

The Abundance of God

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Joanna C. Leiserson at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, November 16, 2008.

How many of you don't feel for the third servant? Who doesn't think that of the three servants, maybe he made the best choice—stashing his money away instead of investing it in a bank funded by mortgage-backed securities? The poor servant was just being prudent! What is wrong with being prudent and sensible? Why does Jesus scold anyone who would be cautious about investing their boss's money? Besides, the underside of a mattress is looking like pretty good these days when you are watching your retirement account disappear. Merrill Lynch, Jesus is not. But Jesus is not telling us what to do with our money. And he's no Dear Abby either, handing out advice about being courageous or taking chances. Instead, as he so often does in Matthew, Jesus is teaching us about the Kingdom of God.

Earlier in the Gospel, Jesus told parables about what the Kingdom of God is like. The Kingdom is like bread dough full of yeast that rises and swells all by itself. It's like a mustard seed that grows into an enormous bush without any help from any of us. The Kingdom of God is extravagant, almost spendthrift abundance—an infinite gift of grace, love, forgiveness—gifts that never run out. These are the parables of the Kingdom. Then as Jesus moves toward the end of his life, he begins to focus on the world's end times. His parables of the Kingdom give way to parables of judgment and decision. Today's story is sandwiched in between the story of the wise and foolish bridesmaids and the story of the King who separates the sheep from the goats. Together these stories warn us how we need to prepare for the Day of the Lord, and how not to. In today's story, Jesus tells us in particular what to do with wealth—not earthly wealth but the wealth of God, and whether it makes sense to be prudent about God.

God offers us wealth, an abundance of love. Who are we to hoard it, or to put a lid on it? But we often do. Like a foolish bridesmaid, we sometimes fail to carry it with us. So we carefully ration it—just a little love here and there, without showing too much lest we run out. Or like the chintzy servant, we keep it hidden. No one can find it beneath our defenses or our cynicism or our resentments. In other words, what God has so freely give, we can make scarce. But don't, says Jesus. Don't stop God. Do not take abundance and turn it into scarcity. Do not live in the day as if it were the night, as St. Paul warns; do not mistake the day for the night. Do not mistake abundance for scarcity. If we believe in scarcity, we will live by scarcity's rules, and we will be bearers of scarcity—afraid that like our worldly goods, God's riches might “run out.” If we live by abundance, we will be agents of God's abundance, trusting that God's grace is indeed infinite.

So how can we be agents of God's abundance in our society? Think about, for example, Appalachia. Appalachia is on my mind, now that I live in Kentucky. You have heard about mountaintop removal for mining coal, a practice that buries rivers and erodes the land. You have heard about low wages combined with dangerous working conditions. Ways like these have taken the abundance of Appalachia and turned it into scarcity. But these old ways of exploiting the land and the people are beginning to be

challenged. We are learning that abundance for all means abundance for each of us, that exploiting and degrading any of us exploits and degrades us all. We are learning to practice sustainable development of our natural resources that recognizes that abundance for me does not need to create scarcity for somebody else. Instead of destructive mountaintop removal and clearcutting of forests, instead of exploiting and impoverishing the people of the mountains and taking their land for the gain of a few, instead of taking the abundance of Appalachia and turning it into scarcity, what if we advocated for a just and fair use and ownership of the land, that benefits us all? What if we live as if we are connected to one another? This is Appalachia, but imagine another place, or another situation. What if we can remember and embrace our connectedness to one another each day—in our homes, in our workplace, in our church? Perhaps this is our task as people who commit their lives to God in baptism, we who form this Christian (Christ-centered) community, as a people of God, a communion of saints, and even a ministry of the baptized. So perhaps part of our answer lies in the meaning of our baptism.

God gives to us such an abundance of blessings at our baptism, the anointing seal of oil marking us as Christ's own for ever. In fact, we are so much Christ's own that at baptism, we say that we even die and rise with Christ. We have a new birth and a risen life. At the other end of life, at death, we are commended to God "in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ." What happens in between—between our new life and our eternal life? What is different in a risen life?

Our baptismal rite says that we are promised God's grace and truth, God's holy and life-giving Spirit, forgiveness of our sins, and a new life of grace. What wondrous promises! And God gives them to us!

We ask for an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love God, and the gift of joy and wonder in all of God's works. What audacious requests! And God gives them to us!

As we grow into our baptism—as we do every day of our life—these gifts become part of us. So let us remember the abundance of these gifts within and not turn them into scarcity by hoarding ourselves or putting a lid on ourselves. When we see someone in need and are "tempted" (as we so bizarrely say) to give generously, let us remember that the world of God's abundance is not bound by the limits of human scarcity. When we give to one, we give to ourselves, and to God, and the whole Kingdom grows. When we feed someone who is hungry, we feed ourselves, and we feed the King, and the whole Kingdom grows. We are all part of God's abundance, all connected; in fact, we are all one.

We might want to hide our money under a mattress these days, so it won't become scarce or get used up. But don't hide God's love under that mattress. That's like mistaking the day for the night. Don't mistake God's unlimited abundance of his Kingdom for the finite riches of this world. God's love and mercy will never run out, and if we are as extravagant with God's love and mercy as God is, we are good and faithful servants indeed.