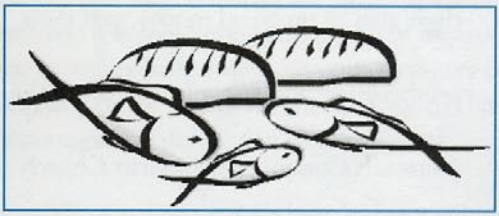
From Scarcity to Abundance



A Stewardship Discipline

By Mark Beckwith

The Episcopal Network for Stewardship

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From Scarcity to Abundance is published by The Episcopal Network for Stewardship in celebration of five years of ministry to the Episcopal Church and the greater Christian community, with grateful hearts to all who have supported the work of TENS with their prayers, their gifts of time and money, and their memberships; and a special thanks to the Outreach Committee of Christ Church Cathedral, Indianapolis, for their ongoing financial support.

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When I was in college, my introductory economics textbook was entitled *Economics: The Science of Scarcity*. Since it was the only course in economics that I took in college – or at any other time, for that matter – a good bit of my theoretical understanding of how money works in the marketplace is framed by the title: the science of scarcity.

Distilling an entire textbook after twenty years is not an easy task, but I still carry with me – from both the book and the course – the notion that our whole financial system is predicated on the fact that there is not enough to go around. The laws of supply and demand, the phenomena of interest rates, money supply, and inflation issues are all a market reaction to the fact that these resources are always in scarce supply; and it is only through the genius of maneuvering or manipulating them – through monetary or fiscal policy, or the "divine hand" – that we can have the most equitable distribution system possible.

This notion of scarcity carries over into our culture and our thinking. More often than not it is the fear of not having enough that impels people to consume excessively, and then to hoard what they have as a hedge against a "rainy day" or the uncertainty of the future. Security is seen as stockpiling enough of these scarce resources and defending them, if not at all costs, then at least with a certain amount of selfishness.

The dynamics of scarcity, consumption and the quest for security serves as a catalyst for intense competition. Who can get what little there is, and then who can get the most of that. A person's value is often identified by how much of a valued commodity they have, over against people who have less.

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For centuries the church has been a participant in the purveyance of the doctrine of scarcity. In the Middle Ages, the sacrament was offered only to priests and church officials, and was denied to everyone else. The sinfulness of the human condition was the code phrase for scarcity, and the human family was taught that it was not good enough or worthy enough, or too full of evil, to be accorded God's full blessing. To my mind, an example of this attitude is retained in the Prayer of Humble Access, an optional prayer offered at the end of the Eucharistic prayer in the RITE I liturgy. In this prayer the congregation declares "we are not worthy to gather up the crumbs under Thy table." (BCP, page 337) Though not the stated intent of the prayer, it nevertheless conveys this age-old sense of personal scarcity. Denying communion to children, which is still the policy in many churches despite the understanding that Baptism accords people the full blessing of the church, also reinforces the notion of scarcity. It sends a message to children that either they are not old enough or they don't know enough.

Whether intentional or not, whenever there is the sense of scarcity there is the ingredient of misused or misapplied power. Power is invariably in the hands of those who are perceived to have more, and the corollary of that is that those in power have a self-interest in maintaining the notion of scarcity. Through the centuries, in one way or another, the church has maintained its control over people and the conduct of their lives through the constant reminder that economic and spiritual scarcity is real, and the only way out of it is through the unfailing obedience to church doctrine and dogma.

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For a host of reasons, not the least of which is the grace of God, in the past twenty or thirty yearspeople have become less willing to put up with a religious system that has as one of its major purposes the constant reminder of their scarcity. I have heard some argue that one of the primary reasons that the mainline churches have experienced a significant decline in membership is not because of demographics or doctrinal mood swings, but the fact that people do not want to be associated with an institution and a faith that reminds them at every turn how unworthy or empty they are. More and more people have come to realize that this doctrine of scarcity ends up being an ideology – even a theology – of the denial of freedom, in that one is always trying to bargain for more, and is held hostage by the person or institution that allegedly has more. On the other end, those who have, or are perceived to have, more of the "scarce" resources and are therefore in a position of power, are also discovering that they, too, have their freedom in jeopardy because they have become possessed by those things or goods or monies that they work so hard to attain.

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What, it may be asked, does all this have to do with stewardship? Plenty. Until recently, financing the church was carried out under the influence of the doctrine of scarcity. In the Middle Ages, contributing to the church was not an option but a requirement of everyone who lived within a church's jurisdiction. A ten percent tithe of one's production and/or income was exacted by the church from everyone; people gave because they had no choice in the matter. There was no blessing or gift accorded to people for this coerced tithe, but instead the power and influence of the church was wielded as a consequence if one did not pay: the consequence of ridicule or excommunication, which in effect was the threat of even greater scarcity since excommunication was tantamount to the loss of personhood.

Over the centuries, as the power of the church began to wane in the arena of controlling peoples' day-to-day offerings/tithing became an option rather than a requirement. And since the threat of banishment, ridicule or excommunication was no longer held as a consequence if people did not tithe, there was little motivation for people to do so. People gave on the basis of what they had left over, in a mindset of scarcity, which was congruent with what the church was teaching.

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And yet the dynamic of power was maintained, because at least in the Episcopal Church, it was often the case that a church vestry would turn to the wealthiest member of the congregation at the end of the annual parish-wide appeal and ask him or her to make up the difference between what they could expect in income and what was needed in the budget. With this arrangement, which was the practice for years in countless numbers of parishes across the country (and still is extant in some places,) the doctrine of scarcity was maintained because one person or small group in effect held the church and congregation hostage by the threat of the wealthy person withholding his or her financial blessing.

Things began to change dramatically in the Episcopal Church about 1970. More and more congregations gave up the practice of pledging to meet a budget and instead began to teach and practice the Christian discipline of stewardship. The concept of proportionate giving was introduced, and pledges were solicited not on the basis of what people could afford, but on the bounty of what they had. The pledge drive became less of a fund-raising exercise and more of a spiritual adventure. The effect catapulted the Episcopal Church from being the denomination with the lowest per capita giving of main line demoninations to the highest. This transition, which is still in process, marks an important movement – the movement from scarcity to abundance.

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Perhaps the best way to see the relationship between scarcity and abundance, and how the theology of abundance opens us up to mystery and freedom, is to look closely at the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand, as recorded in the Gospel of Mark.

The apostles returned to Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. And he said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had not leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a lonely place by themselves. Now many saw them going, and knew them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns, and got there ahead of them. As he landed he saw a great throng, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. And when it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a lonely place, and the hour is now late; send them away, to go into the country and villages round about and buy themselves something to eat." But he answered them, "You give them something to eat." And they said to him, "Shall we 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." And when they had found out, they said, "Five, and two fish." Then he commanded them all to sit down by companies upon the grass. So they sat down in groups, by hundreds and by fifties. And taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven, and blessed, and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. And those who ate the loaves were five thousand men. Mark 6:30-44 (RSV)

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The story indicates that Jesus and his disciples were off to a "lonely place" in order to rest and collect themselves. Word had somehow gotten out where they were going, and so when Jesus and his entourage arrived there were 5,000 people waiting for them. Quickly giving up his retreat plans, Jesus "had compassion on them . . . and began to teach them many things." It grew late, and the disciples began to panic. 5,000 people and no food. "Send them away, to go into the country and villages round about and buy themselves something to eat." Their panic was based on a fear of scarcity: If Jesus were to send the crowd away, the disciples would no longer have to worry about them, the people could buy what they did not now have, and the problem of scarcity would be, for the moment at least, avoided.

Jesus parries the disciples' request that he get rid of the crowd by calling them into an attitude of abundance: "You give them something to eat," he says. The disciples can't or won't get this shift in attitude, so they ask, "Shall we go and buy 200 denarii worth of bread?" They are willing to go and buy the food – and thus keep the crowd together – but they are still living in the panic of scarcity, which a trip to the market will cure. Jesus then asks them, "How many loaves have you?" again drawing them into his framework of abundance. "Five, and two fish," they answer. That is hardly abundance. Undaunted, Jesus had the disciples sit the crowds down in groups of hundreds and fifties and took the bread, blessed it, and gave it to the disciples to set before the people. And they all ate and were satisfied. The dynamics between the disciples and Jesus are revealing.

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DISCIPLES	JESUS
Scarcity Mindset	Abundance Mindset
Initial reaction: Send them away to buy for themselves.	Response: No, you give them something.
Second reaction: Shall we buy something for them?	Response: No, don't buy anything. Take an inventory of what you already have.

Schematically, the exchange looks like this:

DISCIPLES' REACTIONS	JESUS' CHALLENGE
1. They can buy.	1. No, you give.
2. Shall we buy?	2. No, give what you already have.

The disciples were reacting to the problem, offering a quick fix in the hope that the problem – and the crowd – would go away. Jesus responded to each reaction with a challenge for the disciples to act out of their abundance. His was a challenge fraught with risks: the risk that they just wouldn't get it or that the tension Jesus introduced would cause the disciples to turn on him. Jesus continually took this risk of drawing people into abundance and challenging them to move from a cash economy to a kingdom economy. In this challenge he sought to reframe reality for the disciples and for all of us. He resisted the impulse to react by solving the problem in the moment, and instead challenged people to draw upon their own resources.

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What happens is a miracle, the miracle of being able to penetrate the illusion that I have to get it on my own, and instead I can count on the abundance of what I and others have. The result is satisfaction ("and all were satisfied") which is being in touch with the deepest reality of our lives. Another result is freedom – freedom *from* kneejerk reaction, freedom *to* live in the full blessing of what God offers us.

The challenge is to risk as Jesus did – to live out of a sense of abundance. As soon as we are able to make that choice, we begin to experience a new level of freedom from the imprisoning yoke of scarcity. At the same time, when we choose to live out of abundance we begin to discover even more abundance inside ourselves than we ever knew was there. We learn more about our gifts, and are able to live in a mindset of blessing.

Our culture has made much of the image of the cycle of despair, also identified as the spiral of negativity or the slew of despond, the abyss or the vortex. And many of us have lived through experiences that cascade us downward into a deeper sense of helplessness and depression. We can easily fall into this cycle – in part because its image is so prevalent, and it is fed by our cultural notion of scarcity.

Yet our culture does not offer its shadow image, the cycle of blessing or abundance, a cycle which provides us more fruit and abundance as we move along on it. In my own life and in the lives of those people I see as spiritual director, I have discovered that we know very little about this cycle of abundance, and yet we want to know about it – and trust it. All of which is to say that we need to learn to develop this image, and not to feel guilty or sheepish if we start moving on in the cycle of blessing.

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Two ancient spiritual practices stand out for me as means by which we can learn how to live in the cycle of abundance.

The first is prayer; specifically, intercessory prayer. As I learned it as a child, intercessory prayer was seen as our prayer to God on behalf of others. The effectiveness of that prayer was determined by whether or not God "heard" our prayers and decided whether or not to act on them. And it was further implied that God heard our prayers only if we were deemed worthy enough for God to listen to them. Such a perception, I would suggest, participates in the notion of scarcity in that we have to broker with God to intercede on behalf of others, giving God all the power and leaving ourselves with none.

God, in fact, *does* have the power to intercede on behalf of others, but the presence of God is planted inside each of us. That divine presence is the cornerstone of our abundance. In intercessory prayer, therefore, we pray not to God to intercede, and not in the hope that God will hear and then act, but as we pray for others we contribute the divine presence that resides in us to someone who is in special need. If we can conceive of the spirit of life and wholeness to be a river, then our prayers add to the size and power of that river, potentially transforming and healing others.

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Prayer, therefore, is an act of Christian stewardship. We are giving out of our abundance through prayer on behalf of others. It has been said, and I subscribe to this opinion, that one of the reasons that nuclear weapons have not been used since 1945 is that people have prayed that they not be. Millions of people have prayed out of the divine abundance that resides in everyone to encircle nuclear weapons with the spirit of life. This may sound overly romantic or sentimental, but I shudder to think what might happen if people gave up on this prayer to hold back the use of nuclear weapons.

The other practice that we need to learn in order to live out of the cycle of abundance is the practice of financial stewardship. Giving out of our abundance. Proportionate giving with the 10% tithe as a numerical benchmark is the model that the church has used, a model that is Biblically grounded and spiritually liberating. It is a practice that enables us to reject being possessed by our possessions and the idolatry that often stems from our lust for them. It is a practice that unmasks the illusion of scarcity.

When I was first ordained I pledged to the church on the basis of what I could afford. And since as a Curate I wasn't paid all that much (or so I thought,) I couldn't afford to give away much. At that time in my life, the annual pledge drive was a process that reinforced my feelings of what little I had and left me feeling angry, because I felt compelled to give something financial on top of the giving I had already done, having chosen a vocation that did not pay very well.

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It was during a pledge campaign in another church (I was by now an Associate Rector,) a campaign that promoted the notion of giving out of abundance through the practice of proportionate giving, that my wife was converted. She suggested that we determine a percentage of what we wanted to give away to the church and other non-profit groups to which we had a commitment. I was resistant, saying that I had already contributed more than enough through my work in the church. She persisted, and I relented, and all I can say is that, over the next several years, as our proportion grew to a tithe, my perspective has changed, my anger has disappeared and I can celebrate abundance.

There are times when I fall off this cycle of blessing – moments when the nasty forces of fear or self-righteousness get the upper hand – but I soon realize that living into the cycle of blessing is new and unfamiliar, and I can easily fall prey to the dynamics of scarcity.

In both the practice of prayer and of financial giving out of a sense of abundance, we continue the process of creation. In effect, we become co-creators, in that we take what has been given to us and pass it on.

Miracles can happen in the living out of abundance just as in the story of the feeding of the 5,000: the miracle of discovering that, in living out of our abundance, we find there is more richness in us than we ever knew before.

Living out of abundance is an opportunity. It is also a demand, because the alternative – living from scarcity – leaves us in a position of being hostage to those who are seen to have more, and leaves those who are seen to have more as victims of their wealth and property.

As was the case of Jesus in the story of the feeding of the 5,000, living in abundance is a risk. A wonder-filled, life-giving risk.

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Our Purpose . . .

- To lead in the growth of a network of dedicated stewardship ministers serving congregations and dioceses; and,

- To support each other with personal consultations and fellowship opportunities, as well as print, video and electronic resources.

The Episcopal Network for Stewardship

For information on individual, parish and corporate memberships, contact:

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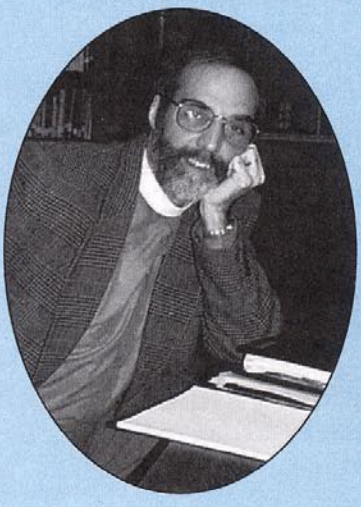

Following his graduation from Amherst College cum laude in 1973, Mark Beckwith spent two years teaching English in Japan. He attended Berkeley Divinity School at Yale and has been an Episcopal priest since 1980. Much of his ministry has been focused on the stewardship of human lives, as he is the founder of several church-based programs to serve homeless families.

Inter-Religious Fellowship for Homeless, involving 200 congregations and several thousand volunteers in northern New Jersey, began in 1986 and expanded to include a low income housing corporation. Mark also set up the central Massachusetts branch of the Interfaith Hospitality Network, a national program involving congregations sheltering homeless families, and he served as its first president. He has attended CREDO and the Clergy Leadership Project.

Currently in Worcester, Massachusetts, Mark Beckwith serves as Rector of All Saints Church, a racially and socio-economically diverse urban parish. He is married to Marilyn Olson and is the parent of two teenagers, Christine and Paul. He is a serious, if not diseased, Boston Red Sox fan.

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