

**“Abundance Abounds”****Luke 12.13–31****The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 5 November 2006**

The first sermon I ever preached was at First Congregational UCC in Boulder, and it was this text I preached from at a Thanksgiving service in 1995. And it is this text that our Stewardship Committee chose as part of its “Loving God Back” theme for this year. It’s a wonderful parable...a difficult parable for many of us to hear...because many of us (perhaps all of us) relate to the rich fool who decides to build new barns to contain his wealth, only to realize “you can’t take it with you.”

Fidelity Investments wants my money. They want me to put more and more in my IRA. They want me to have invested \$330,000 with them just to cover healthcare costs during my retirement.<sup>1</sup> (ha ha ha) And they also want me to consider “longevity risk,” that I might live too long. And “inflation risk,” and “asset allocation risk.” With all that risk abounding, I’m beginning to feel a little fearful. Now, I don’t mean to pick on Fidelity. It’s just that they have my retirement savings. And maybe I’m a bit sensitive since Jean and I don’t have anything like enough money saved for retirement, both of us having invested in second careers and four rounds of graduate school. But I still think Fidelity points out something about the way middle and upper-middle class Americans think about money. We’re surrounded by abundance, and we seldom think we have enough. We strive and we worry.

How much time do we spend earning and saving for retirement and planning our investments? And how much time do we spend invest in the kingdom of God and managing God’s commonwealth on earth? And you all are a somewhat rarified subset of the American populace...how much time and money do you think the average American spends working for justice, for shalom, for the realm of God among us?

Our new associate conference minister, David Popham, wrote some surprising words I want to share with you. “I begin with an apology to the stewardship teams and chairs who are busy this time of the year. However, I must confess that I do not believe in supporting a church budget.” (Okay, don’t tune out there...hang in there with me.) “There are already too many demands upon my income. Talk about financial needs and deferred maintenance only serve to bore me and turn me off. I am troubled with my money when it never goes far enough or never amounts to what is really needed. To the horror of many a good person, in my mind’s eye the church budget resembles something of a voracious Tyrannosaurus Rex – a terrible predator that is never satisfied. Rather I am happiest with my money when it goes to support and underwrite values which I think are important in our world. While I may not support the monster budget, I do faithfully give financial support to my local church. Out of the abundance of grace and acceptance which I have received from God, I cannot but help give back to the one community whose goal is to strengthen and enhance values which help grace to prosper.

- Relating to a God who is still active in the world
- Being a revelation of God’s goodness and love as is Jesus
- Finding identity as a community of faith in the scriptures
- Intentionally fostering love and forgiveness
- Welcoming diversity
- Valuing the unique character of individual life journeys
- Seeking to involve each person in addressing the needs and concerns of others

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<sup>1</sup> source: fidelity.com

These are the standards encouraged and promoted by my home congregation. It makes me happy to be spending my hard-earned money on these values. It is the church which grants a place where such spending is peaceful instead of disordered. No other organization – political or social, and no other entity – well-known or humble, gives me the zing-of-life as does my home church. Far from feeding a monster, when I give to my congregation I undergo the joy of experiencing the multiplication of my hopes and dreams for a world transformed by God. When you consider your tithe recall what you love about your home church. In the end your offerings support those values, emphasis, and ideals which connected you to the church and provide your life with the blessings of God.”<sup>2</sup> So, I’d ask the question implied by our stewardship campaign: How do we love God back? We do it by being part of the kingdom of God. And the question that is implied by Jesus: How do we become rich toward God? We do it by being part of the kingdom of God.

It’s always struck me as a profound irony that the most affluent folks on the planet – those of us who have an abundance of possessions that Jesus talks about – give so sparingly of their wealth. Most of us in mainline churches give between two and three percent of our incomes to the church, and we think that’s doing really well. And on one level it is: most of us give more to the church than to NPR, PBS, the Fort Collins Symphony, our alma mater, or whatever charity you care to name. Of course, Plymouth doesn’t rely on corporate sponsorships or foundation grants to support its operation, 97 percent of this congregation’s income comes from you. It really is **your** church. And if you give to this church because Plymouth is a significant voice of progressive Christianity in northern Colorado, *then you are supporting the kingdom of God*. And if you give because the work of the national setting of the United Church of Christ is a significant voice for justice, *then you are supporting the kingdom of God*. And if you give to support the mission work done around the world, across the country, and right here in Fort Collins is substantial, *you are supporting the kingdom of God*. That’s why I pledge to this church every year; because I can’t think of a better way to invest in the kingdom of God, and I want to be a part of it.



When you think of abundance, what do you imagine? And I invite you to think **beyond** an abundance of possessions. Is your abundance having a wealth of fellow Christians around you who are traveling with you on this pilgrimage we call life? Is your abundance knowing that no matter what happens to you, that you are not alone, because the Spirit is with you now and forever? Is your abundance knowing that you can make a difference in the world through your church? Is your abundance being grateful for what God has given you: enough to eat, enough to wear, enough to live in? Is your abundance in the joy of learning? Is abundance the idea being surrounded by a natural world that is full of beauty beyond description? Is your abundance in just being alive?

If the ravens are the recipients of God’s abundance, just think how much more God has given you!

I was thinking about Jesus’ injunction about not worrying. The freedom from worry and the freedom from fear is a gift of abundance. We only need to open our eyes to God’s abundance and then open our hearts in gratitude.

I was also considering that if we seriously don’t worry about our lives, what we eat, about our bodies, or about what we wear... it’s really going to mess up the line-up on TV. No more “Queer Eye for the Straight Guy,” or “Trading Spaces,” or even “Martha Stewart Living.” Really, these programs are better at driving people’s sense of inadequacy and compulsion for external perfection than they are about making us feel whole. What doe

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<sup>2</sup> David Popham in the October 2006 issue of *Reflections*.

they do to reinforce our understanding that we are loved by God no matter what we look like or where we live?

There is tremendous freedom in knowing that no matter what we do or what we really deserve, we are God's beloved. We don't have to fear that we won't be accepted by people who have really nice hair or really nice botox treatments or really nice McMansions or really nice cars. Because we already have the abundance of God's love. So, we can stop grasping and striving for things and we can let go of our worry, because we already have what is really important. And that frees us up.



I want to end by telling you about a gift that each of us have received, because today we're celebrating a birthday. Fifty years ago, Veldon Grassmick, pastor here at Plymouth, was a delegate to the General Convention of the Congregational and Christian Churches. When I spoke with his wife Ruth a few years back at Plymouth's centennial celebration, she told me that he had been a very strong supporter of union between the Congregational and Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church, which 50 years ago joined together to become the United Church of Christ.

Beginning today, we in the United Church of Christ begin a yearlong celebration of turning 50. This denomination, this one small square within the kingdom of God, has had a profoundly positive impact on the history of this country over the last 50 years. While some churches tried to block the changes of the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 60s, the United Church stood tall in supporting it. While some denominations are still wringing their hands about including non-straight people in the full life of their churches, we declared our denomination Open and Affirming 21 years ago. While some Christians think that stewardship of the environment and combating racism are issues that don't belong in a church, the United Church has been a leader in both areas, coining the term "environmental racism" to describe locating toxic waste and pollution sites near communities of color, because they thought nobody would notice. While some Christians hope only for a secure spot in the heaven, I give thanks that our denomination sees that the kingdom is here among us. While some people still think that God is a guy, we have a hymnal that suggests otherwise: that God is beyond gender. And while some of us have our ears stopped up so that we can shut out the world, others of us know that through the world... God is still speaking.

I have been blessed time and time again by this imperfect union we call the United Church of Christ. I am proud to be part of a denomination that is willing to take risks, that is willing to be on the leading edge, that is less comfortable as "the establishment" and more called to be "the movement."

A significant part of the way I experience God's abundance is through the people I know here at Plymouth, the folks I served with in the Connecticut Conference of the UCC, and those who serve God through the national setting of the UCC. But it's also the people in congregations I've served and belonged to: the people of First Congregational UCC in Boulder, and the East Boulder UCC Fellowship, and First Congregational UCC in Kittery Point, Maine, and First Church UCC in Windsor, Connecticut, and all the way back to First Community Church in Columbus, Ohio, where I was in preschool. I give thanks for the 1.4 million members of our United Church of Christ. And I give thanks for you.

We have been given an incredible gift in this church, and in this denomination. So, let us give thanks to God, who is the source of every good gift. And let us continue to become the people of the United Church of Christ, boldly and bravely proclaiming our faith, and welcoming all God's people...all God's people...all God's people to the table. Amen.