

Sermon at St. Thomas by Lynn E. Cunningham. September 23, 2007. Proper 20, Year C. Amos ; I Tim. 2:1-8; Luke 16:1-13.

1. Luke in his Gospel often highlights the interplay between worldly, material wealth, and the abundance of life found in a strong relationship with God. Today's lessons challenge readers to contrast a theology of abundance with the theology of scarcity. Consider the notions of wealth and scarcity for a moment.
2. St Thomas as a community understands what true wealth is. Think of the wealth that surrounds us. The beauty of the land and rivers in the surrounding mountains. The friendliness and hard working nature of the Dubois people. Are these not true wealth in great abundance? The neighborly caring for one another in times of adversity. The times of celebration with all of Dubois' special events, such as the upcoming Kiwanis Oktoberfest. The abundant fishing and hunting. The living silence of the deep woods, where little is heard but the call of the camp robber and the raven. The honesty found here where a persons's word is his bond. Are these not all true and abundant wealth?
3. Dubois and St. Thomas have much in the way of such true wealth.
4. God provides this great wealth, even in the simplest of things. A fresh new day to start out with, every morning. The fresh air of the beloved winds of our valley. The Wyoming Eucharist celebrates the many treasures we receive each day from God.
5. Some have called this awareness of God's abundant caring for us a theology of abundance.
6. This great abundance of God's love gives me, and I hope each of you, the strength and courage to choose to find the best, the most hopeful direction in each situation encountered.
7. For example, when I moved out here from Washington, I left behind friends and places that I had grown to love and enjoy. Coming here meant being open to much that is new and strange, unknown and unexpected. But I have been able to live into this newness, these unknowns, because of the hope and courage which thrives within a theology of abundance.
8. I understand that living in Dubois is sometimes hard and challenging for every person who newly moves here. Maybe among those who stay, an understanding of how richly God rewards those who seek Him, sustains them.
9. On the other hand, sometimes a person might come to Dubois with an overwhelming fearfulness that life is really about scarcity. Life for them is lived under a theology of scarcity. They tend to focus on God as a punishing disciplinarian, who often withholds what is needed. For such a person, this town viewed through a theology of scarcity can be a disappointment.
10. These lessons offer powerful reflections on these contrasting theologies of abundance and scarcity.
11. Look at the passage from Amos. The rich merchants, whom Amos condemns, are always living for the day they can work to squeeze more money out of the poor. According to Amos those merchants live with the constant fear that they can never have enough money and worldly wealth. They are really trapped in this theology of scarcity. The merchants in the Amos passage are eager to get the religious holidays over with so that they can get on with the business of trading and robbing the poor. "When will the religious festival of the new moon be over so the we may sell grain", they ask, "and the Sabbath so that we may offer wheat for sale". These merchants were cheating at selling the very food that the poor needed to survive on. They are afraid they can never get enough. They cannot take the time even to honor the graceful abundance shown by God in commanding the Sabbath day of rest.
12. Amos condemns them and utters these terrifying words, "the Lord will never forget their deeds". So, they want to get the festivals out of the way? Okay, let's see how they feel

- when the word of the Lord that sustains life itself, falls silent. Let's see how those merchants react when the world itself is bereft of all the gifts of God. "I will create a famine of the hearing of the words of the Lord", Amos says, "and everyone in the land will be left to wander aimlessly." The words of the Lord mean life to the world, and without those words, nothing can live, is the message of Amos.
13. Paul's first letter to Timothy taps into the true wealth arising within a good relationship with God. For Paul, in this letter, every human being has been ransomed from death by the generosity of Jesus Christ. Life itself has been transformed into a new kind of abundance of holy grace by what Christ accomplished.
 14. Now the good news of God's generosity and saving grace is being brought to everyone, Paul says. Even the kings and the rulers of the peoples will be able to live "quiet and peaceful lives in all godliness and dignity". Can anyone imagine a world in which all the politicians who lead the countries of this world could enjoy quiet and peaceful lives! What a great abundance of life that would be! No sense of scarcity there!
 15. The parable of the unjust steward in Luke's Gospel is another of the parables concerned with the interplay between material wealth and the spiritual life. The story ends with the flat exhortation, that a person cannot worship both God and material wealth. "You cannot worship God and mammon."
 16. In the parable, it seems there was a rich man who had hired a steward to manage his property, and the manager was stealing the rich man blind. The rich man determined to fire the manager. But before he could finish getting rid of him, the manager went to the debtors who owed debts to the rich man and had them write down how much they owed, and proceeded to coach them into reducing the very debts they owed. The manager did this in order to curry favor with the debtors, since he knew he would be needing their help in the near future when he was out of a job.
 17. So, does the rich man turn the manager into the police for committing fraud? If he was going to fire him before for being dishonest, I would expect the rich man would punish the manager even more for colluding with the debtors.
 18. Instead, the rich man commends the manager in the story. Why is Jesus praising a crook for being so shrewd? What is going on here in this parable?
 19. The key is, again, to me the difference between a theology of abundance and a theology of scarcity.
 20. The rich man in the story illustrates the abundance of grace that God gives his children, even when they have handled things badly, very badly.
 21. Think of the rich man in the story as God. And the manager in the story as each person here today, trying to manage the abundance of gifts I talked about at the start of this sermon. What person has been a perfect steward of all the gifts God has bestowed upon them? Has not the most righteous person at some time and in some way squandered and mismanaged the good gifts that God has chosen to bestow upon that person? Think back over life. Have there not been times when gifts were squandered and mismanaged?
 22. So, here comes God into the person's life and says, ok, the time for your mismanagement is up, and you are going to be relieved of your life as you have lived it. You are going to be set out on your own with no support, no more grace to tide you over hard times. Like the dishonest merchants in the passage from Amos, whom Amos threatens with being cut off from the very grace of God that sustains everyone. Who would not panic in this situation?
 23. Who could face without some fear and trepidation the Big Boss coming over and asking for an accounting for the way true wealth in life has been spent and squandered?
 24. The story pushes the readers to see that the worst thing about worshiping money rather than God is that it leads inevitably to a theology of scarcity. Worshiping wealth instead of God ties up the spirit in trying to satisfy oneself with material possessions and wealth. In fact, by contrast, God commands that his children live into a theology of abundance, and

- God forgives each person for their mismanagement of the abundance, just as the rich man in the parable forgives the dishonest manager.
25. I began by pointing out how, being surrounded by God's abundance and grace provides a person the basis for dealing in a good way with each day's newness and unknowns, dealing with them with courage and hope. If God is with us, who can be against us, as Paul says elsewhere.
 26. The lessons from Amos, Paul's letter to Timothy, and Jesus in this parable, all show clearly that life lived out of a theology of abundance is much more fun and satisfying than its opposite. Or again, as Paul says, perfect love casts out fear.
 27. In Jesus name, Amen.