

Abundance, Gratitude, Generosity

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I Timothy 6:6-19 and Luke 16:19-31

A season of my father's ministry was spent in service to the Presbyterian synod that included the states of Michigan, Kentucky and Ohio. He carried the longest job title, perhaps, in the history of Christendom: Associate Synod Executive for the Financial Support of Mission. That is, he was the money guy. One component of that was training presbyteries and congregations in stewardship. He would travel, go to meetings and preach in churches across those three states. Sometimes I would travel with him, a unique father-son experience.

When you are on the circuit like that, at a congregation to talk about stewardship, you needn't develop new material each time. So I came to know my dad's stewardship sermons pretty well. I'd joke that I could almost preach them for him, letting him stay in the car, or even at home.

One sermon began with the nursery rhyme "Old Mother Hubbard." "Old Mother Hubbard went to the cupboard, to get her poor doggy a bone. But when she got there the cupboard was bare, and so the poor doggy had none."

The churches' cupboards were bare, my father would suggest, and needed replenishing. I don't think he meant that the church was bare on resources, but, rather, that we had the resources we need, including financial ones, if only we could acknowledge that, and reframe, recalibrate our understanding. I would want to ask him, do we give from our scarcity, only enough to barely fill the cupboards, if at all? Or to we give from our abundance, so that the cupboards are overflowing?

As we are just getting to know each other, I will tell you that one of my go-to scholars is Old Testament theologian Walter Brueggemann. No doubt you've heard that name mentioned from this pulpit. Brueggemann connects the vision of the Old Testament with the church's call in the world today, and he writes with such skill and passion.

Twenty years ago Brueggemann published an essay that still resonates – "The Liturgy of Abundance, the Myth of Scarcity." Brueggemann begins, where we should, with the Bible. The Bible, he says, is a "liturgy of abundance...a song of praise for God's generosity." Our calling is to embrace and celebrate God's abundance, and to nurture and care for it.

That is our narrative, the "liturgy of abundance," to celebrate God's generosity.

There is a counter narrative, of course, biblically and in this moment. Brueggemann calls it the "myth of scarcity."

Brueggemann wrote that "as we Americans grow more and more wealthy, money is becoming a kind of narcotic for us. We hardly notice our own prosperity or the poverty of

so many others. The great contradiction is that we have more and more money and less and less generosity.” He continues: “We never feel that we have enough; we have to have more and more, and this insatiable desire destroys us. (T)he central problem of our lives is that we are torn apart by the conflict between our attraction to the good news of God's abundance and the power of our belief in scarcity...We spend our lives trying to sort out that ambiguity.” Brueggemann, in summary: “The conflict between the narratives of abundance and of scarcity is the defining problem confronting us ...” That was 20 years ago. What about now?

Brueggemann explores biblical moment after moment of abundance and scarcity. Some are about money, but not all. Sometimes it's food, or justice, or power. But money is a regular biblical focus.

Last week Jesus said it succinctly – you cannot serve God and wealth. Now we explore what that looks like more fully, with all the implications and consequences.

In a letter to a younger follower named Timothy and attributed to Paul, we encounter the ethics of abundance and scarcity playing themselves out.

“...we brought nothing into the world,” Paul writes, “so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these.” That is, we have enough. And yet “...those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. *For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil*, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.”

Love of money is the root of all kinds of evil, even to the point of causing pain. Money itself is not the problem – loving it is, loving it so much that it obscures faith and harms both those who have and those who do not.

This is not hypothetical. I read this week about James Skowron, an orthopedic surgeon turned hedge fund manager who was imprisoned for several years for illegal trading practices. On the other side of prison, Skowron said that “I had no idea how deeply in love I could fall with making money. But that was nothing compared to how deeply I was in love with myself.” Not that we need a disgraced hedge fund manager to illustrate Paul's point, but that testimony makes a biblical concept very tangible.

Paul follows with a kind of mission statement. My first meeting here was with the Stewardship Committee, and this feels like a kind of divinely orchestrated set-up! “As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.”

The problem, for Paul, and perhaps for us, is not money. This is just not clever parsing or wishful thinking. William Loader writes that "(Paul) does not ... rebuke the rich and then leave them with unreal choices which their intelligence knows are wrong and from which they then switch off, inoculated against future challenges. Rather (Paul) speaks about using one's wealth effectively."

And one thing more. Note that the stewardship Paul is commending – to the rich and to all of us – is not just about sharing our material wealth. We are called to do good, to be rich in good works.

In case we are not sure exactly what that looks like, the lectionary tees it up for us, pairing Paul's admonition to Timothy with a searing parable from Jesus.

A wealthy man eats and drinks and wears fabulous clothes. At the gate to his property is a poor, diseased man named Lazarus. No starker contrast could be imagined. They both die. The poor man goes to heaven; the rich man does not. Smoking or non-smoking, as a friend of mine says.

The rich man begs for mercy from Father Abraham, at heaven's gates. No mercy is offered. Abraham said, "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony." The rich man accepts his fate, and then asks, compassionately, if not for me, then what about my brothers? No dice. No mercy.

It can sound harsh, and it may be. But more so Jesus is clear about opportunity after opportunity the rich have had to work this out. We can engage the issues of heaven and hell – told by Jesus here to make the point. We can ask about grace, and mercy, and second chances. The point is not subtle, and stares us down. You cannot serve God and wealth. Love of money is the root of all evil. To embrace scarcity is to embrace the false narrative of fear, and even death.

Faith invites us into a cycle, a rhythm, a kind of symphony or dance, with three distinct acts.

- Abundance
- Gratitude
- Generosity
  
- Abundance -- gifts overflowing, every kind of gift, given to us by a just and loving and merciful God.
- Gratitude – our call, our invitation, to acknowledge those gifts, cherish and celebrate them, and, most of all, thank God for them.
- Generosity – to share those gifts, with joy.

That's the cycle: abundance, gratitude, generosity.

There is a competing, counter cycle, of course, articulated also with regularity in the Bible and in the moment.

- Rather than celebrate abundance, we cling to scarcity, the notion that there is *not* enough, that the empty cupboard is an acceptable – and almost expected – status quo.
- Rather than thanking God, we thank ourselves. We convince ourselves that whatever we have is by our own merit and accomplishment.
- Rather than sharing generously, we hoard, protect, control, from fear – whether it's power or justice or food or money.

It is, of course, easier to talk about these things than to live them.

Yet opportunities exist all around where we may share our gifts and do good works and engage in the kind of faith that the rich man rejected. You know that. You do that.

Nearly every day since I've arrived, when I've left the church, I've pointed the car in a different direction and just driven. Greta Thunberg might not approve, but it's given me a good sense of context, of landscape, of possibility and opportunity. You all know this, but we needn't go far from this place to find something much less extreme than a rich man in purple and a poor man with sores to practice the kind of generosity that Jesus commends.

And when we do, we receive so much in return, that the abundance flows in all directions, multiplying as we share our gifts. Think how the rich man's life would have been transformed had he paid just a little bit of attention to the man at his gate – had his apathy and indifference and fear and quest for power been moved even just a little. What a change he would have experienced even as Lazarus' deep human needs were being met.

Jesus understands the temptation to be seduced by the myth of scarcity, to hold on tightly, to enter that cycle that cannot give life. The pull of scarcity and fear is strong. David Lose underscores the "barriers that exist already between us and those who are less fortunate," and the strong medicine of Jesus' parable, its life and death implications. But Lose also reminds us that "this is a parable, not a prediction." "We have the power to re-write the ending," he says. And we do.

We rewrite it every day, not from fear, but from a deep sense of generosity born of gratitude, taking hold of life that really is life, ushering in a transformation of the world God loves so much, an abundant God, a God whose giving knows no ending. Amen.