

September 25, 2016

Sunday Sermon: “A Culture of Abundance”

Rev. Dr. Len De Roche

Ever since and maybe before the recession of 2007 America has been operating in a culture of scarcity. We don't want to borrow to do infrastructure, we don't want to pay our bills supporting those in need. We don't build new schools and public buildings with the idea that we need to save money because there is not enough of it around. Now for many American citizens this is true. But the Americans who are most vocal about the need to not spend and those cultivating the culture of scarcity, are those whose personal wealth is embarrassing to our nation. If truth were more persuasive than rhetoric, the real bill for infrastructure and welfare and public buildings and schools doesn't fall on the embarrassing rich, but on declining middle income population. If truth were more persuasive than rhetoric, we would see that the overall wealth of our great nation has increased embarrassingly compared to the world's wealth.

But the culture of scarcity has little to do with material being. Our culture of scarcity is really a culture that tells us we never have enough, we are never good enough, we are never thin enough nor tall enough nor beautiful enough, we are never successful enough, we are never great enough. This is the cultural scarcity, the moral fiber of our society. The whole argument about expanding medical entitlements to the entire population is an excellent example. We have beyond a doubt the best medical providers and systems in the world. Accessing it by only a portion of our population makes it a culture of scarcity. Dr. Brené Brown, a frequent TED presenter, said, “Worry about scarcity is our culture's version of post-traumatic stress.”

This in some ways goes back to our Puritan ancestors whose work ethic has no place for those who don't fit into that Puritan model. This is why I believe we don't honor the arts with more of our national treasure. After all you can't eat art, well most art anyway. Likewise looking at those striving to survive in our culture and applying our Puritan formula we have a scapegoat. In many ways the scarcity lies in our lack of ability to find happiness and contentment with what we do have and the beautiful natural environment in which we live.

Another victim of this culture of scarcity is love. This is the love that the Greeks named agape, which they believed was the highest form of love, brotherly love, and charity.

I believe Angela Merkel displayed this agape when she opened the doors of Germany to refugees. This was the culture of abundance where there was much love out there. Then the culture of scarcity took over and that's what we see happening within Europe today. Merkel has been alternately called the Angel of Mercy and the Agent of Destruction depending on your perspective.

In Dan's story to the children he talked about everybody doing the responsible thing to take care of the ship, since it's everybody's ship. If labor is the commodity that shipmates bring to the ship, they can't operate in a culture of scarcity. They have to operate in a culture where there is sufficient labor to take care of the ship, a culture of abundance. We see that abundance here in the states when Obama agreed to taking 10,000 refugees, and then as many as 30 state governors said "not in my backyard." This is the culture of scarcity. In order to display agape you have to be vulnerable and display much courage. You need to be open emotionally to other people to display this agape. So the culture of scarcity is at odds with the culture of abundance. I've known many congregations that live with this mindset of scarcity.

They're afraid of asking and therefore they operate constantly as if they are closing the doors of the churches. Members, friends, and even renters of the building need to be asked to give. The last congregation I served wouldn't ask. They use what I call the NPR model of giving: send a postcard or letter and say we need money and then accept only what comes. I believe that you have to ask the members what they want the organization to be able to do and then find the resources to do it.

Now the Culture of scarcity is part of our 20th century business environment, which comes from a warfare model that states the only outcome is to be winners and losers. In this philosophy the resources are limited, but so is the product outcome. In this mindset there is only so much to go around and when that is done there is no more. It says that our resources are limited. It doesn't work with economics and it doesn't work with agape.

In contrast to scarcity there is a culture of abundance, in this mindset we are constantly creating new resources. I believe Steve Jobs and Apple operated on this abundance philosophy when they were in their growth mode.

This was the mindset of this country in its productive eras. One of our presidential candidates points to this era with the scarcity mindset. In the abundance mindset, resources are created. Last year when I arrived there wasn't enough money or energy to hold the congregation together. But you created the energies that have regenerated your congregation. For example, the sign out front was to be replaced and there were estimates of how much money it would take to replace it. There was not the money in the budget to do that but Kevin Krebsbach supplied the expertise and the energy and the sign was replaced. When we looked at the outside of the building and examined what needed to be done with the shrubbery and plants, there wasn't enough money or energy to make it look attractive. But you looked at the same situation through the eyes of a culture of abundance and the money and energy were available to remove the trees, trim shrubs and weed our gardens. This is living the culture of abundance. When you've embraced the culture of abundance, things happen. New resources develop.

To live in this culture of scarcity is to live in a finite world, to live in a culture of abundance is to live in an infinite world. When we repeat the mantra, love is the spirit, this is to live in the infinite world. There's the old story of stone soup that comes from Eastern Europe. "Once upon a time, somewhere in post-war Eastern Europe, there was a great famine in which people jealously hoarded whatever food they could find, hiding it even from their friends and neighbors. One day a wandering soldier came into a village and began asking questions as if he planned to stay for the night. "There's not a bite to eat in the whole province," he was told. "Better keep moving on. Oh, I have everything I need," he said. "In fact, I was thinking of making some stone soup to share with all of you." He pulled an iron cauldron from his wagon, filled it with water, and built a fire under it. Then, with great ceremony, he drew an ordinary-looking stone from a velvet bag and dropped it into the water. By now, hearing the rumor of food, most of the villagers had come to the square or watched from their windows. As the soldier sniffed the "broth" and licked his lips in anticipation, hunger began to overcome their skepticism. "Ahh," the soldier said to himself rather loudly, "I do like a tasty stone soup. Of course, stone soup with *cabbage* --

that's hard to beat." Soon a villager approached hesitantly, holding a cabbage he'd retrieved from its hiding place, and added it to the pot. "Capital!" cried the soldier. "You know, I once had stone soup with cabbage and a bit of salt beef as well, and it was fit for a king."

The village butcher managed to find some salt beef . . . and so it went, through potatoes, onions, carrots, mushrooms, and so on, until there was indeed a delicious meal for all. The villagers offered the soldier a great deal of money for the magic stone, but he refused to sell and traveled on the next day. As the soldier did, you are creating a culture of abundance.

This week we will be showing our first Fern Street movie for the year on Wednesday afternoon and Friday evening. It will be the movie Crash and will be shown on the new 65-inch monitor in the program Center. This is part of an anonymous gift that supports communication and energy conservation in the congregation.

That same gift will replace much of our lighting with low-cost LED lights and our thermostats with programmable instruments. This is the culture of abundance that you are creating.

But when we think of the culture of abundance we think money. But it isn't only money, it's also energies and love. The concept of abundance isn't primarily a money issue, it's a way of being, it's a way of being in the world. Last year when the president promised a home for 10,000 Syrian families and one Syrian family was due to arrive in Indiana, the governor and current vice presidential candidate said no. His Christian ethics were trumped by the philosophy of scarcity. In contrast Governor Malloy opened his arms and accepted that family. Connecticut is richer for this decision based on abundance. Coming down to your decision to help sponsor a refugee family last spring, there was some initial scarcity thinking. The initial meetings indicated how vast the undertaking. But Linda, Nan and Bebe and the rest of the committee accepted the challenge. The money came easy. The money was the easiest part of the challenge. It was the easiest part of the challenge because of love.

When love is the spirit, money isn't an obstacle. The culture of love and abundance prevailed. The great thing about his culture of abundance is how infectious it is. When the call went out for furniture for the Syrian family, the response was almost universal. Even people selling things on Craigslist

donated their items to the greater good. When the Syrian family needed a cell phone, the response was immediate. This is the culture of abundance in work and offers unlimited possibility.

I have talked about the culture of scarcity and abundance in relationship to national and international and congregations way of being, but there's a more important aspect of both. What it does for us as individuals. When the culture of scarcity is part of our souls, we are inward oriented. It is all about us and our thoughts and our actions are all about us. It is like trying to keep love in as a way of saving it for ourselves. This is counterproductive, self – love is necessary for complete personality. Self-love as the source of our soul is selfish. Both love and abundance are commodities that are boundless. The more you exercise both the more there is. Now the culture of abundance fills the soul with positive energy.

No one involved with the re-imagining of our building and grounds committee, nor the creation of our refugee committee feels any regret about the involvement. You only feel satisfaction and good about yourself. It's like that with abundance the more you give, the more you want to give. Look at our choir, the larger the choir the better their music, the better the members feel about their contribution.

Money it is said will not give happiness. But when used as our early ancestors did as wampam, it is a source for growth. This growth could be seen in the welcomeness this community offers. As you go into your stewardship campaign these next few weeks enter with the spirit of abundance, not the spirit of scarcity. Love is the spirit. In an evolving and never-ending world, Amen.

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