

Sharing God's Abundance
GCFA Quadrennial meeting
February 20, 2009

Janice A. Virtue
Leadership Education at Duke Divinity
leadership@div.duke.edu
faithandleadership.com

Hello, my name is Janice and I am a recovering financial analyst! There was a time in my life when I knew the price of potatoes on every world commodities market and when my greatest accomplishment was the development of a spreadsheet so complex it needed to run overnight to finish all its calculations. Of course, that was in the early days of Lotus 123 and slower computers. Like you, little of my financial training prepared me for the time we are now in. Fortunately for me and for you, our financial training, our statistical training, and our training in the varieties of management tasks we do are not the only sources of knowledge and wisdom we possess. As leaders for Christ's church, we have the benefit of a great source of wisdom that our world really needs right now.

In a time when the numbers are astonishing and unprecedented -- \$700 billion in bailout, minus 47% for the market -- we need to...**No**, we are called to show another way. It is time for the church to lead the way. Greed, scarcity, and the hoarding of wealth have come to their natural end. It is time again for the church to proclaim abundance: time to remember that in creation God provided enough for everyone and everything, time to show the world that the fruit of the spirit -- joy, peace, love, gentleness and generosity -- these fruit are not subject to market conditions. And you? You are just the people to do it.

Before I go too much further, I want to bring you greetings from your colleagues in ministry at Leadership Education at Duke Divinity School. Along with you, we are endeavoring to understand what it means to be Christian leaders in a time such as this. The lead story on our new website this week was on the financial crisis and the coming weeks will feature stories about the ways congregations and religious institutions are facing the challenges presented by our economy. You can read those stories and see video interviews at faithandleadership.com.

As I told various colleagues what I was off to do today, I received two responses. When I would tell them the theme for the event, "Sharing God's Abundance," people would either say, "Have these people ever heard the word DENIAL?" or they would say "I'm glad they are thinking that way. It's time for the church to really live and teach what it means to live abundantly." I am very glad to be with you today. I've already learned a good bit from our general secretaries and conversations with you have left me feeling hopeful about the ability of our church to not only weather this storm, but to emerge with a keen sense of purpose and call.

Tonight I hope to do *three* things: first, I hope to put the current story of our economic life into the larger story of God's ongoing presence in the world. Second, I want to explore the

biblical and theological character of abundance. And finally, I want to think with you about what it means to lead in this time. And, I hope to do that in a short amount of time because you east coast people – including me – are already starting to slump into your desserts!

As Christians, we are part of a story that began a very long time ago and will continue well beyond us. Our spiritual ancestors spent their lives building the church that we now have. They weren't perfect but they did create all the wealth and assets that we now have. When the next generation looks back on this time, their judgment will not be about the quality of this conference; it will be about whether we allowed faith or fear to rule our actions.

Sam Wells, the dean of Duke Chapel, says that the Christian story is like a five-act drama.¹ The first act is creation and in it the Triune God's abundant love spills over into the world creating all that is and was and will be. The second act is Israel. It is the story of God's relentless pursuit of the people of God, a pursuit that is full of both promise and warning. The third act is Jesus, where God fully reveals God's character to the world. The fourth act, the act that we are now currently in, is the Church, the body of believers living in the already-and-not yet of God's reign. The fifth act is the eschaton and it belongs fully to God. We don't know what that will be or when it will be and it isn't ours to know. It is God's.

Now the problem with living in act four of this drama is that we have a tendency to vacillate between two incomplete understandings of our reality. The first is a spiritualization of our role in the world. If God is ultimately the one who will make things right, then we don't have to do anything. God will provide, even if the mortgage on our building is being called by the bank or we can't make payroll. The apostle Paul asks if we should sin more so that grace can abound, and of course, the answer is no. The fifth act of our drama does belong to God, but in the meantime we are called to live and act according to the discipline of our faith.

But therein lies the problem. In this room, I'm sure more of us lean toward the other incomplete understanding of our fourth act life. Most of us, I would guess, live in a hyper responsibility, a belief that if we don't take charge, no one will or that the future of the church belongs to us. Parker Palmer calls this our functional atheism. Yes, we believe in God and that God will have the final say but we act like we are really in charge!²

So here is the challenge of living in this part of God's story. When we choose the middle way between these two extremes, we understand that we do have responsibility **and** God will provide, we understand that we must act **and** that God will have the final act. In this middle ground, we find freedom ... freedom to imagine possibility and to take risks for the sake of the Kingdom... freedom for playfulness and creativity... freedom to relax and wonder just what God is up to and what is needed of us... freedom to hear again God's call and to respond faithfully.

So the first point tonight: when we locate our current reality in the full story of God's work in the world, we find that we can relax a little. This economic crisis is not the worst thing

¹ For a full explanation of Sam's work, see chapter 3, "Narrative as Drama" in *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* by Samuel Wells, Brazos Press, 2004.

² For more on Palmer's explanation of shadow, see pages 85-91 of *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* by Parker J. Palmer, Jossey-Bass, 2000.

that has ever happened to God's people. We can trust God to be God and know that God will prevail. The end game isn't this year or next; it isn't even likely in our lifetime. The end game belongs to God and it's called the reign of God. Even as you make hard decisions, you can still have a sense of humor and a sense of playfulness. And above all else, you can see that in the grand sweep of time God will bring something new from this latest wrinkle in our story.

I want to turn now to this business of abundance. On what grounds do we claim that we are to share God's abundance? Biblical scholar Walter Brueggeman has been my teacher about the narrative of God's abundance contained in our scriptures. From the very first word, Brueggeman argues, our story is a story of abundance. Listen to his words: "The Bible is about abundance. From the first chapters of Genesis, God not only initiates abundance – calling forth plants and fish and birds and animals – but promises continued abundance by commanding them to 'increase and multiply' (1:22). God's generosity and fidelity reach their climax on the sixth day, when God proclaims a sufficiency for 'everything that has the breath of life' and declares all this 'very good' (1:30D31)."³

Scarcity, he argues, doesn't show up until Pharaoh has a dream about a famine in the land. Up until then, blessing was the order of the world. God instructs Abraham and Sarah and all their family – that includes you and me – to be a blessing to the world, to be the force of well-being in the world, to be the reminder that creation includes enough of everything for everything. But then Pharaoh has a dream and he sets forth the systems to control and monopolize the food supply. In the first year of the famine, the people give up their land for food. In the second year they give up their cattle. And in the third, they give up all they have left – their children. "Pharaoh introduces the principle of scarcity into the world economy," Brueggeman says. "For the first time in the Bible, someone says, 'There's not enough. Let's get everything'."⁴

From that point forward, we have struggled to remember that there is enough, that the world God created and that we inhabit has in its founding enough. The Bible offers story after story about God's ongoing offer of abundance and our stubborn insistence on scarcity. Slavery for the Israelites was hard. Harder than anything most of us can imagine. And yet, they multiplied. So much so that Pharaoh ordered the midwives to kill all the boy babies. In spite of all his manipulation and brutality, Pharaoh could not control the people of God. They continued to multiply, until an exasperated and fearful Pharaoh ordered Moses and Aaron to take their abundant people and leave. Oh, and on your way out of town, Pharaoh says, could you bless us with whatever it is you have? In one sweeping story, the villain -- the creator of scarcity, the one who enslaves in the name of greed, the one who stores up all the treasure he can find – that one concedes to the creator of the Universe and asks for a blessing. Brueggeman points out to us, "This text shows that the power of the future is not in the hands of those who believe in scarcity and monopolize the world's resources; it is in the hands of those who trust God's abundance." So I say to you, Church, you must choose: Will you live according to Pharaoh's rules or God's rules? Will you live according to Pharaoh's rules, where some have lots and many have nothing or will you live according to God's rules, where all have enough and abundance shows up in the

³ Quotes from page 1 of "Enough is Enough," by Walter Brueggeman, a lecture delivered for the United Church in Australia, synod of Victoria and Tasmania.

⁴ Quotes from page 2 of "Enough is Enough," by Walter Brueggeman, a lecture delivered for the United Church in Australia, synod of Victoria and Tasmania.

most surprising ways. If we listen to our scriptures, we must acknowledge that even in the midst of unprecedented financial crisis, the future will be held by those who trust in and live by the truth of God's abundance.⁵

There are plenty more examples of our ancestors learning about God's surprising abundance in places of scarcity. In Exodus we learn of manna in the wilderness, the prophet Elijah finds sustenance in surprising places, and Joshua finds allies among the strangest of partners. These texts ask us to wonder what surprises God has for us and what partners are waiting for us to join them in accomplishing a new work.

Of course, there are also plenty of examples in Scripture of our ongoing **inability** to really believe in God's abundance, to believe that there is enough for all and to order our lives accordingly. Here I want to draw your attention to the two feeding narratives in Mark's gospel. In both chapters 6 and 8, you will find stories of Jesus feeding the masses: first 5000 people and then 4000 people. I love these stories, but I've always wondered why there are two. Did this really happen twice? Did some ancient redactor want to tell his version of the story so included it twice? Was there some mess up with the manuscripts?

You heard one of these stories today in worship, but I invite you to listen again. Listen to these stories and think with me about what might be going on here. What is God wanting to teach us?

Feeding the Five Thousand

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, 'Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.' For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.' But he answered them, 'You give them something to eat.' They said to him, 'Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?' And he said to them, 'How many loaves have you? Go and see.' When they had found out, they said, 'Five, and two fish.' Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.

⁵ In addition to "Enough is Enough," this section also draws upon, "The Liturgy of Abundance, the Myth of Scarcity," by Walter Brueggeman, published in *The Christian Century*, March 24, 1999.

Just two short chapters later, we have this story:

Feeding the Four Thousand

In those days when there was **again** (an important word, that again) a great crowd without anything to eat, he called his disciples and said to them, ‘I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way—and some of them have come from a great distance.’

Now, at this point in the story, we expect the disciples to start collecting loaves and fishes, or at the very least to say to Jesus, “Hey, do you want us to do what we did before? You know, collect what people have and let you bless them?” Instead they say, “How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?” Not only had the disciples apparently not learned from their previous experience (noted just two chapters before), but they also seem to forget the story of bread, of manna, in the wilderness. Now this might be the place to point out that Mark loves to paint a picture of the disciples as slow-witted followers. Mark’s disciples are frequently one step behind. But I think something else might be going on here. Do you see it?

I think that we are not so very different from the disciples in these two stories. You can hear the absolute pragmatism in the disciples’ question – where is the food, the money, the resource going to come from? No matter what the Biblical story says or what we’ve experienced, we’re still in the real world and that real world is tough. The fear of scarcity, of not having enough, is so ingrained in us that our memory of abundance is slow and vague. The world wants to teach us to store up our treasures, to build our bank accounts and add to our stores. The world approves when the cemetery fund is wisely invested while children in our neighborhood go to school hungry. Watch out for yourself, the world says; take care of your own, grab your piece of the pie before someone else gets it. The Gospel, on the other hand, this Jesus, son of God, invites us to share our pie, to sit in the company of others and care about their needs, to trust that blessing is more powerful than any market. To believe, down to our very souls, that with God all things are possible, including our church – the wonderful, gifted and flawed United Methodist Church – navigating this crisis and coming out stronger on the other side.

Abundance. From the very beginning until now. It’s the drum beat of our story. If you listen, you’ll hear it.

Now, finally, to the question many of you may be holding: what am I to do? How do I lead in this time? I’ve not forgotten that I am in a room full of bottom line folks. What does it mean to be one of the church’s leaders in this time?

First, let me say very clearly that you are our leaders. Please embrace your leadership. You have the knowledge and the experience to help our church navigate this particular time. Too often I see petty battles and arguments prevent knowledgeable people from being leaders. Don’t let that be you. Sometimes we want to look for people outside ourselves to rescue us – President Obama and the government perhaps, or maybe our general secretaries and bishops, or maybe our large church pastors. “It’s not our job,” we want to say, “It’s theirs.” Don’t let that be you. This

economic challenge will take all of us and you have an important role to play. We need your wisdom. We need your imagination. We need your courage.

In this great forging time, I hope we can put away some of our most cherished stereotypes and judgments. Let's banish the idea that all accountants are naysayers and gatekeepers and all pastors are afraid to talk about money. Where those images are real, let's work to change them rather than complain about them. Let's put away the long-tired battle between finance and program – who is the world is that old saw serving? As long as we are judging one another we'll never share our bread or our best ideas. And this is a time for our best ideas and our greatest commitments. You are the leaders God has raised up. Please lead.

And, even as you step into leadership, please do not forget the lesson of the loaves and fishes. The loaves and fishes story teaches us about abundance in community. We can't go it alone. Now more than ever co-labor – collaboration – is required. No one among you will be our saviour. No general agency will be the hero for the day. It's our time to sit down in our groups of fifty and one hundred and to share what we have – our resources, our money, our knowledge and our power. It's time for us to revive the brilliance of being a connectional church and to actually be it. Wendall Berry is one of my all time favorite writers. In one of his poems he says, "We pray not for a new earth and heaven, but to be quiet in heart and in eye clear. What we need is here." I take this to mean that we don't need God to press re-boot and start all over with heaven and earth. I also take it to mean that what we need – all the wisdom, skill, imagination and vision – is here, right here... in this room... it's you. What we need is here seated with you around these tables. The way for forward for our church will be found among you.

It is worth noting here that the Gospel calls us to be saints, not heroes. Heroes are solitary figures, with at most a rather inept sidekick. Think Batman and Robin. They act autonomously and believe that all that is good or evil rests on their action. Only a few people get to be heroes and everyone knows about them. Saints, on the other hand, are rather inconspicuous and fairly numerous. I'm certain every one of you can name more than an handful. Saints aren't afraid of making mistakes because they know about restoration and new creation. And most importantly, saints don't go it alone. Of the 64 references to saints in the New Testament, all are plural. Saints are never alone. Saints know about abundance in community.⁶

The best strategic advice for our time may come from John Wesley in a sermon titled, "The Use of Money." In it, he laid out the formula that I'm sure is well known to you: "earn all you can, save all you can and give all you can." Even in an economic downturn, earn all you can. Keep teaching stewardship, keep asking for money, keep putting God's compelling vision before the people and let them make it happen. Don't let your own anxiety keep you from these tasks – teach, ask and do it again. Teach, ask and do it again. Earn all you can.

Now when Wesley said "save all you can," he wasn't talking about our 401k's or our church endowments. He was talking about being frugal, about limiting our expenses. You already know that this is the time to restructure, to work smarter, not harder, to define the stop

⁶ Thanks to Sam Wells for his quick, but illuminating discussion of heroes and saints. See pages 42-44 of *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* by Samuel Wells, Brazos Press, 2004.

doing as well as the start doing lists. I suspect that in this room, this is the easiest of Wesley's instructions to carry out.

So before you get carried away by the fantasy of cost-cutting, let me also remind that Wesley said "give all you can." He means you personally, but he also means us corporately. Give to the poor, fund the mission and the program that addresses the needs of the imprisoned, the widowed and the hungry. We earn and we save, according to Wesley so we can give. In Wesley's day he noted that it was easy for people to think about the earning part, a little more difficult to think about the saving part and very difficult to do the giving part. In 1789, two years before his death, John wrote about this instruction on giving, "Have you reason to believe that five hundred of these are to be found among fifty thousand Methodists?" Friends, that's only 1%. He continued, "And, yet, nothing can be more plain that that all who observe the first rules without the third will be twofold more the children of hell than ever they were before."⁷ May that not be so with you.

Campbell Harvey is a professor of International business at Duke's Fuqua school of Business. He's one of those guys who holds a named chair and is regularly sought out by others for his point-of-view. He met with a group of religious leaders not too long ago and said that much of this unprecedented recession is the result of greed and moral hazard. What we are in, he said, is an ethical dilemma and the way we've been doing business must change. And then this man who is regularly quoted in the Wall Street Journal and the New York Times said, "I believe there is an opportunity for Christian leaders to show the world that there is another way. Now is not the time for tweaking things," he said. "Now is the time for making structural changes that might have been too radical before. We must act boldly and seize this opportunity."⁸

Now is the time for Christian leaders to show the world that there is another way. A way marked by blessing. A way that begins and ends with God. A way that does not forget that abundance was present in the beginning of time and will be present for all time. A way that does not forget that each person must offer his or her leadership. A way that does not forget that in community we will find life abundant.

Sharing God's abundance. It's more than a conference title. It's a mandate, our manifesto for today. It works for me. I hope it does for you.

Note: For those of you who were at the conference, there is one more word – *Yowsa!*

⁷ Thanks to Bishop Kenneth L. Carder for teachings on Wesley and stewardship.

⁸ You can see a video of an interview with Campbell Harvey at faithandleadership.com. Simply type his name into the search box.