
John 6: 1-15

Scarcity to Abundance

© Rev Dr. Susan Cartmell

The Congregational Church of Needham

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This month our worship theme is stewardship. Now a steward is someone who looks after the finances of a large estate or a cruise ship. If you have ever taken a cruise, the steward is a valuable person to know on the ship because he has a lot of power and watches out for the rooms and the meals, and feels responsible for your welfare. If you are unhappy with your accommodations seek out the ship's steward he is the most likely person to be able to help. A large local hospital corporation in the Boston area is named Steward Health Care. They chose the word steward because it has the connotation of something you can trust.

But it is also true that we are stewards. The biggest responsibility most of us have is the stewardship of our families. We are in charge of their accommodations, meals, and the order of life in our homes. Like all stewards, we also take the complaints when one of the brood is unhappy with their arrangements.

Attorneys steward their cases for years, or even decades. Businesspeople are the stewards of various sales departments. Authors are the stewards of their manuscripts until they deliver them to the publisher. We are all stewards of our country; the citizens of a democracy are the stewards of the affairs of the state, and the stewards of freedom.

The Bible talks a lot about stewardship reminding us that we are stewards of creation, and stewards of our resources. Everything we have is a gift from God, so God holds us accountable for what we do with it. Being good stewards is a big responsibility.

For this series of sermons, I will break the theme down into reasonable topics. Last week I talked about the Stewardship of Time, and how time is one of our most precious commodities. Today I want to talk about the Stewardship of Money and see what the Bible is telling us about that. Let's take a look at John 6 and see what the loaves and fishes have to tell us about stewardship of money today.

IN THE FIRST PLACE – The Bible offers us abundance where many people see scarcity.

In our story today, Jesus has gone off into the countryside to rest, but as word spread about his healings, big crowds of people followed him. Soon, the disciples started to worry about how to feed such a crowd, because the disciples were the stewards of these large public appearances. Practical men, they had grown nervous and speculated that it would take 6-months wages to feed a gathering of this size. They huddled with Jesus to talk about their dilemma in terms of how bleak it was. All they could see was scarcity. Talk of scarcity is contagious. People who believe there is not enough get very anxious very fast.

It is the frenzied fear of scarcity that drives people to hoard food before a major storm in New England. If you go to the supermarket late in the day before a well- publicized Nor'easter it looks like folks are expecting Armageddon. Shelves are stripped bare; the shopping spree is driven by fears of scarcity. It is not logical but people get terrified that there won't be enough. It was that kind of thinking that caused the bank run in 1929 that led to the Great Depression.

Jesus comes to tell us that in God's kingdom people live with a sense of abundance; they are not paralyzed by fear of scarcity. Christ started his career at a wedding. When the wine supply was exhausted he turned water into the best wine of the evening, and he made enough that people were amazed at the exhaustive supply. He did not do that to show off, but to demonstrate that God's gifts to us, the gifts of life, flow abundantly. From the Wedding at Cana to the resurrection Jesus says where we fear the worst God is often creating an abundance we can hardly comprehend.

It is ironic that we need to keep learning that lesson again and again in human history. We have so much more today than ever, but most of us worry about not having enough. We live in the wealthiest country on the planet but most of us don't feel rich. Sociologists of Religion, Christian Smith and Michael Emerson have written about giving in American Churches. Their book is called *Passing the Plate*. "Contemporary American Christians are among the wealthiest of their faith in the world today and probably the most affluent single group of Christians in 2000 years of church history." But American Christians don't see themselves as affluent. American Christians belong to churches that teach us to give generously to the work of God's kingdom. Many of these churches, including the UCC, teach people to tithe- work toward giving 10% of their income. Most American Christians today profess that they "want the hungry fed, the church strengthened, the poor raised to enjoy lives of dignity and hope." Yet only a small percentage give as generously as they could. {Smith, Christian & Emerson: Michael, *Passing the Plate: Why American Christians Don't Give Away More Money*. New York: Oxford Press, 2008. P. 3}

The authors don't pass judgment on American Christians, but they point out that if we could see the abundance that is here in our churches things might be very different. They demonstrate that American Christians might have a huge impact on the world's economy, and could even become a force for good to be reckoned with. Over 226 million people profess to be Christians in America.

Based on average household income the authors calculate that if everyone did what the Bible encourages us to do- tithe 10% after taxes, at a bare minimum we could have a sum equal to \$46 billion to spend to make the world a better place. That would be plenty for 500,000 clean water projects. It would quadruple the budget for Habitat, and supply 50,000 need-based scholarships to seminaries. 20 million needy children would get more food education and healthcare. All refugees in Asia, Africa, Europe and Latin America would be cared for. It would cover 1000 safe houses in Latin American for street orphans; 10,000 literacy workers; 8 new colleges in Eastern Europe; fully fund an institute for Christian peacemaking; provide vitamins and antibiotics to 100,000 medical clinics. This list is pages long. *{Ibid, p. 13-18}*

It makes you wonder what an impact we could have. We would not need the UN to buy in or Congress to agree; we could do this. On a much smaller scale, churches that see their abundance instead of their scarcity can make strides no one imagined. Look at what has happened to us. Many churches and temples would have ignored the opportunity to buy the building next door, as we did last spring, even when the gift and opportunity came knocking. It would have been easy to focus on the obstacles, like those disciples did with Jesus long ago. No one would have blamed us if we focused on the scarcity instead of the abundance.

Jesus says faith is not about seeing obstacles; but about being open to the possibility for abundance. In our church when we give generously, we are only limited by our imaginations.

IN THE SECOND PLACE Jesus call us to be open.

There are many ways to interpret the story of the loaves and the fishes. One way is to say that Jesus took the food of the little boy and passed his hands over it and turned it into a banquet, much

like a magic trick. The other interpretation does not diminish the miracle, but makes it more believable. Many scholars think that most of the people would have brought some provisions with them, on a journey out to the countryside, but they also would have expected to keep the food to themselves.

When Jesus took the child's food and brought it out into the open it may have inspired others or shamed them to share what they had, too. When people bring things out into the open, we are confronted with our own stinginess, or we are encouraged to be all that we can be. The Bible discussed money in dozens of places. Jesus talks more about money than he talked about prayer. Maybe because it was not written by New Englanders, people writing the Bible brought out the topic of money out into the open.

We also need to fight the temptation to keep our finances a secret, or to hide information, especially about money. Often when we bring things out into the open, and explain what we need, people step up and things get better.

FINALLY, Jesus says we all need each other.

My favorite person in the story is the little boy. He was not old enough to be skeptical. An innocent child, he sees that people are hungry and gives up his lunch. He says, "Here is what I have, but you are welcome to it. I am glad to give it. I am willing to do what I can." It is tempting to do less than we can because we imagine it won't make a difference. But, when we speculate about our scarcity we forget that it is God's job to worry about feeding the multitude. It is our job to give what we have, and there is something freeing about generous giving. That boy was all in that day. When we are all in, God blesses our gifts.

It is hard to be open-handed in our consumer-driven culture. Last week I told you I was worried that we are losing the Sabbath. I am also worried that many of us are losing our way. It is easy to get lost in today's world. It is easy to forget the messages of faith. The culture will tear you down. It tells you, no one has enough unless you buy what they are selling. It convinces you that you won't have enough money to buy a good car, to afford the good life or send your children to college, or retire when and where you want to. It is easy to feel overwhelmed. The Church has a different message.

On another mountain Jesus said, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and thieves break in. Where your treasure is there will your heart be also. No one can serve two masters; you cannot serve God and wealth. You will hate the one and love the other. Therefore I tell you don't worry about your life, what you will eat or drink or about your body what you will put on. Is not life more than food and body more than clothing? Strive first for God's kingdom and all these things shall be yours as well.

We need each other, because the values of our society are not all life-giving. Many of them are toxic. Christ believes in us. He can take our gifts and bless them, so that even if they look like small gifts to us they can set the stage for miracles of faith and risk. Here in Needham our gifts to this church really make a difference. Twenty seven years ago our church started the Guatemala Project; our budget supports trips and school supplies. Together we have funded dozens of scholarships. Fourteen years ago, our church started Needham Steps Up a tutoring program that helps Needham youth living in subsidized housing find tutoring and SAT help so they can apply for college. Eight years ago our church started Baby Basics, a program for poor families who need help in this community; last Tuesday fourteen Spanish and African American parents with children joined us for dinner prepared by church volunteers, as they do every month. We send money to teachers in Turkey, hospitals in India, refugees in Columbia, earthquake victims in Japan and children with HIV in South

Africa. We support schools in Native Americans communities in Arizona and LGBT asylum seekers in a shelter in Worcester, people who would be in danger in their home countries.

None of us could do so much individually, but together when we combine our gifts and offer what we have open-handedly, miracles of faith and hope are born. Loaves and fish are multiplied. We put our faith into action through this church where the words Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven are not just part of a prayer, but central to our mission.