

## *From Scarcity to Abundance*

Sermon by Joanne Gallardo

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Luke 12:13-21

*13 Someone in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.' 14But he said to him, 'Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?' 15And he said to them, 'Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.' 16Then he told them a parable: 'The land of a rich man produced abundantly. 17And he thought to himself, "What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?" 18Then he said, "I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 19And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." 20But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" 21So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.'*

If I mention "The Fyre Festival," how many of you know what I'm talking about? The Fyre festival was supposed to be the best music festival on the planet. For thousands of dollars, you could hop on a private jet to Pablo Escobar's island, rent out a fancy villa, listen to hot musical groups while eating gourmet-chef prepared food. The target crowd was rich millennials who had money to burn. Rich millennials who were looking for experiences since they already own everything they could ever want.

What ensued was the most spectacular failure of the year, maybe even the decade. The island they found did not have the infrastructure for all the tickets that were sold. Talent started backing out at the last minute. Money was being poured in, with the host, Billy McFarlane taking his fair share and not producing the luxury experience he promised. The fancy condos were FEMA tents. The gourmet food turned out to be cheese sandwiches. People arrived expecting a show, and ultimately, there was no show. They were ready to eat, drink, and be merry...but they had just spent all their money on one of the biggest cons ever put on by one person. This group of Fyre festival enthusiasts turned into a group of rich fools.

There's a bit of schadenfreude that goes along with these stories. Super rich people AND millennials (some of the most vilified people in the US today) getting what they deserve...absolutely nothing. The spoils of capitalism boiled down to a cheese sandwich and a rain-soaked mattress in a FEMA tent. You could almost laugh about it....almost.

Or what about the greatest Ponzi scheme of our time: the investment fraud of Bernie Madoff. By robbing Peter to pay Paul Madoff made millions by tricking rich folks into believing that he was a financial wizard when time and time again he offered his clients consistent returns on their investments...no matter the health of the economy. Financially, that's a red flag. But when you're getting paid, it's hard to see the red flags. But then the economy really tanked. People started to pull money out of Madoff's firm. And those returns...weren't real returns. People lost their entire savings. Nonprofits went under. People died by suicide. Madoff's own son died by suicide. All because someone wanted to make a lot of money, more money than they could ever need.

The parable of the rich fool is tricky. We feel a little smug and self-righteous for a rich person needing to come to grips with money not being able to buy everything. We know that. Money can't buy happiness. We gasp at people who con others out of their money. Maybe we think that we wouldn't be fooled, that we know how to spot a con artist so we wouldn't have fallen for it. We're good stewards, right?

For as much as we distance ourselves from the 1%, the billionaires, those who have made their money exploiting others, or evil, evil corporations...can our hands ever really be clean of the messiness of capitalism? The coldness of self-made people? The opulence of excess? Are we that different from those Fyre festival party-goers? Would we know enough to figure out we're being taken in for our money? Would we know what to do if we lost everything?

We see that rich fool in Jesus' story as just that: someone who has a lot of money and who dies without giving thought to life after death. The rich fool is someone who only thinks about his wealth. And that's not us.

Money is a strange thing. An exchange of currency for goods and services. But money is much more than that. Money, or even the illusion of money, gives us power. It gives us access. It creates opportunities. It keeps us alive. If we use it for others, it can do the same for them.

Does having wealth make us sinful? I don't think it does. I don't think the Bible says that either, the love of money is what is evil. But the parable here tells us a very important story: having more than you could ever need

or want and just storing it away is unethical. And when it comes to spiritual matters, or matters of life and death, your money will not save you.

One commentator states that it's not this man's wealth that puts him under scrutiny, but it's the fact that he only lives for himself. His discourse is full of "I" language. This is what *I'll* do. *I* will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there *I* will store my surplus grain. And *I'll* say to myself, "*You (meaning I)* have plenty of grain laid up for many years."

Was this man giving thought to his neighbor? He has more than he could ever use in his lifetime. He had saved and stockpiled until he had a ridiculous amount of wealth. And he thought that was all he needed! He congratulated himself on having his own stockpile of stuff, as if by his own hand was the only way he was able to have the surplus that he did.

There is no such thing as self-made wealth. As one of my favorite podcasters Tawney Newsome states, there's no way people get extremely wealthy without something immoral happening in the process. In fact, many of our 1% today got to be in the top 1% by exploiting laborers, usually women and people of color, in order to become as rich as possible. White supremacy is lucrative for white folks. Buying into white supremacy is even lucrative for people of color! That's what makes it both so insidious as well as tricky, not to mention sinful. Not only do we gain access, we gain stuff. And stuff is our signaling to others just exactly what kind of wealth we have.

As a kid, I loved "stuff." Not so much for stuff's sake, but what my stuff said about me. My birthday list and Christmas list every year would fill up with toys and things that I saw that all my friends had. School was a place where you went and bragged about the stuff you had. That's where I learned about all the stuff I didn't have. Which, in turn, made me want more stuff.

Sometime during my 20s I realized that I had enough stuff and wasn't looking as much for material possessions as I was for experiences. Quality time with loved ones during the holidays was important, not the gift opening. Getting together with friends and having fun on my birthday or their birthday was more important than anything on my Amazon wish list. Gift and material possessions became more gestures of goodwill than the end all, be all of special occasions.

Yet I can't say I'm not drawn in by the siren song of materialism and capitalism. I start to gather items, gather material possessions. I live as if there's going to suddenly be a shortage. I live as if there's scarcity when there's actually abundance. I should really be gifting what I have to others who actually live in scarcity, not just in the mindset of scarcity, like me.

What is this scarcity and abundance? What does it mean to live into scarcity versus living in abundance? I think our parable illustrates this well. The rich fool lives his life believing that one day, he's going to be out of funds. One day, he's not going to have grain. One day, he's not going to have his "stuff" save him. He's anticipating scarcity when there is no scarcity. He's also equating abundance with the material stuff he sees around him. While he was brimming over with wealth, his soul was impoverished. His inner work was lacking, his soul needed the abundance, and that abundance couldn't be found in grain, or storehouses, or in what he could eat, drink, or make merry. While he was surrounded by material security, surely his neighbors were worried about having grain at all, much less where to store it.

To live in abundance is to share. To live into abundance is to realize that sharing is more than just about sharing your grain, or your funds, or your assets. Living in abundance means that there is no withholding, no bounds on what is rightfully ours and what is needed by someone else. Abundance is living into God's boundless love for you and God's boundless love for others in your community and beyond.

I was recently taught a lesson in abundance, and it was taught to me by my community. A year ago, my dad started slowing down, getting sick more frequently, and it became apparent that maybe he should start thinking about his final plans. Much to my dismay, he resisted this, and also to my dismay, I found out that he had not planned for this at all financially. Due to a lot of factors both in and out of his control, I realized that should anything happen, I was going to have to be the one to pay for whatever end of life arrangements needed to be made. So, I started saving, but a year later, I had gathered a little bit of money but not nearly enough to cover what was needed.

I was completely terrified. I was trying to save up for a house, I had my own finances to take care of and now there was this debt looming large before me. My best friend offered to start a Go Fund Me for the expenses and I

resisted for a while. I resisted because asserting my financial independence has always been very, very important to me. While in some situations that's a good thing, I have taken it to some pretty unhealthy levels. And as my friend reminded me, I didn't really have much of a choice.

So it happened. I let the whole world know that I didn't have enough money to pay for something that was my responsibility. And I know that doesn't quite accurately describe the situation, but that's how it felt to me. And in the end, like my friend said, I didn't have much of a choice. I wasn't exactly the rich fool with stockpiles I didn't know what to do with. But I was a fool in sense that I attributed money to mean a lot of things: money means I don't need help. Money means I don't depend on other people. My relationship with my money doesn't inconvenience others. My money is my own, your money is your own, and keeping it that way means I am a responsible person and decent citizen.

None of that is true. If that's what I believed, then what did I think of others who had been in this situation before me? Was this about me and my pride or about letting my community be my community? Was this about responsibility and irresponsibility or about circumstances and mitigating factors, and situations out of my control? And I asked myself as I ask myself in every situation that has my stomach lurching, what is God trying to teach me though this?

I think God was trying to teach me something by having the lectionary text for the first Sunday in August, the Sunday this sermon was supposed to happen, be about rich fools. I think God was trying to show me where I fit in the story, and not in the way I anticipated. I think maybe God is trying to show us that what we have doesn't really matter, and we should live the life of abundant grace and mercy that we are called to. That we are called to proclaim.

And this abundance is more than just about money. When trying to put others first, I can still fall into the trap of materialism. When something happens, I ask people what they need and I'm usually thinking of what I might tangibly be able to give them. Is it money? Is it stuff? Giving things like "joy," or "kindness," "love," or "understanding" takes work and is complicated when making some pork chops in a slow cooker is much,

much easier. Buying things off the internet that helps with tasks is way easier than any sort of emotional labor I could offer.

Giving and receiving stuff is safe. Our warm cocoon of materialism feels good. In fact, we're programmed to do it! We're advertised to on a daily basis telling us that showing a romantic partner that we really love them means buying them diamonds! Buying an ADT security system shows our family we care about their safety. It keeps both our people and our stuff safe. A new car can help us feel more important and give us the confidence boost we need.

But when it comes to having money and attempting to do the responsible thing for both ourselves and our families, is it a sin to save up for the future? Is there a sin in having Roth IRAs, 401 Ks, stocks, bonds, and all manner of things financial in order to save for the future? Some would say so. Some would say that we should be as generous with our money as possible, using it for the needs of others here and now.

However, I know that I would have a difficult time doing that. For those of us who like to plan ahead, like myself, leaving the future up to the unknown is too risky, especially for those of us who don't have backup plans.

I think we can do these things and still live into the abundance God has called us to. Living into abundance isn't just about giving most of our money away to the worthiest causes, although giving is certainly part of it. Living into abundance is caring for those around us. Using our privilege and what we've been given for others. Not just our money. Our power. Our connections. Our security. Using what we have for the good of not just ourselves, but for others.

When we're not struggling financially, when we're not giving a thought to the poor and marginalized, when we're thinking of ourselves and not those around us, when we're living into what we believe is scarcity, it's easy to lose sight of God's kingdom. We don't have to think about eternity because our day-to-day is pretty nice as it is. Jesus reminds of of how fleeting life is when he says whoever seeks to keep his life will lose it.

Capitalism tells us a lie. Capitalism tells us the lie of scarcity. It tells us that wealth, found in monetary assets and possessions, is the only key to our survival. To our country's survival. We are good citizens doing our part in

keeping the economy going by exercising our purchasing power on a daily basis. Our political parties run on a pro-capitalism platform. It also tells us the lie that our productivity is directly related to our worth. We feel guilty if we're not being "productive" or "getting stuff done." Time is money. And while many of us work for wonderful employers that do good things in the world is our worth in the hours we put in a week? Do our souls depend on the bottom line?

What about our spiritual lives? What about a God that tells us to live into the abundance God has given us. What about a God whose kingdom doesn't measure that abundance in bank accounts, stocks, bonds, or retirement funds, but in peace, joy, and love? In giving our time and our energy to the marginalized? In sharing what we have in both small and big ways?

So my question for us, including myself, is, "What does this 'living into abundance' look like? What are the signs that we're living into scarcity? Is productivity getting in the way of our relationships? Is it hindering our relationship with God? Have we taken the lie of capitalism and have wondered whether we're earning our salvation, whether the hours you've put in doing good deeds outweighs all those things that you wish God didn't know about?

Maybe living into abundance looks like spending our time thinking about how to help our immigrant neighbors. Maybe living into abundance looks like paying attention to our spiritual lives and the spiritual lives of those around us. Maybe living into abundance looks like spending time, energy, power, privilege, and non-monetary wealth in the lives of people God has placed right in front of us? Maybe it looks like using those things for those lives not immediately around us? Maybe when we think of our philanthropic endeavors we think of more than just material wealth, but the fruits of the spirit? What is it, exactly, that we're called to do?

God doesn't care what we've stockpiled. God cares what we're doing with what we have, be that time, energy, money, care, passion, and love. God cares how we're moving and being in the world. God cares about our spiritual wellbeing, for our future spiritual wellbeing. What we do and who we are matters to God. May we go forth in our week with this knowledge, mindful of the abundance at the heart of God. Amen.