

The Gift of God's Abundance
II Corinthians 9:6-15

“And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.”

At some point in our lives most of us have been asked, or have asked ourselves, whether we were essentially a glass half-full or a glass half-empty person, an optimist or a pessimist, a survivor or a victim. Curiously the answer often depends not on our outward circumstances but on our inner disposition. All of us know people whose lives have been riddled with tragedy and still they rise with hope to greet another day. We also know people whose blessings abound and nevertheless they rail against the universe for their lot.

But on this Sunday before Stewardship Commitment Sunday, the Bible asks a slightly different question of us, asks us whether we essentially are a people who tell the story of our lives through the liturgy of abundance or through the myth of scarcity. Again, the answer will depend not on our outward circumstances but on our inner disposition. Individually, of course, we all know people who barely have two cents to rub together and yet their trust in God's abundance leads them to be the most generous people we know anything about. We also know people who have amassed more than enough over a lifetime and yet their fear of never having enough leads them to be as stingy as the day is long. No matter the circumstance of your life, here is the question of the morning: Are you a person who acts out of a great trust in the gift of God's abundant providing or a person who lives day by day in fear of not having enough?

To help us think about this, Walter Brueggemann traces what he calls “the liturgy of abundance and myth of scarcity” in the life of God's chosen people. Genesis begins with a liturgy of abundance. In “an orgy of fruitfulness,” Brueggemann gushes, “everything in its kind is to multiply the overflowing goodness that pours from God's creator spirit.” On the seventh day, “God is so overrun with fruitfulness that God says, ‘I've got to take a break from all this. I've got to get out of the office.’” On Shabbat, God's children step out of the office too and on Sunday we do the same. For an hour or so, we embrace the liturgy of abundance, singing psalms that name and extol God's extravagance in creation and saying with God at the font and the table, in the pulpit and in prayers, “It is good, it is good, it is very good!” Keep reading in Genesis and you will come upon Abraham and Sarah to whom God promises offspring as abundant as the sands on the seashore, as numerous as the stars in the sky. In response, these two set out, not knowing where they are going, because they trust in the utter reliability of God's abundant providing.

The story is awash in God's abundance until the forty-seventh chapter of Genesis when Pharaoh, the ruler who has it all, dreams of a famine in the land. “For the first time in the Bible, someone says ‘There's not enough’” and soon the myth of scarcity spreads fear among the people and begins to reorder the common life. The peasants who are actually at risk of starving in the Egypt are told to put up their land for collateral and then their cattle and, by the third year of the famine, having nothing left, are told to put themselves up as collateral in order to eat. “That is how,” Brueggemann says, “the children of Israel become slaves....By the end of [the chapter] Pharaoh has all the land except the land belonging to the priests, which he never touches because he needs somebody to bless him.” The notion of scarcity, once it has been introduced into the biblical faith, continues in Exodus. Now in the wilderness with no food or water in sight, the Israelites complain and God's abundance falls from the sky in the form of manna, bread sufficient for the day (give us this day our daily bread). Still, the fear of not having enough prevails, causing God's children to hoard the manna. But manna is brilliantly designed by God to rot if it is hoarded. Imagine if money turned to dust in our hands when we hoarded it! Come to think of it, maybe it finally does....

Brueggemann finally traces our stories over the story Scripture tells and concludes that what is still tearing each of us apart is this “conflict between our attraction to the good news of God's abundance,” news that invites us to live with open-handed generosity, “and the power of our belief in scarcity,” a belief that makes us fearful and greedy and unneighborly.

This is so for us as individuals; but it so for the church as well. Apparently Paul had heard that the church in Corinth was inexplicably acting out of scarcity. Even though they had earlier initiated a generous collection for

the needs of the poor in Jerusalem, something had stopped them short. Apostles of scarcity were spreading fear among the community. Proclaiming another Jesus, a different spirit, a gospel contrary to the gospel they had first believed, these fear-mongers were changing the inner disposition and the outward generosity of the church. What was Paul to do? He had only words. Could a letter about God's abundance counter the message of scarcity the church was hearing day in and day out? I also wonder if a liturgy of abundance said in worship on Sunday morning can override the drumbeat of scarcity and fear broadcast six days a week.

Paul's Corinthian strategy was threefold. First he writes to the Corinthians about the inner disposition of churches in Macedonia whose members are poor as church mice. "During a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity," he writes. "For as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints." It would be as if I said to all of you who opened that monthly report from your broker, like I opened mine from John Lawton, to see that your earnings are now less than they were on January 1, it would be as if I said to you that during a severe ordeal of affliction, the members of Emmanuel Presbyterian Church in Thousand Oaks, California had doubled their pledges, said to you that their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity to meet the needs of those shot at the Borderline Bar and Grill and the needs of their burned out community, even as their own church home was burning to the ground. Now what was it you wanted to tell me about your portfolio and your lowered pledge? Paul lifts up a community that did not have two cents to rub together, lifts up a church that, acting out of a great trust in God's abundant provision, gave those two cents to the poor in Jerusalem

Paul then goes on to say, in the second place, that he does not mean that the relief of another's poverty should put pressure on them. Here I think Paul is directly addressing the myth of scarcity that had taken hold of their world view. Clearly the Corinthians had asked him why hard-working folks such as they should have less so that the poor in Jerusalem could have more. When you buy into the myth of scarcity, everything is a zero sum game. In response, Paul says at first what you would expect a liberal like me to say: "It is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need." But then he turns his argument inside out. He says that they should give "so that the abundance of the Jerusalem church may be for your need." Paul is telling the Corinthians that they are the truly needy ones, the ones whose inner lives have been impoverished by the myth of scarcity. He goes on to remind them that even though Jesus was rich, "yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich." Likewise, the poverty of the Jerusalem church is the means God is using so that the Corinthians may become rich, may live abundantly precisely when they give beyond their means.

Paul's third point is this: if you sow sparingly, you will reap sparingly. If you buy the myth of scarcity, you will live a life circumscribed by your fear of never having enough. The myth of scarcity is deathly because, by God's design, when we hoard the life given us by God to lead, it begins to rot. If you sow bountifully, you will reap bountifully. If you trust in God's abundant provision, you will live abundantly. We were made for a life of generosity by a love more generous than we can imagine.

Like Paul, I have only words. But more than Paul's word or mine, we have been given, literally given, God's word and so God's life in the life of a first century Jew. In him, God quit heaven for the cradle and the cross that we might have life and have life abundantly. To live in him is to live as those whose inner disposition is love, self-giving love, toward every other. To live in him is to live abundantly because you have died to life without him.

That life begins at the baptismal font. In the waters of baptism, Mackenzie and Adeline died to the power of death and death dealers, died to the myth of scarcity, died to the apostles of fear, and were reborn into a community that gathers to rehearse the liturgy of abundance on Shabbat or on the first day of the week so that on the other six days they and we may have eyes to see and voices to say, "It is good, it is good, it is good, it is very good" as we offer all that we have and all that we are to the God who has given us simply everything. Amen.