

Finding Abundance

- a worship service and sermon reflection crafted and presented by Dawn Daniels, UUFCM Minister, on Sunday, October 11, 2015.

Prayer & Meditation

Spoken meditation – a poem by Mark Nepo titled “The Way Under the Way”

For all that has been written,
for all that has been read, we
are led to this instant where one
of us will speak and one of us will
listen, as if no one has ever placed
an oar into that water.

It doesn't matter how we come
to this. We may jump to it or be
worn to it. Because of great pain.
Or a sudden raw feeling that this
is all very real. It may happen in a
parking lot when we break the eggs
in the rain. Or watching each other
in our grief.

But here we will come. With very
little left in the way.

When we meet like this, I may not
have the words, so let me say it now:
Nothing compares to the sensation
of being alive in the company of
another. It is God breathing on
the embers of our soul.

Stripped of causes and plans
and things to strive for,
I have discovered everything
I could need or ask for
is right here—
in flawed abundance.

We cannot eliminate hunger,
but we can feed each other.
We cannot eliminate loneliness,
but we can hold each other.
We cannot eliminate pain,
but we can live a life
of compassion.

Ultimately,
we are small living things
awakened in the stream,
not gods who carve out rivers.

Like human fish,
we are asked to experience
meaning in the life that moves
through the gill of our heart.

There is nothing to do
and nowhere to go.
Accepting this,
we can do everything
and go anywhere.

Reading

“Abundant Life” - by Kendyl Gibbons

San Ysidro creek starts somewhere high in the Inez Mountains above Santa Barbara, California, and it falls through a boulder-strewn stream bed down to the bay and the Pacific Ocean. It is a dream of a creek, bubbling, dancing, pouring; sun-dappled and butterfly-haunted, laced with blossoms and grasses for which I have no name. In February, which is when I know it, it is in spate, swift with the melted mountain snows.

The first time I saw this creek, my immediate thought was, “They must turn this off at night, when no one is looking at it.” Realizing how silly that was, I still had to wrestle a bit to wrap my mind around the idea that this pouring forth was continuous; that the stream flows all the time, splashing over the rocks and into the tiny pools constantly, whether I was watching it or not. And it struck me that the creek, in its careless fullness, in its unceasing abundance, is a kind of model for the ceaseless creative energy of the universe, which is also pouring out and over us all the time, whether we see it or not. So I go back to the creek every year to remember; **to remind myself that we stand always in the flow**; that the waters of life are washing over us in a springtime torrent every day we live.

Which is not to say that scarcity is not a reality as well. It can be easy to lose track of the simple abundances of life if we are hungry, or unsheltered, or in want of something as simple as mittens in the raw Minnesota winter. Abundance has this dimension—that it is responsive to need.

There is a **Sufi teaching story** that explores the nature of abundance. It tells of a seeker who was meditating in the forest and observed a bear with a mangled foreleg. Unable to run or to hunt, the bear seemed destined to die of starvation, yet as the seeker watched, a fox came with its prey of that day, and after eating its fill, **it left the remainder of the meal for the bear**. Several days the seeker observed this same pattern, saying to himself, “Behold, how good and generous is God, who feeds the bear by means of the fox, how He provides for all His creatures! I, too, will put my trust in Him utterly.” And the seeker retired to a cave, to await the arrival of his provision, but days passed and

nothing came. Finally, on the fifth day, as he was fainting from hunger, a voice said to him, “O thou who art in the path of error, repent! Stop imitating the injured bear, and go out and follow the example of the fox!”

We can understand the abundance of the universe in two ways: as an invitation to complacency, or as an invitation to generosity. Much depends upon that choice. For if we respond with complacency—if we merely accept all the creative energy and all the love and sacrifice that have made our own lives possible, **then the abundance of the universe comes to a stop in us.** If we choose to receive what we have concluded is our due—and even, perhaps, to complain that it is not given exactly as we would have preferred it—then we make ourselves something outside the process, **something other than the ever-flowing stream of life,** something transitory and futile and ultimately trivial. It is when we respond to the abundance of life with **gratitude and generosity** that we become a part of that universal creativity. When we contribute our own energy to the flowing stream - then it fills us and pours out of us to others, so that the stream is enhanced.

Sermon Reflection

Our worship services for the month of October will be crafted around the themes of hunger and longing, which will lead us quite naturally into the interconnected themes of abundance and scarcity. We continue this morning with a closer look at aspects of scarcity and abundance, particularly how our inward view – our attitudes, our beliefs – deeply impact our lives, our choices and our actions.

To hopefully deepen our insight and broaden our view this day, I bring to this “pulpit of many voices” a message titled “Finding Abundance” by Hilary Landau Krivchenia who is the Minister at Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist in Palatine, Illinois:

<http://www.questformeaning.org/quest-article/finding-abundance/>

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.

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

I expect 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, etc., 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, earned, nor deserved that favor.

The nineteenth century saw a new form of the idea of deserving favor—or entitlement. It was most clearly articulated by churchman and lecturer 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.

***Jim Dealing – stands and reads the following from his place in the congregation:**

I say that you ought to get rich,
and it is our duty to get rich... The
men who get rich may be the most
honest men you find in the community...
98 out of 100 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...
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... If you can honestly
attain unto riches...it is our Christian
and godly duty to do so...
While we should sympathize with
God's poor—that is, those who
cannot help themselves—let us
remember that there 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, and he has been followed by new generations of similar preachers, touting varieties of the same teaching—**that faith brings abundance and poverty is a sign of 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, 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 *Ei Shaddai*, “the God of more than enough.”**”

Now, I know that *Ei Shaddai* actually means Lord Almighty—as in overcoming or victory. If you accept what Joel Osteen is saying it’s unsettling, because the overcoming is a military victory— a battle in which one’s foes are utterly destroyed. And I have to say that while there are many kinds of God in which I cannot believe, that one’s at the top of 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 it mean we only have enough when everyone around us has been ground to dust?

All these abundance or prosperity preachers teach that money is not the important thing, though. The important thing is faith, and if you don’t have faith, you can’t have the abundance. 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 those who starve, those who are hungry on city streets or in Sudan, they are just the less faithful.

I believe that there is 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 **there is no mathematics that will allow such 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 society around us is suffering from this poor equation. There have been times when people have overcome the prejudice of this figuring—times 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 rather 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, but rather in want and fear, in **haunting insecurity**. It’s born in hunger and spiritual famine, because we are trained, taught, primed to internalize that equation of **“good equals 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.

There was a movie in 2009 called *The Box*, with a haunting premise. A box appears on the doorstep of a couple who learn that if they open it they will be given a million dollars, but someone, somewhere, will 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 rather because they are certain that the bad fortune will be far away from them. They might feel bad, but not so bad that they'll keep the lid on the box.

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. It happens 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 to feed it, they are willing to let others suffer or die.** 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.

But the earth is our horn of plenty, and our real abundance—abundance which allows the plenty to flow, which allows us each to feel safe in our homes, which creates good neighbors, whether next door or around the world—that abundance will only come when we recognize the long-lost child, the orphaned brother or sister who is every person. **That abundance will only come 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.

That abundance will only find us when we understand that none of us is 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.

Shalom and Salaam, Blessed be and Amen.