



A sermon by Stephen Atkinson, Minister

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LIVING IN ABUNDANCE

Thinking back on our children's story this morning¹, there's more to that little tale than meets the eye. One reading of the story is that the rich man is unhappy and anxious all the time, while the poor man lives in bliss. Now, we just can't read a story like this in a Unitarian church and let that go by because *we* know it's a myth – in fact it's a classist myth perpetrated by the powerful to pretend that they're burdened and it's the impoverished who are happy. *We* know that money, health and happiness actually do go hand in hand, however much we *also* acknowledge that all people hurt and are worthy of care. But, the poor suffer more; they enjoy life less; have less ability to govern their own lives; are sicker; die younger, and only a tiny portion go around playing flutes all the time!

Such stories are parts of The System. And though many of us here, by no means most, but many just the same *benefit* from The System – and I don't just mean 'benefit', I mean B-E-N-E-F-I-T from it – I include myself here – B-I-G B-E-N-E-F-I-T-S. Despite that, we see through The System; or at least, we pride ourselves in seeing through it, though sometimes our gaze could penetrate a little deeper.

None of that can go by this morning without comment because that would be negligent and blind. But telling the truth about classist propaganda is not why the tale is useful to us. The point I'm taking from it today is that there are all kinds of abundance! The story shows us abundances of money, but also of music, of happiness, of relationships, of freedom. All these are different aspects of abundance.

But to see abundance requires gratitude, and you were cheated last week out of hearing all about gratitude, so I have to bring you up to speed on that a bit this morning. The Family Moment that went with last week's sermon, which you'll be relieved to hear is now all set to go next Thanksgiving – it's so great to work ahead! – last week's story would have been about Pollyanna, the Disney film version with Hayley Mills. You'll just have to come next year to hear the whole thing, but to cut to the chase, Pollyanna is the orphaned daughter of poor British missionaries to the West Indies who taught her always to find something in every situation to be glad about. (There's that classist propaganda again; you just can't get very far away from it!) 'Being glad' is just child-speak for gratitude.

¹ Demi. *The Greatest Treasure*. New York: Scholastic, 1998.

Gratitude helps Pollyanna deal with some pretty difficult situations and people, and she teaches this glass-half-full attitude to everyone she meets. In the end, she changes the whole town, which is a pretty good thing because Pollyanna eventually suffers an accident and she can't find anything to be glad about anymore. Then, the previously unhappy townsfolk flock to her to share the benefits of the gratitude they learned from her; this re-ignites Pollyanna's gladness which we feel sure will help her heal from her injury. The film ends in a tear-soaked hankie of hope.

It's funny how science sometimes catches up with Walt Disney. Some of you may have heard a CBC piece on Thanksgiving Day about the wonders of gratitude, psychologically and physically, I mean. Studies show that even the simple practice of making a mental list each day of three to five things to be grateful for makes you healthier and happier. Gratitude helps lift mild depression. It boosts the immune system. Expressing gratitude to others builds relationships and connectedness which is another general factor that contributes to overall health and well-being. Take *that*, you cynics who diminish everything in the acid of irony. Pollyanna is right!

It's funny how science sometimes catches up with religion. Other studies show that people who are isolated in the social, emotional sense are less likely to survive illness. Some of those studies compared those who attend church and those who don't. People who attend church are far less likely to be isolated, at least not to that chronic, aching degree that many in our communities are locked into. Gratitude attacks isolation, builds healthy community, and community even keeps us alive longer. *That's* a different take on coming to church to be saved!

A feeling that follows from a moment of gratitude is a sense of fullness, of abundance. That 'glass-half-full' feeling that I mentioned isn't quite adequate when we get to this point. It's not just that what you're measuring is at least adequately there – the half-full part. With gratitude comes the awareness of all that you've forgotten to measure.

There's not just water in the glass; there's the glass itself. I for one am constantly amazed that beautiful, clear glass is made out of boring things like silicates, sodium carbonate and calcium oxide. And humanity didn't invent it; we found it in nature after lightning strikes and volcanoes, so it's literally a gift to us from the universe.

And water isn't 'just' water. In it are minerals, and oxygen and trace elements. And it's the most amazing compound in the universe. It allows life as we know it, and probably as most life-containing planets know it. It has unique properties that make it chemically flexible in a fairly narrow range of temperature; it can be carried through space and taken elsewhere. There is a theory that the water on our planet came here from someplace else on some of the multitudes of asteroids and meteorites that formed our planet. Another gift!

That's what gratitude can do to one's perspective. It explodes the ordinary into the wondrous, the miraculous; it takes a fact or an idea and carries it beyond comprehension. And that perspective becomes one of abundance.

In abundance, what is enough becomes plenty. What was disregarded becomes important. Even what is missing can be tolerated because something else is present; a substitute, though not the same, can be enough. Time becomes proportional; the good things of the past can seem more present; the present is less endless and the future opens. Vision widens so that narrow tunnels move towards being broad vistas. Dreams become more attainable because the sense of *current* abundance makes them seem nearer while also the dreams themselves become more realistic. If a person becomes satisfied that her old Corolla is enough for now, then she doesn't need a Ferrari to feel better; she can imagine trading in for a Camry which is more attainable so she can in turn feel more satisfied. Big dreams are wonderful when they actually motivate us, but when they're a product of dissatisfaction they become hungry forces that want to eat us alive.

Abundance is an antidote for envy and greed. It removes the bitterness from these qualities so that we're freer to plan and succeed. When we are deeply dissatisfied and want something we don't have, all our focus remains on that. Living in abundance *now* helps us have positive dreams and to see the steps between here and there. In abundance also comes acceptance of what's present and real, which is the only starting place we can have for going anywhere further.

There's a danger of being misinterpreted when speaking about this. It can sound as though to live in gratitude and abundance is simply to make do; to accept one's lot in life; to abandon dreams. In itself it starts to sound like classist propaganda. "Just imagine that what you've got *now* is Enough so you won't feel like you want anything *more*; you won't want any *real* justice; any *real* equity; any significant redistribution of wealth. Just be grateful. Just see how good you've got it."

That's not what living in gratitude and abundance means. It means to be happy with what one has now as a way of being as strong as possible in present conditions. It means to accept those conditions as the starting point from which to move. It means to alter our dreams so that they become less dreamy solutions to our unhappiness so that more practical solutions can emerge. It means to empower oneself to make the most of what one has, not just to live with it. When we see things in abundance, we also see our tools, skills and resources abundantly.

With this perspective, it's far more likely that we will consciously let our resources flow out into the world; we move out of miserliness and fear and into faith that there is *true* abundance that will also flow to us as we need it.

So, I bet you're wondering what all this has to do with our Canvass.

In one of those serendipitous moments that I choose to think of as teeny, tiny miracles, I heard a quote recently: "Religion is organized gratitude." A light goes on in recognition of the fundamental and simple truth of the statement. Whatever are the other bases of a religion, whatever ultimate ends it may identify, a foundational *function* of every religion is to organize the gratitude found in its members. The Canvass is one of the most direct ways in which we organize and make substantial the gratitude that we feel.

Last year when I was reading search packets for dozens of churches seeking a new minister, one of the most common problems was financial security; this church stated the same thing. One of the most common hopes was that membership growth would help bring about such security; new members, new pledges. This church hoped for the same thing. But it doesn't work that way. New members bring in new pledges and new needs and new ideas and new programs which require more money. Every church seeking financial security has to look within for it. If they really want it, it's always there.

Almost as soon as I started getting to know this church directly, and certainly since I arrived here, it's been clear that there's a certain sense of fatalism around finances. Many of us here heard that or even expressed it in our discussions around selling the building. I observed to the Board that it was very odd to me that members seem to have no faith that we can raise any more significant funds right here. I think there's a similarly odd sense that selling the building and having a brand new one mortgage free will somehow solve our financial challenges. That's no safe assumption to make. I could go through the litany again: new building, new access, new members, new pledges, new needs, etc.

As we turn the corner from feeling stuck as a church and blaming that too much on the building, we also need to turn the corner from this feeling of inadequacy and scarcity towards an awareness of gratitude and abundance. We find within ourselves these days a new energy and excitement, a dawning sense of vision and purpose. We need now to apply that to our pledging.

During the Canvass we're going to hear from others as we did from Pat Brand today about the gratitude we have for this church. We're going to hear not just that the glass is half-full, remembering that glass itself is a wonder. This church is a wonder. Remembering that water itself is miraculous. That the spirit we have here together is miraculous. In real life, we take a glass and we put water in it, but those mundane acts ring with beauty and strike us with awe. Here at church, we have a building, we come together in it, but those mundane things vibrate with blessing and enliven our hearts. There is so much to be grateful for here.

Let's imagine a couple of the things we will do with our abundant generosity towards the church. And let's start with the building we have because we'll have it awhile longer at least. Imagine arriving at the church and finding it looking spiffy and smelling fresh; everything in it works when we need it to. The sanctuary is always tidy

enough for company at services and any other time folks come to visit. There are no spider webs to count on Sunday morning.

Though, come to think of it, let's consider the spiders a bit. In this room the way it's constructed, we'll never defeat them. They're more members of our church than we are: living, breathing, eating and dying here as they do. They've colonized us for sure. In a way they're like the heretics of our own church inside this heretical faith of ours. No matter how hard we forces of orthodoxy beat them down, burn them, destroy their homes, starve their children or drive them out, they're always here, always stubborn, ever resilient. Always coming back. It must be because they have a truth to tell us.

Imagine having to live that way, always faced with imminent destruction; with someone who'll come and tear your house down and you with it if he finds you. Imagine just going about building it all again right afterward, never missing a beat. See, that's living in abundance. The spider has everything it needs to do all that it needs so it keeps doing it no matter what we do to it. It doesn't look back; never gets discouraged; never feels there's only *this* much it can count on.

Now I can imagine that the fiduciary types among us this morning are rolling their eyes about now at my little fancy that we should emulate the spiders and live in a fantasy of carefree abundance but that's not my point. At least not my *whole* point. I suggest that by seeing the life of abundance that our spiders live in, we are reminded to look all about us for examples of abundance, not just in the natural world, but among us. Seek out those who seem to be sustained by joy and gratitude and who live in abundance no matter what their external means are. Emulate them.

Having channel-surfed over to *Animal Planet* let's move back to our imagination of what we'll do with our abundance as we share it with the church. Imagine our beloved staff. Imagine that our church is known not just for the professionalism and excellence of our staff, but also for putting our money where our social justice principles are and *paying* our staff what they're truly worth; loving them in real terms. We are so proud to pay our Fair Share as a member church of the Canadian Unitarian Council. Imagine paying our Fair Share to our own staff; fair benefits; fair salaries. Our staff don't just lead us; they are leaders in their fields among their peers; outstanding in comparison to those at most other churches. We know they serve us, our children and youth, not to mention the greater cause out of a remarkable dedication. Imagine them serving also in the secure calm of being generously compensated, aware of the true value in which we hold them.

Of course, there are many other things we can imagine about our church of abundant resources. These are just two of the most obvious ways in which we could show a shift in our thinking and in our giving. Both of them directly express the true pride that comes from gratitude and a generous response to it. Pride of place. Pride in our staff.

I have already pledged 3% of my salary and housing to the 2008 Canvass campaign; that's \$2175. It comes right off the top.

Let's continue turning the corner to move towards a church filled with gratitude and abundant with the kind of love and pride that makes a tangible difference.

Make it so.