

Abundance

A sermon by The Rev. Keenan Kelsey

Noe Valley Ministry, a progressive Presbyterian Church Nov. 5, 2006

TEXT: Mark 12: 28-34 One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, 'Which commandment is the first of all?' Jesus answered, 'The first is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." The second is this, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these.' Then the scribe said to him, 'You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that "he is one, and besides him there is no other"; and "to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength", and "to love one's neighbor as oneself",—this is much more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices.' When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God.' After that no one dared to ask him any question.

Jamie asked, "God, how long is a million years to you?"

God answered, "It is but a second to me."

Then Jamie asked, "Well, God, how much is a million dollars to you?"

God answered, "It is but a penny to me."

So Jamie asked, "God, can I have a penny?"

And God said, "Sure, just a second."

Obviously Jamie was thoroughly grounded in the theology of the abundance of God. He just didn't know that God's idea of abundance never did include money!

I think we all make that mistake at one time or another – associating abundance with material welfare. Overflowing plenty equals food and shelter and cars and clothes and books and art and sometimes even stocks and bonds. But with this definition of abundance, we are guaranteed to become plagued with scarcity. With lives invested in consumerism, we have a love affair with "more" – which insures that we never have enough.

Old Testament Professor Walter Brueggemann, wrote an article for *Christian Century*, in 1991, entitled *The Liturgy Of Abundance, The Myth Of Scarcity*. He noted: "We are held hostage by the belief that we live in a world of scarcity; that we live in a world of limitations; that there is only so much wealth to go around... Whether we are liberal or conservative Christians, 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 -- a belief that makes us greedy, mean and unneighborly. Some of us spend our lives trying to sort out that ambiguity."

Even author Anne Lamott admitted, "... I had the fantasy that if I made a certain amount of money I'd be okay, that I'd be okay and stop thinking about it. Then I got to that level and discovered that the drug of choice is 'more.'" (Day by Day, in *Common Boundary*, Arline Klatte Ennis, Sept/Oct 1999, p. 18-24)

The challenging word of the Bible is about abundance, the adequacy of God's gifts to fulfill our deepest needs, our most urgent hunger. Modern society says, "We always need more." God's abundance says, "There is always enough."

In that same interview Anne Lamott went on to say “I know people who have a lot of money and are very stressed. I know people who don’t have money and I would trade places with them in a second. But the spiritually fit think, ‘you know what? God is providing every single day exactly what this family needs, exactly what I need.’” That is kind of a restating of Gandhi’s definition of abundance: “There are enough resources in the world for everyone’s need, but not for everyone’s greed.” It means basically, God is good, God will provide, trust God for overflowing plenty. The story of abundance says that our lives begin and end in God, and that this well-being cannot be taken from us.

I think this is exactly what Jesus is telling us in our gospel lesson. “*Shema Israel.*” Hear O Israel, this word is for all of you, the whole nation regardless of tribal affiliations, age, gender, class, or religious grouping. “*Adonai Elohenu, Adonai echad.*” There is one God. Love that God with your heart -- with the center of passion and trust. And with your soul -- with the breath of life that God gives, with a sense of constant, conscious contact with God. And with your mind --with the intellect that pursues truth; with thoughts, attitudes and thinking patterns shaped by love of God and love for God. And with your strength, with your physical self, your actions, your determination to be God's person in the world around you. Love that God in an intimate relationship so binding and challenging that it taps your energy and flexes your muscles, demanding commitment and intention. Love that God in a way that springs from the abundance of God’s love and provision for you. Love God beyond mere sentiment, but with a way of living that emanates from the depths of your identity which knows that, “*God made me. God loves me, I am a child of God. God's love and love of God flows in every fiber of who I am.*”

With these words lifted from Deuteronomy, Jesus meant to transform a focus on scarcity and fear into an experience of God’s abundance. Then out of that understanding and trust, Jesus calls on us to love neighbor as self. This reminds me of that wonderful quote, “You can give without loving, but you cannot love without giving. “ Jesus says out of the abundance of God’s love and the faithfulness of God’s care, give all to God without keeping anything for yourselves.

Wouldn’t it be amazing if instead of wishing for money or fame or success or more “things,” we Christians, as the people of God, could just as earnestly wish with all our hearts and souls and minds and strength, to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves?

This is exactly what Walter Bruggeman was saying: If we followed these directions, we would be able to know and trust genuine abundance. God doesn’t just offer abundance, God becomes the abundance for which we yearn and strive.

So what do you do if you don’t experience abundance? Annie Lamott has a novel prescription—“I know that if I feel any deprivation or fear, the solution is to give. The solution is to go find some mothers on the streets of San Rafael and give them tens and twenties and mail off another fifty to Doctors without Borders in Kosovo. Because I know that giving is the way we can feel abundant. Giving is the way we fill ourselves up.” According to Lamott, somehow abundance and generosity are related.

Tom Brokaw, in his book, *The Greatest Generation*, records the wartime experience of former U.S. Senator Mark Hatfield. As a young Ensign in the Navy during World War II, Hatfield was assigned to one of the first crews to inspect Hiroshima, about a month after the bomb. There was a smell to the city—and total silence. Hatfield says as the American party sailed into the canals, Japanese parents and their children watched silently.

“When we landed, the little kids saw we weren’t going to kill or shoot them, so they began to gather around. We realized they were very hungry, so we took our lunches and broke them up and gave them to as many kids as we could.” In that moment, Hatfield came to realize something that stays with him to this day: “You learn to hate with a passion in wartime,” he says. “If you don’t kill your enemy, they’ll kill you. But sharing those sandwiches with the people who had been my enemy was sort of therapy for me. I could almost feel the hate leaving me. It was almost a spiritual experience.” (Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation*, p. 334-337)

That same transformation is there for you and me. It is an option—a real alternative. We can stop despairing that our meager personal resources are not adequate, that our problems are much larger than our ability to solve them, that we don’t have enough time or money or energy or intelligence or imagination—to meet the challenges we are facing this week as parents, as spouses, in our intimate relationships, that we don’t have enough to meet the challenges at work, or in our families, or our careers, our own health. We could, you know, risk trusting the opposite of that litany of scarcity that drives and determines so much of our lives—risk trusting that when we bring what we have, when we offer what we have to whatever challenge is facing us, God multiplies, empowers, uses, creates and provides.

We might convince ourselves that it could be easier to live without any compelling sense of stewardship, witness, duty, call, commitment, conscience, or conviction. But it would be a life of scarcity. We would never know the relief of trusting the embrace of God’s genuine and total love. We would never be filled to overflowing through giving. We would never experience the freedom to extend that love to our neighbor, our community, our world. Trust God to provide, respond to that promise with gratitude and giving, and you will know the abundance, the overflowing joy and well being, the completeness of purpose and harmony, which God offers.

May it be so.