

[Opinion](#)

[Guest Voices](#)

A brown welcome rug reads "all are welcome here" in black, cursive lettering. The rug lies upon

(Unsplash/LeeAnn Cline)



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One of my favorite lines of Jesus appears at the end of his parable about the laborers in the vineyard and comes in the form of the landowner's question to some disgruntled workers: "Are you envious because I am generous?" (Matthew 20:15). I love that line because it is so good at exposing the contrast between how we interpret what is or is not fair (often according to our own personal desires) and how God acts with prodigality and incomprehensible divine love.

I thought of this truth telling from Jesus most recently while reading the new book [Abundance](#) by the New York Times columnist Ezra Klein and the Atlantic staff writer Derek Thompson. Klein and Thompson analyze the political and economic landscape of the United States over the last century and argue that we have witnessed stagnation, paralyzing bureaucracy, and a general rise in a scarcity mentality, which has been a major contributor to the ineffectual political system we currently have. "Over the course of the twentieth century," they write, "America developed a right that fought the government and a left that hobbled it."

Their proposal, aimed primarily at the political progressives in the country, is a paradigm shift. They explain:

There is a word that describes the future we want: abundance. We imagine a future not of less but of more. We do not subscribe to the seductive ideologies of scarcity. We will not get more or better jobs by closing our gates to immigrants. We will not turn back climate change by persuading the world to starve itself of growth. It is not merely that these visions are unrealistic. It is that they are counterproductive. They will not achieve the futures they seek. They will do more harm than good.

Klein and Thompson make a compelling case about the need for growth and development, innovation and reform, and they show how things need to change substantively and regulatorily to make way for this better tomorrow. The current positions and visions of both the political right and left in the United States do not provide a path forward. As they note, "Too often, the right sees only the imagined glories of the past, and the left sees only the injustices of the present."

Their proposals about rebalancing regulation and growth in order to address the housing crisis, the stagnation of innovation and research, and the seeming insurmountable crisis of climate change, among other challenges of scarcity, are compelling. But I found myself thinking of a domain that they don't address in their policy and economic analysis: theology.

A spread of food ingredients are is displayed on a table in an overhead shot. (CNS/Nancy Wiechec)

Another way to describe the generosity reflected in the reign of God announced by Jesus Christ is abundance. It is striking that everything Jesus communicated about how God wants us to live in community was about expanding our sense of belonging, inclusion and justice. So abundant are the resources of God's love and favor that all are invited to the divine banquet and there's plenty for everyone, provided we let go of our own prejudices and envy in order to recognize that God's love and mercy falls on "the just and unjust" alike (Matthew 5:45).

However, instead of living as an inclusive community that celebrates the gratuity and abundance of God's grace, we too often choose to adopt a mentality of scarcity in the church.

This is reflected in global ways, like then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's perspective expressed in an often-cited 1997 book-length interview *Salt of the Earth*.

Maybe we are facing a new and different kind of epoch in the church's history, where Christianity will again be characterized more by the mustard seed, where it will exist in small, seemingly insignificant groups that nonetheless live an intense struggle against evil and bring good into the world — that let God in.

This worldview is one rooted in a theology of scarcity and reservation. There will only be a few "real" or "true" Christians that persist against the perceived evils of "secularism" outside of the church. It is a vision shaped by a theology that insists that only within the Roman Catholic Church can you ultimately find truth and grace and God. It is a perspective that mistakenly believes that we can "let God in" to places and communities where God is allegedly absent without our invitation.

This is also reflected in local ways, such as in parishes, religious institutions, and even family units that believe there is only one way to be Christian or one way to be in the world. Within these contexts there is often a sense of limitation regarding who God loves or who can belong.

But as Klein and Thompson note within their social analysis, "scarcity is a choice," and we don't have to limit ourselves (or God) to a competitive, discriminatory, exclusionary theological worldview and set of practices.

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Imagine if we took this as the guiding principle for our theological reflection, moral reasoning and ecclesial policies: abundance over scarcity, inclusion over exclusion, and the reign of God over our selfish desires.

If our theological anthropology presupposed the kind of divine abundance found in Jesus' preaching, church teaching on gender and sexuality might look very different. Instead of a scarcity mentality that maintains a narrowly conceived standard for what is considered "normal" or "right," we might recognize the wonderful diversity of God's creative intention.

Perhaps women, LGBTQ+ persons, members of historically minoritized communities and others considered "different" (or even "disordered") would enjoy the same presumption of full humanity that their cisgender, straight, white male neighbors do.

If our ecclesiology was informed by such a theology of abundance, perhaps our understandings of vocation, ministry and ecumenical and interreligious dialogue might look very different.

Perhaps instead of presuming God calls only a few to ministry in the church, we might consider how the Holy Spirit is moving in the hearts of so many whose vocations might go unrecognized or are precluded from consideration outright. Maybe we would have a more generous approach to dialogue and friendship across traditions and belief systems.

If our pastoral outreach was motivated by a theology of abundance rather than scarcity, we might find that the frequent proclamation that "all are welcome" in our faith communities was lived more authentically through our actions.

Perhaps this might mean a ministry of presence takes priority over proselytizing, and loving invitation to community takes priority over condemnation or dismissal. It may also mean not just attending to the self-selecting members of our churches, but also reaching out to others in our communities, especially the most vulnerable.

The scarcity mindset is governed by fear and self-interest, but a theology of abundance more closely aligns with the life, ministry, and preaching of Jesus Christ in the Gospels. It feels odd to state something that appears so obvious and should be taken for granted within the Christian community but, given the state of the world today, we could all use a good reminder. And instead of feeling envious of others, like the vineyard laborers who were operating with a scarcity mindset and a zero-sum mentality, let us live in such a way as to announce the inbreaking of God's reign through our embrace of abundance.