

Abundance

A Sermon offered at Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist

By the Reverend Hilary Landau Krivchenia

November 13, 2011

The earth is our horn of plenty. She sends forth all manner of delicious food. She flowers and sends forth fruits and vegetables. She dances wheat into the wind, sprouts and bathes rice, and draws corn toward the sky. Season to season the earth provides.

Today we have a farmer's market at Countryside. It's an opportunity to go small again. It's a celebration of food, of fair trade, of supporting more local businesses. It's one way to create and share a vision of abundance in our midst.

From ancient time human beings have held harvest celebrations to show our appreciation for the abundance of the earth. Sometimes our celebrations have been more propitiatory in character – trying to placate or appease the gods so that they would continue to provide. Long ago, often sacrifices were made to appease the gods life would return to the soil and abundance be restored.

I'm sure that we want to think of ourselves as having moved far beyond such primitive ideas of appeasement and sacrifice. But I'm not so sure.

For millennia – abundance or the lack of it was simply taken for granted. It was the mark of a relatively solid and unchangeable social station or caste – perhaps preordained in an earlier life – certainly inherited from one's parents, given to the first born male, and possibly assigned by the gods or by god.

This idea has evolved over time – particularly as the system of inherited class began to break down a few centuries ago. As that happened, the idea of abundance changed – but ever so slightly – to mean that – if you had wealth, enough to eat, a good place to live – it meant that somehow, you deserved it, you were entitled to it. You'd found favor in the eyes of god. And those who did not have abundance – well – they had just not found nor deserved that favor.

You remember the story of Oliver Twist – it came early in Charles Dickens career – in 1843. Oliver was the boy who had the audacity to ask for more thin gruel. He was born in a poorhouse and sold into servitude and misery. Oliver was eventually saved as he was miraculously recognized as a long lost grandchild by his well-heeled family and taken into comfort, safety, and abundance.

For the British, this theme of blue blood and social standing overcoming the misfortunes life became a stock vehicle for entertainment. One of my favorites is the operetta the Pirates of Penzance by Gilbert and Sullivan, written in 1897, about Frederich, a hapless lad, who'd been accidentally given into service on a Pirate ship. As his nurse recounted it:

I was, alas! his nurserymaid, and so it fell to my lot
To take and bind the promising boy apprentice to a pilot .

But on account of being hard of hearing the poor woman took and bound this promising boy apprentice to a pirate. Of course, by the end of the show – Frederich is returned to his rightful

station and all the pirates, of whom we have grown fond, are discovered to be “no members of the common throng;/ They are all noblemen who have gone wrong.” And thus not only was Frederick saved, but all the pirates were pardoned, married beautiful girls, and had their rank restored as well.

Now I grew up on Gilbert and Sullivan and will stand by them with fervent zeal. But shortly after the two Englishmen wrote *Pirates*, a young American woman named Sarah Cleghorn came of age and wrote a poem I also grew up hearing at least as often as I heard Gilbert and Sullivan. My father would recite it to me. It’s short –

The golf links lie so near the mill
That almost every day
The laboring children can look out
And see the men at play.

It reminds me of Dickens and of all the common throng – who are most of us.

As Dickens matured in his writing and his ethics he allowed his books to increasingly reflect the suffering not simply of the long lost but of any person. Gilbert Chesterton, in his comments on *Oliver Twist*, said that Dickens was not a person of political ideology but simply someone who abhorred the idea of anyone suffering oppression. So it was 8 years later, that Dickens wrote a *Christmas Carol*. In which abundance became something to share with everyone, not only those with station.

But just as Dickens was the harbinger of new, more humans, and just ideas so there were new and stranger twists to old myths.

The nineteenth century also saw a new form of the idea of deserving – or entitlement. It was most clearly articulated by a churchman and lecturer by the name of Russell Conwell – the founder of Temple University. Although he began as a Baptist preacher he developed a theology of wealth and preached it around the country. Conwell is best known for his *Acres of Diamonds* speech – which he gave repeatedly. I will quote you a short section here because I found it so fascinating.

I say that you ought to get rich, and it is our duty to get rich. How many of my pious brethren say to me, “Do you, a Christian minister, spend your time going up and down the country advising young people to get rich, to get money?...The men who get rich may be the most honest men you find in the community. Let me say here clearly, and say it briefly, ... ninety-eight out of one hundred of the rich men of America are honest. That is why they are rich. That is why they carry on great enterprises and find plenty of people to work with them. It is because they are honest men.

...A man is not really a true man until he owns his own home, and they that own their homes are made more honorable and honest and pure, true and economical and careful, by owning the home.

Money is power, and you ought to be reasonably ambitious to have it. You ought because you can do more good with it than you could without it. The man who gets the largest salary can do the most good with the power that is furnished to him. If you can honestly attain unto riches ... it is our Christian and godly duty to do so. Some men say, “Don’t you sympathize with the poor

people?” of course I do, or else I would not have been lecturing these years.... While we should sympathize with God’s poor—that is, those who cannot help themselves—let us remember that is not a poor person in the United States who was not made poor by his own shortcomings... It is all wrong to be poor, anyhow.” Conwell believed that abundance was a sign of virtue. He used the examples of both Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie as examples of the fact that people think vile things of the wealthy but that they are, in truth, the best men and that people are only envious of them because as he said “they have got ahead.”

Conwell has been followed by new generations of these abundance preachers. And they all preach varieties of the same teaching – that faith brings abundance and poverty is a sign of personal failure.

It’s the power of positive thinking on steroids. On The Reverend Creflo Dollar’s website it says: “We are firm believers that the *precise* understanding of God’s Word is the gateway to change in people’s lives. From finances to walking in divine health; Creflo Dollar Ministries is committed to equipping people all over the world with the knowledge and wisdom needed to make decisions that will positively impact their futures.”

Paul Yonggi Cho, the minister of the world’s largest church in South Korea, has what he calls the “Law of Incubation.” He says “First make a clear-cut goal, then draw a mental picture to visualize success. Then incubate it into reality, and finally speak it into existence through the creative power of the spoken word.”

Joel Osteen, pastor of the 16,000-seat Lakewood Church in Houston preaches: “God wants you to live an overcoming life of victory. He doesn’t want you to barely get by. He’s called *El Shaddai*, ‘the God of more than enough.’” Now I know that El Shaddai – actually means Lord Almighty – it is sort of like overcoming – like victory. If you take what Joel Osteen is saying it’s unsettling – because the overcoming is a military victory – a battle in which ones foes are utterly destroyed. And I have to say – that while there are many kinds of God in which I cannot believe – that’s the top one on my list – the powerful destroyer who uses infinite might to crush adversaries into dust. And what does that mean when it comes to the receiving of abundance? Does that mean we only have enough when everyone around us has been ground to dust?

Now all these abundance or prosperity preachers teach that money is not the important thing. The important thing is faith – and that’s important because if you don’t have faith – you can’t have the abundance. So if you don’t have the abundance, you just didn’t have the faith. Simple as that.

So the wealthiest one percent must be the most faithful. The ones God has chosen for God’s greatest blessings. And – there we are -- right back at trying to score God’s approval in order to thrive and those who starve – like the people who receive food from Feed My Starving Children or those in Sudan whose tears the choir sang about earlier – they are just the less faithful.

I believe that there is a great abundance on this earth. I believe that there is plenty to go around and no one needs to starve. But I’m also sure that there is no mathematics that will allow that plenty to flow if the bulk of the world’s abundance is held and controlled by a few people.

It’s both bad math and bad faith. And I notice that the society around us is suffering from this

poor equation. There have been brief times when people have overcome the prejudice of this figuring – when poverty or scarcity has not been seen as an immutable fact, a personal failure, or as an obstacle to be overcome by individual grit and determination.

We've enjoyed those times of relative generosity and compassion because of the rise of a powerful and dangerous idea. It is a political idea but it arose from a deeply known and held religious value: that each person is created in the image of the divine and not, therefore, born in sin and evil – but equally endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights. That idea caught fire – birthed a nation – and has been in struggle with the preachers of individual abundance ever since. This belief created a very new view of the world: that every person is entitled – to basic thriving because there is, in fact, enough to go around if only we live in a social contract that can ensure cooperation over control and generosity over greed.

Where does greed come from? It is not born in evil. It's born in want and fear -- in haunting insecurity. It's born in hunger and spiritual famine - because we are trained, taught, bored, primed to feel that equation of good = wealth from the time we are small. After all Santa has a list and he's checking it twice and you are only going to get stuff if you were nice. So – if you don't get lots of stuff – well – it's pretty clear – you aren't nice. We start 'em early. Measuring themselves against some impossible standard and hoping to be good enough.

There was a movie recently – called *The Box*. If you pressed the button on the box you'd be given a million dollars but someone, somewhere would die. Now most of us have problems that could be well solved by a million dollars. It was a test of greed – a test in just the way that greed happens – not because someone is cackling at someone else's bad fortune but because they are certain that the bad fortune will be far away from them – not touch them – they might feel bad – but not to bad to press the button.

The willingness to sacrifice others happens in small ways every day. I had a chilling experience the other day. I think it was Monday. I turned on the radio as I got in the car. I hadn't heard the beginning of the newscast but what I heard was that there had been a bombing and people were dead. I hunkered down inside, tense and worried about Lea, my stepdaughter, at Yida Refugee Camp in South Sudan. But as the newscast continued, I heard it wasn't South Sudan. I was washed with relief. Like – whew – life is still good for me. And a moment later I felt a deep shame. How could I feel relief when somewhere a large number of people had been killed in violence? In an instant I'd forgotten that the people everywhere are my kin, not as personally dear as my step daughter – but dear enough to feel worry wherever a bomb might explode. Well, a few days later, on Thursday a bomb did explode in Yida Camp, while Lea was away in the capital Juba. She reported to us that no one was killed.

Famine is created by our fears and hungers. It's created because someone dams a river, closes a border, starts a war, prices a medication sky high, prevents a crop from being grown or sold, because two nations can't share the same land or water rights. Famine is created because in one place people have a bottomless hunger and are willing to let others suffer or die to feed it. Perhaps it's easier to live with that cost because somewhere – not too long ago, our ancestors were making living sacrifices on the altars of gods they hoped to buy favor with.

When the Board took a large group of Countrysiders to pack meals at Feed My Starving Children, when they decided that Hunger would be a good service focus for this year – it was

because they wanted some way for the congregation to recognize our call to service and our real kinship with all people. One of the things that I like about the Feed My Starving Children program is that they often figure out how many young people will be fed for how long because of the food that will be delivered. You really get to feel that you are feeding others and making a real offering.

Abundance comes when we are able to make those offerings. Because we give out of our feeling of belonging, worth and connection.

Connection is key. Our connection to our inherent value, to our earth, and to one another. The bottomless hunger of Americans, in this once wealthiest among the nations, has resulted, I believe, in our high rates of morbid obesity. Of course I believe that some people could eat right, exercise all day, and be right with all things and still, because of health problems, be overweight – even severely. But I think that Americans nosh and consume and consume because we are hungry in soul not in body. I read with some interest a couple of days ago in the New York Times about Pastor Rick Warren of Saddleback Church in California. He wrote that as he looked out over his assembly he recognized that most of them were fat and that he, himself, was fat. That's his word. So he contacted a renowned health and weight loss specialist and, using the huge small group ministry in his 30,000 member congregation, created a healthy living support network. In the months since they began their program the congregation has lost more than 250,000 pounds. Now I don't think it was their scriptural message that took the weight off – but rather the deepening of their ties as a human community. And I surely don't think that we have 250,000 pounds to lose. But I do think that we can join together, in small groups for strength, to do service, to find community, to deepen our spirit and we can shed our own burden and be lighter and more nourished of soul. That is true abundance.

The Farmer's Market today is a true celebration of abundance. It is way to affirm the intimacy of food – to stand with the people who grow or create it, to build community, which is a great wealth. It's a way of, you might say, bypassing both wall street and main street and heading onto a dirt road that leads straight to the place where earth shows her abundance.

Our real abundance – the one that allows water and the plenty to flow, that allows us each to feel safe in our homes, that creates good neighbors –whether next door or around the world, will come when we recognize the long lost child, the orphaned brother or sister who is every person. And when the emptiness inside is filled by the knowledge that we are enough – that each one of us is precious and worthy and deserving and connected.

And that none of us are fully nourished until all of us are nourished. And then none shall know famine and all shall be full – in body, in heart, in mind and in spirit.