

**THE LITURGY OF ABUNDANCE  
AND THE MYTH OF SCARCITY**

Trustees in God's kingdom: A sacred trust

*Psalms 104:1-2, 10-18, 24-30, 35b; Matt. 6:25-33; Deut. 8:10-18*

We live in one of the best times ever to be a Christian in America.

I can't think of a more ideal period in our history,  
to be identified with the Christian church  
in the United States of America.

I'm checking facial expressions right now.

I'm noticing some puzzlement.

A little skepticism here and there.

A smattering of shock and disbelief.

About what I expected.

Now why would I say such a ridiculous thing?

For *one* thing, that statement sounds patently false.

There is abundant evidence backed by solid research,  
that the Christian church in America is at an all-time low  
in its social influence,  
its public respect,  
and its number of active members.

Compared to a couple generations ago,  
the church has been shoved from the center of American society  
to the margins.

Not to mention, that just being *American*  
increasingly puts us on the margins in the global community.

Our reputation and strength around the world  
has taken quite a beating in recent years.

So not only does it sound *false* to say

it's a great time to be a Christian in America,  
but it sounds patently offensive and paternalistic.

We live in an age where we are trying to move *away* from  
attitudes and behavior that smack of  
Christian domination and American imperialism.

We hope we have matured to the point where

we both tolerate and value the wide range of ethnicities,  
and nationalities, and religions.

Well, I agree wholeheartedly with both of those objections  
to my opening statement.

The church *is* at an all-time low in American society,  
and I personally *do* treasure the  
social, political, racial, ethnic, and religious diversity  
that makes up our culture today.

But all that notwithstanding,

I am grateful to be a Christian in 21<sup>st</sup>-century Western culture.

Because the church is a people shaped by a liturgy of abundance.

And we live in a culture shaped by the myth of scarcity.

We have something important going for us.

We have some significant gifts we can give the world  
at such a time as this.

If we worship the God of Abraham and the God of Jesus,  
we worship with a liturgy of abundance.

And that worship shapes how we look at God,  
look at ourselves,  
and look at the world around us.

A world shaped by the myth of scarcity *needs* people like us.

So it's a great time to be alive;

a great time to follow Christ in our daily living.

And I say that with all humility,

because I know that we have a very long way to go,

in actually reflecting the liturgy of abundance in our lives.

Much of the time we are a very poor reflection, indeed.

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I'm going to develop this idea,

first by looking at today's scripture readings,

and then by listening to the words of the renowned biblical scholar  
Walter Brueggemann.

to whom I owe these terms

“liturgy of abundance and myth of scarcity.”

I chose only three scripture passages today,  
out of hundreds of possibilities.  
Everywhere we look, scripture reveals to us  
a God of abundant generosity.

In Psalm 104 we have a rich, even opulent,  
picture of God’s abundance in creation,  
and his over-the-top provisions for all of his creatures.

The psalmist gushes in his praise of God.  
“O Lord my God, you are very great.”  
You make springs gush forth in the valleys . . .  
you give drink to every wild animal . . .  
You water the mountains . . .  
You cause grass to grow for the cattle,  
and plants for people to use . . .  
to bring forth food and wine and oil and bread . . .  
O Lord, how manifold are your works! . . .  
the earth is running over with your creatures . . .  
things innumerable . . .  
These all look to you  
to give them their food in due season;  
when you give to them . . . they are filled with good things . . .  
When you take away their breath, they die . . .  
[but] when you send forth your spirit, they are created.  
Praise the Lord!”

Every work of creation,  
from humankind, to cattle, to fish, to the land itself . . .  
God is praised as the One and only source of their life.  
Everything they enjoy comes from God’s abundant hands.  
And if God’s hands close, they wither and die.

And in Deuteronomy 8, God’s people are instructed,  
“Eat your fill and bless the Lord your God  
for the good land that he has given you.”

This is an urgent matter for people about to get to the promised land.  
This is a liturgy they need to keep them oriented.

“When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses . . .  
when your herds and flocks have multiplied,  
and your silver and gold is multiplied . . .  
then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God,  
who led you through the great and terrible wilderness . . .  
He made water flow for you from flint rock,  
and fed you in the wilderness with manna . . .  
Do not say to yourself,  
‘My power and the might of my own hand  
have gotten me this wealth.’  
But remember the Lord your God,  
for it is he who gives you power to get wealth.”

There is no time for God’s people that is more dangerous,  
in terms of losing their orientation toward God,  
losing the liturgy of God’s abundance,  
than when they are settled and prosperous.  
That is when God’s people forget who God is.  
Is there a lesson in there for North American Christians?  
You decide.

And then there’s Matthew 6,  
straight from the Sermon on the Mount.  
All through Jesus’ ministry,  
he reinforced and demonstrated the liturgy of abundance.  
The miracles were case studies in God’s abundant generosity.  
Turning water into wine.  
Feeding 4,000 and 5,000 from a few fish and loaves of bread.  
Catches of fish so excessive they broke the nets.  
Lepers cleansed. Demoniacs cured. The dead raised.  
So with that backdrop, Jesus preached, saying,  
“Don’t be anxious about your life,  
what you will eat or what you will drink,  
or about your body, what you will wear.  
Look at the birds of the air . . .  
Consider the lilies of the field . . .  
through nothing of their own doing,

God feeds them . . . abundantly,  
and clothes them . . . majestically.  
And they are of relatively little value.  
And their life is momentary.  
How much more will God abundantly care for you?  
But strive first for the kingdom of God  
and all these things will be given to you as well.”

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Just three out of a hundred passages,  
All pointing the same direction.  
We learn that the God of the Bible is a God who  
created every good thing that exists in the universe,  
and who owns it, and has ultimate authority over it.  
And we learn that the God of the Bible is a God who  
stands before the people he loves with generous open hands.  
God is not stingy or self-protective with his blessings.  
God is a huge risk-taker in his generosity.  
Time and again, God gives *more* than is needed for life.  
God gives to those who don't fully appreciate his gifts.  
Even to those who abuse and misappropriate his gifts  
to their own selfish purposes.

Yes, God sometimes judges the disobedient,  
by withholding abundance.  
But the withholding is simply to draw them back,  
to restore them to a place where they can receive God's abundance,  
with joy and gratitude.

When we are steeped in, and formed by,  
a liturgy of abundance,  
we live free of anxiety,  
full of joy,  
full of gratitude,  
and we respond with similar generosity.  
Unfortunately, we are even more strongly steeped in, and formed by,  
our culture's myth of scarcity.

I told you I was indebted to Walter Brueggemann,

the brilliant and provocative O. T. Bible scholar,  
who coined these terms,  
liturgy of abundance and myth of scarcity.

He is far more articulate on this topic than I.  
So I'm simply going to read some selected quotes from his writing.

These are Brueggemann's words:

*The Bible starts out with a liturgy of abundance.*  
*Genesis 1 is a song of praise for God's generosity . . .*  
*It keeps saying, "It is good, it is good, it is good, it is very good."*  
*God blesses the plants and animals and fish and birds and humankind.*  
*And says "Be fruitful and multiply."*  
*Overflowing goodness . . . pours from God's creator spirit . . .*

*[In the face of a famine,]*  
*Pharaoh introduces the principle of scarcity into the world economy.*  
*For the first time in the Bible, someone says,*  
*"There's not enough. Let's get everything."*  
*Pharaoh [creates a] monopoly.*  
*When the crops fail, the peasants give up their land for food . . .*  
*the next year, they give up their cattle.*  
*[Then] they have no collateral but themselves.*  
*And that's how the children of Israel become slaves.*

*[Later, in the wilderness,*  
*the children of Israel received the gift of free bread.]*  
*At first, everybody had enough.*  
*But because Israel had learned to believe in scarcity in Egypt,*  
*people started to hoard the bread.*  
*When they tried to bank it, to invest it, it turned sour and rotted,*  
*because you cannot store up God's generosity.*

*Exodus is a record of the contest*  
*between the liturgy of generosity and the myth of scarcity—*  
*a contest that still tears us apart today.*

*The liturgy of abundance says . . .*

*Appearances notwithstanding, there is enough to go around,  
so long as each of us takes only what we need.  
In fact, if we are willing to have but not hoard,  
there will even be more than enough left over.*

*An ideology of scarcity says no, there's not enough,  
so hold onto what you have.  
In fact, don't just hold onto it, hoard it.  
Put aside more than you need, so that if you do need it,  
it will be there, even if others must do without.*

*The fundamental human condition continues to be anxiety,  
fueled by an ideology that keeps pounding on us to take more,  
to not think about our neighbor,  
to be fearful, shortsighted, grudging.*

*The Bible offers an antidote to all this . . . the call to Sabbath.  
Sabbath is based on abundance.  
God's generosity reached [its] climax on the sixth day [of creation],  
when God proclaimed it sufficient . . .  
and declared all this "very good"*

*But how willing are we to practice Sabbath?  
A Sabbath spent catching up on chores  
we were too busy to do during the week,  
[or racing to the mall to catch the last of the weekend specials]  
is hardly a testimony to abundance.  
Honoring the Sabbath is a form of witness.  
It tells the world that "there is enough."*

*We can live according to an ethic whereby we are not  
driven, controlled, anxious, frantic or greedy,  
precisely because we are sufficiently at home and at peace  
to care about others as we have been cared for.*

*The gospel story of abundance says  
we originated in the magnificent,  
inexplicable love of a God who loved the world into generous being.  
The story of abundance says that our lives will end in God,*

*and that this well-being cannot be taken from us . . .  
neither life nor death nor angels nor principalities nor things—  
nothing can separate us from God.*

*Wouldn't it be wonderful if liberal and conservative church people,  
who love to quarrel with each other,  
came to a common realization that  
the real issue confronting us  
is whether the news of God's abundance can be trusted  
in the face of the story of scarcity?*

*What we know in the secret recesses of our hearts  
is that the story of scarcity is a tale of death.  
And the people of God counter this tale  
by witnessing to the manna.  
There is a more excellent bread, [and there is plenty.]*

End of quotations.  
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You know, the liturgy of abundance has nothing at *all* to do  
with being wealthy and having lots of possessions.  
In fact, the wealthy (like nearly all of us in this room)  
are probably more likely than anyone  
to fall for the myth of scarcity.  
That's why the children of Israel were sternly warned in Deut. 8  
when they arrived in the promised land,  
"Do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my own hand  
have gotten me this wealth.'"

I have personally been in worship services in small,  
extremely poor villages  
in India, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, and Swaziland.  
I never cease being amazed  
at the sheer joy and exuberance and gratitude  
of Christians in poverty worshiping God their provider.  
And oh, the abundant and celebrative feasts that can be spread  
by people with almost nothing.

Contrast that with high church worship in the wealthy West—  
Europe and North America.

Now, I *love* the beauty and liturgy of high Western worship.  
But I don't often get the impression  
that this worship is driven *primarily*  
by a deep and visceral gratitude to God the daily provider,  
without whom we would not survive.

What I invite us to do this morning,  
is to begin laying down the myth of scarcity.  
To lay down this useless anxiety we carry around in our beings  
about whether we're going to have enough.  
To lay down our worries, our self-protective behavior,  
our tendency to hoard.

But rather, in spite of our shrinking 401K's,  
in defiance of the latest drop in the stock market,  
in rebellion against the media messages of doom and gloom,  
I invite us to invest ourselves in the liturgy of God's abundance.  
I invite us to be formed by *that* liturgy,  
into people of radical joy, gratitude, sharing and generosity.

God created this world beautifully and abundantly.  
It is full and overflowing with life.  
And God continues to sustain and reproduce this life.  
There is enough for all. There is plenty, if we share.

So today I invite us to celebrate the offering  
as if we all believed in this liturgy of abundance.  
Maybe we're not completely convinced of its truth.  
It doesn't hurt to *act* like it. To practice it *anyway*.  
Behavior can shape belief, just like belief shapes behavior.  
So participate in this offering as if you fully believed  
that God is your daily provider.  
That God never has, and never will abandon you,  
but has provided enough for a full life.

The first thing we do is make sure we all have something to give.  
The offering is an act of the community.

One reason we can be so confident in God's abundance,  
is that we are part of a sharing and caring community.  
So we all participate.  
You may not have come this morning with something  
in your hand or pocket or purse.  
That's okay. Because there are people all around you with extra.

Our offering this morning can be whatever you want to bring.  
Your weekly offering to the mission of this church.  
Or your filled-out Faith Promise cards for 2009.  
Or whatever else you might have to give to God.  
Take a moment now to look around you,  
and make sure everyone, including all the children,  
has something in their hands to bring.

Share.  
If you have an empty hand, show it. Hold it out.  
I'm sure someone around you has something to put in it.  
It doesn't matter whose pocket it came from,  
because, remember, it all came from God anyway!  
Now it's going back to God in an act of gratitude.

Everybody *have* something? Okay.  
Now we don't have to be prim and proper and orderly  
when we're giving a joyful gift to God.  
We're not going to use ushers.  
But maybe to prevent people from getting run over and stepped on  
in your enthusiasm to give God an offering,  
I suggest that we move this way.  
Those in the center section, go to the center aisle,  
and make your way to the baskets,  
returning to your seats by the opposite aisle.  
Start in the front and work your way back.  
Same with those in the side sections.  
Come to the side aisles.  
Make your offering,  
and return to your seats by way of the angled aisles.  
If it's physically difficult to make this trek yourself, that's fine.  
Send your gift up with someone else.

We're *ready*?

So let's worship, with great joy and gratitude,  
the God who gives us all we need, and more.

—*Philip L. Kniss, November 23, 2008*