



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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THE TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
THE GENEROUS COMMUNITY

From Garden to Garden: The Generosity of God Genesis 1:1-2:4; Luke 15:11-32

I tend to shy away from labels. I once took some pride in being a “Baby Boomer” because that group (which includes many of you) was in the world doing some amazing things. But I arrived toward the end of that generation and realized that my experience growing up was quite different from the people who embodied it. I grew up with rock and roll and disco. We had bellbottoms and polyester and big hair. I am not certain there is an adjective to describe my particular era of growing up and, if there is, I am not certain I want to hear it! Now we have GenX-ers and Millennials and, if I were you, I would be offended at being reduced to a category instead of being recognized for the individual gifts I bring to life.

I really do not want a label for my generation, but I am aware of the heritage that is mine. To that end, I know that I am a grandchild of the Great Depression. Unlike my parents, I grew up in an era of economic growth and spreading prosperity. I did not always have what I wanted, but I certainly had all that I needed—and more.

My parents are children of the Depression, both born in the year following the stock market crash of 1929. There were and are to this day very frugal people. Their parents taught them to be thrifty. I remember my grandmother neatly folding used tinfoil and placing it in a kitchen drawer with a dozen other pieces of used, neatly folded tinfoil. The little tan ceramic vase that sat for years beside my grandfather’s chair is now in my parents’ home. Every day my grandfather stretched a green rubber band around that vase which he had removed from the morning newspaper. That vase probably held two or three hundred rubber bands when he died—each one ready to be used whenever the need might arise.

My father and mother taught their three boys not to waste anything. I possess DNA that requires that I save odds and ends because I might need an odd or an end some day!

Years ago, when I pastored another congregation, I noticed that the otherwise charming town in which we lived was showing signs of wear and

tear. Paint peeled on houses, churches, and public buildings. Fences sagged, signs faded, temporary patches were evident where permanent fixes should have been made.

The puzzling factor was that I had learned banks in the area were among the wealthiest in the state in terms of deposits. Old money loitered there, gaining interest but never being very useful. Eventually it dawned on me that much of the property and a good deal of the money in that community were owned by people who had lived through, grown up during, or were descended from the Great Depression. They generally held onto whatever assets they had fearing that one day the bottom would drop out again and they would need every penny they had stored away. They were determined that they would never be forced to struggle as they had in those desperate days of the Depression.

For years I called this characteristic frugality and thriftiness and preparing for the future. It was not until a few months ago that the bulb lit up, the bell rang, and I finally understood the origin of this behavior.

Walter Brueggemann, Emeritus Professor of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary, wrote an article about fifteen years ago which I had somehow missed until a few weeks ago. He pinpointed the problem which my grandparents and parents and you and I have struggled with for so long. He calls it “the myth of scarcity.”¹ It is the deep-seated, anxiety-producing, behavior-changing feeling that there is simply not enough of anything to go around.

Dr. Brueggemann is right. I know it. I feel it. I live it. So do you. I drive a car for ten or fifteen years. I wear clothes until they embarrass my wife. I use ink pens until they are absolutely dry—and then save the little spring inside. I don’t save used tinfoil, but I do save rubber bands and paper clips and those aluminum clips that hold new dress shirts together because they can be re-used as paper clips! I save screws, wires, switches, paint, and string because someday I may need them.

The myth of scarcity believes that everything is limited. In a positive sense it urges people to be frugal and thrifty, to conserve and preserve. In the negative, however, the myth of scarcity encourages hoarding and

¹Walter Brueggemann, “The Liturgy of Abundance, the Myth of Scarcity,” *The Christian Century* (March 24-31, 1999).

selfishness. And regardless of what your parents or grandparents or anybody else told you, the myth of scarcity is not biblical. It is evident, but it is not an attitude endorsed by God.

The Bible begins with, not a cautionary word to save what God has given us; rather, the Bible begins with a brash story about God's lavish creation of the world and all that is in it. When there is a need for light, God creates it. He creates not just one, sufficient light; God provides a light for day and another light for night along with trillions of stars to supplement the moon. When water is corralled, it becomes creeks and streams, ponds and lakes, rivers and oceans. Land takes on multiple forms and sizes and characteristics. When it is time to add vegetation, God has a hey day. When fish and birds and animals are needed, God is extravagant. And when God realizes a companion would be nice, God creates two creatures who can be friends to God and one another. There is no sense of scarcity in the first Garden. Abundance is evident at every turn for creation is a gift of God's love, and God's love knows nothing but abundance.

Even when the humans forget that they have more than they will ever need and decide they must have the one thing God has said they should not have and are forced to leave the Garden, God still lavishes care upon them. They are given clothing and skills and protection and family. Abraham and Sarah are invited to possess a new land "flowing with milk and honey." Everything they need is provided including the Son of Promise who will insure a great nation. Despite challenging times, God provides for the Hebrew people at every turn and they never lack for anything.

It is not until Pharaoh dreams about a famine, that the myth of scarcity creeps into the story. Through Joseph, God has a plan to feed the Hebrew and Egyptian people so that they will not starve. There will be plenty of food for everyone. Yet, according to Dr. Brueggemann, it is Pharaoh who introduces the myth of scarcity. It is Pharaoh (who, by the way, holds more possessions than any other human on earth) who fears the famine and requires that people forfeit their land and animals and, eventually, themselves to get the food they have planted and harvested and stored against the famine. The myth of scarcity is planted like the seed of a noxious weed that grows and spreads and threatens to choke the life-giving abundance of God's generosity.

We see this struggle of attitudes played out in the familiar parable of the Prodigal Son. The older son is hard working and responsible while the

younger son is the epitome of wastefulness and irresponsibility. He is part heir to a profitable farm, but fears that he had better get his while he can because it might not be there tomorrow. So he cashes in his stock in the family farm, leaves town, and proceeds to throw it all away. Which of the two sons would your grandparents have chosen? Your parents? You? Give me the hard working, frugal, responsible child any day!

That day finally arrives when the young man “comes to himself.” He knows he has blown not only his inheritance, but his relationship with his family as well. He comes crawling back home, praying that at the least his father will give him a job working out in the fields. He had already received what was his and had squandered it. His portion of the inheritance was gone. There was nothing left for him. But he forgot who his father was. Having spent every day since his young son left praying and looking for his return, the father saw him when he turned the corner a mile down the road. He ran to meet his boy, threw his arms around him and welcomed him home. He called for fresh clothes and a party. He lavished him with presents. His generous love was displayed in abundance for his son who was alive to him again.

The older son was a Pharaoh. Already his father had given half the inheritance to his irresponsible younger brother. Now it appeared as if the remaining half would have to be divided again. His father was throwing a party for this boy but had never thrown a party for him. He thought in terms of portions and limits and shrinking resources, but his father thought in terms of joy and happiness and sharing everything that was his.

It is no surprise that Jesus told such a parable for he was always telling stories of abundance and doing things that made it seem as if there were an abundance of everything people needed. He told stories of vineyard owners who paid a full day’s wages for an hour’s work and of masters who forgave huge debts owed by their servants. Jesus transformed jars of ordinary water into jugs of the finest wine. He took a child’s lunch, some bread and a couple of fish, and managed to feed thousands upon thousands of people with a dozen baskets of food left over. Jesus knew nothing about the myth of scarcity except that it was counter to God’s attitude of abundance. And when he had given everything he had—his own life—in perhaps his greatest show of generosity, Jesus appeared in another garden, the garden of resurrection, and offered salvation and eternal life to the entire world. No scarcity there!

Yet we still struggle with the myth of scarcity. We see it in corporations which lay off workers at holiday time in order to make the bottom line of their

annual report more palatable to shareholders. We see it in legislative struggles over healthcare and other benefits for the poor. We saw it last week in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida when a law prohibiting the feeding of homeless people was enforced and three Good Samaritans were arrested. The problem was not that the police enforced an existing law. The problem was that such a law existed to begin with! We see the myth of scarcity alive and well day after day in the actions of people who have more than they can ever use grabbing for more of what little bit other people have. And we see it in our own lives when we hold back our own resources instead of trusting God to provide for us and to provide through us as God always has.

There is God—running toward us all with arms wide open, unconcerned about the inheritance we have squandered, caring only for the fact that we are still alive and on the way back home. There is God lavishing us with the abundance of his love day after day and we, like the older brother, are too concerned with what we don't have to recognize that we already have it all. There is God—who knows nothing about scarcity because his love is so generous—dying to share that love with us. There is God who has thrown open the door of death and stepped into a garden teeming with life, inviting us to come and dwell there as well. There is God. And here we are. And here we are! Thanks be to God!

November 9, 2014

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

We look at the world and are astounded by your generosity, O God. Grace is found in each detail and love is evident in the sheer abundance of your provision for us. We thank you, though our words are meager attempts at gratitude. We praise you, all the while knowing that the fullness of our hearts can never be adequately expressed. We love you, understanding that our toddling affection may well appear fickle when embraced by your encompassing compassion. Nonetheless, we are grateful for all you do for us, O God, and seek to demonstrate that gratitude with our lives.

As we look at the world you have given us, we realize all of the resources that you have provided for us. As we pray for one another, we pray also to be aware of what is already ours. We pray that skill and ingenuity will partner with your grace to provide healing and that insight and opportunity will combine for new direction. We ask that knowledge and the compassion of friends will result in peace and that conviction and courage will right the wrongs that plague our lives. We pray that we will seek your involvement in every aspect of our lives so that we might help change life for one another.

There are times when we feel as if our little bit can do little to make a difference in this world. Remind us that even a mustard seed can grow into a vibrant bush and that little more than a kind word from us can turn life on a dime. Make us aware of our potential to share your love in a multitude of ways and then give us the strength and courage to do it.

At this moment, O God, make us aware of how very much you love us. Remind us of how abundantly we are blessed. Inspire us to live as generously; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.