

“Simple Abundance”

John 10.10

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 21 October 2007

Early on Tuesday morning, before the sun had come up, I sat down at the kitchen with a cup of coffee table to pray. Now, the kitchen table may not sound to you like the spiritual heart of the home, but I assure you, it is. (Do you remember the movie *Moonstruck*, when a large Italian-American family always retreated to the kitchen whenever anything of importance was discussed?) At any rate, I was reading a cycle of meditations and prayers from Philip Newell’s book *Celtic Benediction*, and the prayers for Tuesday morning jumped right out at me as being perfect for this season of stewardship. In fact, I’ve shared most of them with you in the Call to Worship, the Unison Prayer, and the Prayer of Dedication in this morning’s order of worship. And the word that leapt into my heart as I offered these prayers was *abundance*. Even though Philip Newell doesn’t use that term directly, his words are almost like electrons spinning around the nucleus of *abundance*.

Sharon talked about *gratitude* in her sermon last Sunday, and I’m going to talk about *abundance* today, and I hope you’ll be able to see the connections to stewardship.

Last spring, I was sitting in a retreat with Philip Newell at Ghost Ranch in Abiquiu, New Mexico. It’s a gorgeous retreat center in the high desert, and all of a sudden, we heard rain beating down on the roof. He looked at us, paused, and with a wry Scottish smile, simply said, “A blessing.” And in the desert, rain is clearly seen as a blessing from God. But, it took someone saying, “A blessing,” for me to recognize it as such...seeing it as part of the cycle of abundance built into this amazing creation in which we live. In our culture, we are losing the capacity for wonder... to see the holy in our midst. Most of us are too jaded to hear the miraculous in the sound of raindrops, or the laughter of a child, or even in the clap of thunder. Sometimes, I think we’re just too busy to notice the holy, and sometimes I think that the reason is because we can see nearly everything on TV, and what we can’t see there, we can find with Google. But there is no substitute for feasting your eyes on a starry sky or attuning your hearing to the crash of waves or feeling the warmth of a friend’s hug.

I think we need more silence in our lives in order to notice God’s abundance. As I was writing this sermon, I wondered if *time* is something most of us don’t have in abundance. I went swimming Thursday afternoon, and it was the second time I had exercised in three weeks, *which isn’t good*. And while whining to myself about how busy I am, I decided that it isn’t that there is less time to exercise; it’s me making decisions about what’s really important. There will always be urgent matters that demand our attention, but sometimes we need to choose our priorities. With lifespans lengthening, we have a great abundance of time that any humans who have ever lived, but we fill our lives with a lot of things that don’t necessarily matter. On the wall of my office (actually, on the wall of my old office...*I haven’t had time* to decorate my new office), I have a little Amish quilt square design with the inscription, “To simplify, we have to say, ‘no.’” And obviously, I’m still working on that!



This is a season when we often think of the abundance of the harvest (and we’re hosting an interfaith Thanksgiving service at 3:00 p.m. on Sunday, November 18). I look in my back yard and see two apple trees that produce enough apples to feed every raccoon in western Fort Collins. In other parts of the country, farmers are bringing in harvests of all kinds of fruits, vegetables, and grains now that the summer is over. In this

country, we almost never think about having harvests that are adequate to feed our populace. Abundance is a given, and sometimes superabundance is the norm. (When you have enough corn so that you can feed it to livestock or turn it into ethanol, you have a superabundance of corn.) We are the stewards of an incredible planet, which is capable of providing for the nutritional needs of every person. Nobody needs to go hungry on this planet. It's all a matter of raising what people need, using it wisely, and distributing it.

Today, our Social Concerns Committee is observing Bread for the World Sunday. I cannot say enough good things about Bread for the World, an organization that aims to make food distribution and development changes on a system level – not just applying a much-needed band-aid. So, please read the Bread for the World insert in your bulletin and consider taking action.

Jesus talked a lot about food and its distribution during his ministry, and we continue to sense his presence in worship through bread and wine. Food was one of the primary metaphors he used, not just because it can represent spiritual sustenance, but because the people he taught were concerned about survival – having enough to eat. When I talk about feeding the 5,000 with fishes and loaves, I often talk about what a miracle it would be if we could feed everyone on this planet. And that miracle is within our reach, because God's planet provides abundantly, but it takes our stewardship of the earth and its resources to complete the miracle of eradicating hunger.

We have other resources that are poorly distributed and unwisely used, as well. I think of petroleum first of all. I've wondered what the U.S. would be like if we all drove Toyota Priuses instead of Toyota Land Cruisers...if the average vehicle got the Prius's 48 miles per gallon, instead of the Toyota Sequoia's 14. I wonder how much longer our supplies of oil would last, and if putting less carbon monoxide into the air would make a difference in global warming and on our need to see oil as our primary national interest. While some would like us to believe that oil is abundant, it is clearly a finite resource. (But it would certainly last longer if we all used less of it.) Energy, however, is abundant. Wind and solar power generate electricity sustainably. (And to the best of my knowledge, Plymouth is the only faith community in Fort Collins to pay for 100% wind-generated energy.) The use of resources – in scarcity and in abundance – is an important aspect of stewardship of the earth. And the recent shifts among evangelical Christian show underscore this, even as we in the mainline have understood it for some time. One Christian environmental group a few years ago posed a new “WWJD” question: What Would Jesus *Drive*?

God provides the abundance...what we need to supply is good stewardship.



Enough food, enough time, enough energy. That's abundance, isn't it? But what about money? Is there ever enough money? Is it true that you can't be too rich or too thin? If you suffer from bulimia or anorexia, you know that you can be too thin. But, if you're like me, it often seems that there isn't enough money when the end of the month rolls around. (Isn't that why God created credit?!?!?) Someone once said that “The person who is truly rich is the person with few needs.” And that seems really good...until the new Crate and Barrel catalog arrives (or Orvis or J. Jill or whatever really floats your boat). Or until we see a new car we just can't live without. Or until we decide that we really need a second home. And then, we discover “needs” we didn't know we had. Of course, few of these things are really “needs,” but wants. And I dare say that virtually every person in this room, including me, spends money on things they don't really *need*, but decide they *want*. And there are also members of this congregation who are

struggling to meet their most basic needs, and *our collective stewardship* makes it possible for all of us to be full members of this community.

What about financial abundance? Is there enough money? It all depends on how we decide to spend it, and what we decide is really important to us. Jesus said, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” And if you want to do a really simple inventory of your priorities in life, open your checkbook or look at your credit card statements. Once your basic needs for food, clothing, healthcare, and shelter are met, where does your money go? Where is your treasure? Where is your heart? Do your priorities in spending reflect God’s priorities in providing? Are we really faithful stewards?

One of the great stories of *abundance* in the New Testament is a story that most of us think of as a story of *scarcity*: the widow’s mite. If you don’t know this parable, a widow (who in Jesus’ day was on the lowest rung of the economic ladder) has only two small coins left to her name, but puts them in the offering box in the Temple. Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

I would pose the question: Who had a true sense of God’s abundance: those who put in a few bits of their expendable income that they wouldn’t even miss or the widow, who knew that God was abundant and would provide not necessarily what she *wanted*, but what she *needed*? Who was truly rich?

This is one of those clear illustration when we can see faith as being trust, rather than belief. And it also points out the corollary idea: *that the opposite of faith is not doubt; the opposite of faith is fear.*

Faith and abundance; fear and scarcity. Our fear and our own misplaced sense of scarcity are the shadow side of our own lack of faith. Our faith and our sense of God’s abundance show us the path of new beginnings. Faith and abundance instill in us what Bill Coffin called “a passion for the possible.”

The widow’s action speaks volumes about the trust she has in God. You may have heard me ask you to do this experiment before, but reach in your pocket or your wallet and pull out a coin or a bill. And look carefully at what is written on it. Yes, it says what country it’s from and how much it’s worth, but it also says something else: “In God We Trust.” I wonder how true that is, even for the most faithful among us. Do we really trust in God for our security, or do we trust in cash? Do we ground our faith in economic wellbeing or in a sense of God’s abundance? ***God provides abundantly; good stewardship of that abundance is our job.***

With the idea of abundance in mind – and also in heart – hear these familiar words of the psalmist: (*you may wish to close your eyes*) *Let us be together in the spirit of meditation:*

The Lord is my shepherd; ***I shall not want.***

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I fear no evil: for thou art with me;

thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou ***preparest a table*** before me in the presence of mine enemies: ***thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.***

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

[Play Bobby McFerrin's "Psalm 23"]