

“Hoarders or Sharers?”

Rev. Greg Watling

First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

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Texts: Proverbs 11:23-31 and John 21: 1-19

The writer of Proverbs 11 writes, “Those who trust in their wealth will wither, but the righteous will thrive like leafy trees.” It is an interesting metaphor, but it parallels with Robin Wall Kimmerer’s use of the Saskatoon, a ten-foot-tall tree, to speak about how she believes the economy could or should work. “Using the free raw materials of light, water, and air, [the Saskatoons] transmute these gifts into leaves and flowers and fruits. They store some energy as sugars in the making of their own bodies, but much of it is shared. Some of the abundance of spring rain and sun manifests in the form of flowers, which offer a feast for insects when it’s cold and rainy. The insects return the favor by carrying pollen. Food is rarely in short supply for Saskatoons, but mobility is rare. Movement is a gift of the pollinators, but the energy needed to support buzzing around is scarce. So the trees and the insects create a relationship of exchange that benefits both.” This has been the point all along: economies are best when the relationship of exchange benefits both. Another way to say it is that all flourish in mutual. But to work, there must be many sharers and few, if any, hoarders.

Much of our economic system works in the opposite way. We’re constantly bombarded with messages of consumption. We never have enough. We’re rarely content. Our marketers and others tell us that if we had just one more thing, then we’d be happy. The problem is that we need that one thing, and then another thing, and then some more

things and sooner or later we need three or four storage units, our house, a trailer, an old pickup and whatever else can find to hoard all the stuff. All the purchasing impacts our budgets and for some of us, becomes more than we can handle.

I know that is a rather simplistic way to think about our economy, but one thing I pick up every time I travel, especially to countries where the people don't have much, is that they are among the most sharing groups of people I come across. Of course, there are exceptions, but by and large; these people share whatever it is they have. Even in their rituals and rites, there is sharing, with a special seat for the one "who wanders" or is in need.

When it comes to nature, the currency of the economic system is energy, which flows through it, and materials, which cycle among the producers and consumers. It is a system of redistribution of wealth, an exchange of goods, and services. Each member has an abundance of something...wait, what?

Does each member of our economy have an abundance of something? We often think of the economy strictly in terms of the money exchanged. Is there something that each of us has in abundance? Do you have something that I need? Something I have that you need? Last week at fellowship time was a perfect example of abundance being shared. In fact, that happens every week at fellowship, regardless of how much food or drink there is. For beyond the amounts of food shared, there was time spent, creativity employed, and the gifts presented made smiles come to many faces. I noticed that the whole experience began with a sign that said, "welcome". Even if you welcome to eat a single

item on that table, you were welcomed. I'm not saying that from now on we must have a welcome sign on the table. Don't be so literal! I am saying that something unexpected happened. Something was given that no one saw coming. People were welcomed regardless of the gifts on the table.

Maybe it is that sign that you or someone else thoughtfully put out on that table. Maybe it was someone else in the room who saw someone alone and thought of a way to share the time and conversation with that person. Maybe there were those who didn't bring a thing for the fellowship time but offered to help clean up. The point is that I do believe that each of us has something of abundance to share. ***And our abundance is not the same!*** We still spend time comparing ourselves with what someone else did. That is not helpful! We don't need to waste time with comparison. We do need to find the gifts that we bring that enhance the whole community.

Today, we're starting a collection for those who are in need due to the government shutdown, especially those who are losing their SNAP benefits. Some of us will be able to give the \$150 to support a family. Others will not. They might have an item to bring, or \$5 to help someone else. Someone else might not give to this event but might share the story with someone from another part of our community. Maybe that person, on their own, decides to sponsor a family. Someone might really go crazy and invite a family over for a meal or two. Maybe someone else will share that we have a community meal virtually every Friday, and someone who never knew it existed comes to receive a meal.

The first step is figuring out what we have in abundance. I firmly believe that everyone has something. It may be money, or time, or experience, or a vehicle, or joy, or a listening ear, or something I'm not thinking of. We know our scarcity (or at least think we do), but I don't think many of us think about what we have in abundance. If we don't have a lot of money, we think we don't have a lot of abundance, or even much to offer. That couldn't be further from the truth! God has endowed each of us with abundance in some form. The trick is to take a look at ourselves with the right eyes to see that we really do have something to offer.

In nature, "each member has an abundance of something, which they offer to others," writes Robin Wall Kimmerer. "The abundance of berries goes to the birds—for what use are berries to the tree other than as a way to make relationships with the birds?" She continues, "eating too many berries has the same effect on birds as it does on people. Fuchsia splats decorate the fence posts. This of course is the whole point of berries—to make themselves so irresistible and plentiful that birds will come and feast...and then distribute the seeds far and wide. Feasting has another benefit. Passage through a bird gut scarifies the seeds to stimulate germination. The birds provide services to Serviceberries, who provide for them in return. The relationships created by the gift weave myriad relations between insects and microbes and root systems. The gift is multiplied with every gift, until it returns so rich and sweet that it burbles forth as the birdsong that awakens me in the morning. If the abundance had been hoarded, if Juneberries acted solely for their own benefit, the forest would be diminished."

Our communities, and indeed our world, are being diminished by people acting only for their own benefit. “The Serviceberries show us another model, one based upon reciprocity rather than accumulation, where wealth and security come from the quality of our relationships, not from the illusion of self-sufficiency. Without gift relationships with bees and birds, the Serviceberries would disappear from the planet. Even if they hoarded abundance, perching atop the wealth ladder, they would not save themselves from the fate of extinction if their partners did not share in their abundance. Hoarding won’t save us either. All flourishing is mutual.”

Jesus pointed this out many times and, in many ways, but none more so than our John scripture for this morning. We forget that Jesus needed the disciples in different ways than they needed him. He had a lot of teaching to do so that they would begin to understand that Jesus operated by partnership, not by management and top-down operations. He needed the disciples to experience the rich abundance that is so much a part of our world. Then he demonstrated to them what happens when abundance is shared. They would need to be taught over and over again that Jesus was not the only one blessed with abundance, but all of them were. Their abundance just came in different forms. But when shared, all of them were better, and eventually we were the beneficiaries of all of them sharing their abundance.

So, what do you have? What abundance do you possess? Are you sharing it or hoarding it? It’s not about whether you have the most money – that’s the human world built on scarcity talking to you. It might take a while for you to figure out what abundance you have. We’re not used to thinking this way. Consider what is yours to offer. What is

uniquely yours that the community needs – whether it is the church or the community beyond the church. Every gift is needed. Every one of us has something to give and something to receive. First, we need to know what that gift (those gifts?) are! Then we need to decide how and when to share them. It's a spiritual journey, but one that will benefit you as well as all of us. For together we thrive. I invite you to this journey of faith.

Amen.