

Unlimited good: Acts 9:1-20; John 21:1-19

by [Sarah Dylan Breuer](#) in the [April 3, 2007](#) issue

My mother's generation of women was raised to expect that families would depend financially on the husband's income. My mother is lively and creative, and as a child she wanted to be a doctor—but women just didn't do that. When her husband left her, her creativity and energy were channeled into supporting three children on the small income from a job initially intended to supplement the family's welfare and provide a personal challenge. She did her best, but it was impossible to hide how worried she was about money.

I had a keen sense that my older brothers and I were in constant competition for meager resources, which added to the sting of every small denial. Relationships between teenage siblings are rarely the model of family harmony, and every conflict was heightened by our sense that there was only so much, not nearly enough, and that what one got another would lack.

And that was in the wealthiest nation in the world, in a home that most would regard as middle class. The cultures in which the church was born, however, were what anthropologists call "limited good" cultures. Every good—not just tangible resources, but anything of value—was perceived as being limited in quantity. Not uncoincidentally, they were also "agonistic" cultures (from the Greek word *agon*, for a competition, like a wrestling match).

Furthermore, there was no such thing as a "middle class" in the ancient Mediterranean. The work of a fisherman in the first century didn't connote a tranquil vacation of enjoying simple pleasures of sun and sea as it does for some of us; the fishing life was one of constant anxiety, of wondering whether today's catch would be enough to provide for all of the tariffs and fees owed to the richer and more powerful classes just for the chance to make a living. Those who have lived in such anxiety know how it can make everything in life come down to a single question: Will there be enough fish today?

That crucial question was asked by many others, of course, and could extend to many other areas of life. As more and more Jews—people called to worship the God

of Israel and be distinct from worshipers of other Gods—abandoned their cultural heritage to assimilate to the dominant culture, even adopting Greek as their first or only language, many asked themselves whether there would be enough Jews willing to be distinct from the nations to provide for the survival of God’s people. Many of St. Paul’s Pharisaic brethren taught that “the Holy One loves exceedingly gentiles who join God’s people” (*Numbers Rabbah* 8.3) and were known among Christians as well as pagans for their eagerness to invite gentiles to join them (as Matthew 23:15 reports in judgmental language born of persecution of Jesus’ followers by a minority of Jews). Paul, however, based his life on the assumption that the survival of God’s people depended on making sure that God’s welcome—like all limited goods—was extended only to that limited number of people for which it was meant.

When we meet him in Acts 9, Paul wasn’t being a closed-minded jerk preserving his own privilege; in his eyes, he was making personal sacrifices to ensure the survival of his people, his family in the broadest and noblest sense.

If you’ve ever tried to persuade someone of Paul’s temperament to change her or his mind, you know how hard that can be. No wonder Paul and Peter are so inseparably paired in tradition: two apostles known for their willingness to squabble with each another (e.g., in Gal. 2:14) as well as occasionally with their Lord and God, and in time paired in the memory of Jesus’ followers for their shared love of the church and martyrdom in the center of Rome’s imperial might. What can change the mind and heart of a Peter or Paul? For that matter, what could change the life of a person like me?

If it’s not the only way, it’s the surest way: an encounter with the living, risen Jesus of Nazareth. All his life, before he first met Jesus, the central question in Peter’s life was “Will there be enough fish today for us to get by?” and each day he braved the waters knowing that his life and others’ depended on the answer to that question. Then he met the risen Jesus while fishing in the Galilee, and he had an experience of God’s abundance so powerful that, were the boat not close to shore, it would have been in danger of sinking. After a meal with this Jesus, the central question in Peter’s life shifted from “Can I gather enough fish for me and my family to get by?” to “Can I gather the fullness of the flock I am called to feed with the limitless blessings God has for us?”

Paul, who traveled far and sacrificed much to persecute others when he believed that other kinds of scarcity threatened the survival of God’s people, encountered

Jesus on his way to Damascus, and suddenly the central questions for him were not about who is worthy to join the messianic banquet, but how quickly all of those unworthy and made worthy can be gathered at the table to break bread with Jesus in a foretaste of the feast that will never end.

All of us who think of what we own as earned, and of what the world's children need as a burden too heavy to think about, all of us who wonder whether there's room or love enough for us, all of us whose relationships are governed too often by a sense that what's good in the world is limited and always the subject of competition, should keep our ears open to Jesus' voice. Jesus is here, ready to receive us with limitless joy and to grant us limitless peace and joyful, eternal life. The real question, for those of us who have met him, is how we can gather enough friends, neighbors and enemies to take in the abundance that God is offering.