY that's going to SAVE us, but our VALUES and our GENEROSITY. Think of it: IF we just took just a FRACTION of our \$500 or \$600 BILLION military budget (and that's ALL it would take is just a FRACTION of it) -- and IF we USED that money to FEED and SHELTER and provide HEALTH care for the world's POOR and downtrodden, then Al-Qaeda and OTHER hate groups would have a VERY hard time recruiting TERRORISTS, wouldn't they? And ALL it would take is a FRACTION! Yes, we NEED to STOP being TAKERS and HOARDERS, and START being GIVERS -- ABUNDANT givers -- JUST as JESUS was. We NEED to break FREE from our *mentality of SCARCITY*, and OPEN our hands to world's POOR and HUNGRY and BROKEN, saying to them with a SMILE: *HERE, my brothers and sisters -- take WHATEVER you NEED, for the God WE serve is a God of ABUNDANCE.... Amen.*