

“Shared Abundance”

Sermon delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
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Reading

“Abundance” by CharlesC on “Hello” Poetry

Sermon

As I began preparing for my sermon this morning, I thought to myself, Wow. This is a huge topic you’ve decided to take on. So, I want to start off by acknowledging to all of you what an undertaking it is to think and talk about our economic system, the ways it can harm us, and what we can do to enact a more life-sustaining economic model.

Because the topic is so big, I want to start closer to home.

I believe that personal transformation and social transformation are deeply intertwined. So, my starting point in this conversation, and the one I invite you to start with, is the personal.

I received my first lessons in economics at home in Chicago growing up with two brothers. Partly, I learned how many things were and were not sold in quantities divisible by three.

We would get a box of popsicles from the grocery store and if there were 12 popsicles, we would say that we would each get 4. Pretty simple and fair. I can’t quite remember what we did when there were say 10 or 14 of something. Most likely, my older brother would get the extra quantities of fruit juice boxes or chocolate or whatever the most treasured treat of the day was.

My grandmother had a very different approach to ensuring that anyone at her table got their fair share. And that was simply to make more food than any of us could imagine

finishing in one sitting. Any gathering at my grandmother's home would include multiple plates teeming with fried fish and grilled pork, beef soup, and noodles. An abundance of food for my grandmother was a sign of love and care.

Stories like these began to emerge for me a few Saturdays ago during our UU Class Conversations workshop. About 35 of us gathered downstairs in the vestry for several hours to begin to talk with one another about our own class backgrounds and the impacts of class and classism in the broader world and in our congregation.

My own person story around class begins with my parents who were both born and raised in the Philippines in the time just after the Philippines gained independence from the United States. The United States has continued to have a strong influence on the country and for my parents part they sought economic mobility by immigrating to the United States in the late 1970s. Both of them earned college degrees in the Philippines and were prepared to take on professional, "white collar" roles once in the U.S.

For my parents, establishing themselves in the middle class - both having salaried jobs, owning a home, sending their children to private, parochial school - was an important marker of success. The pursuit of the "American" dream was a strong motivator for my parents, and for most of their siblings after them, in coming to the United States and in the way they built their lives once they were here.

I feel deeply indebted to my parents for the sacrifices they made to provide a stable life without much material need for me and my siblings - leaving friends and family behind, spending many hours at work even when their work was challenging, always putting their children's needs first.

Yet, I know that there are also middle class habits around consumerism that were not so great for my own spiritual development and my impact on the world. And, there are other messages I received by virtue of being in the middle class that I have come to regard as problematic - for example, the idea that we only have to work hard to achieve economic success, or that having more and better things somehow proves that you are deserving of such prosperity. As time has gone on, I have started to see just how caught my family was and so many of us are in perpetuating an economic system that in the end does not serve to promote the vision for the world I hold today.

I think at the grandest scale we know that the economy as it is set up right now - to be driven towards ever increasing growth - has had detrimental effects on our planet and also on people.

One of the most devastating images I have seen recently is of an island in the Caribbean near the coast of Guatemala that is covered in plastic waste - bags, bottles, plastic cutlery, packaging material.¹

There are other islands of garbage - garbage patches, they are called - in our oceans created by the refuse of our consumption. According to a 2015 study, about 8 million metric tons of plastic now enter the ocean during a typical year.² The massive amounts of plastic debris threaten marine life and can eventually find its way back to us as micro-particles of plastic are ingested by fish and other aquatic life that we then eat.

The almost incomprehensible amount of plastic in our oceans right now is just one example of the impact we have had on our natural environment by virtue of an economic system that is designed to make us believe that our consumption of stuff is a good thing and that the cost of that consumption - to the environment and to one another - is something we don't need to deal with.

Perhaps the most notable and devastating impact on the environmental side is the climate crisis driven by our dependence on fossil fuels. This past fall's series of "natural" disasters - hurricanes and wild fires made worse by global warming - make it clear that we will not be able to escape the destructive impacts of unsustainable growth for very much longer. Our ecosystems and people who live in environmentally vulnerable areas, like Puerto Rico, have already started to face these all too real changes.

And, we know that people continue to suffer in other ways in our economic system as well.

¹ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/trevornace/2017/10/27/idyllic-caribbean-island-covered-in-a-tide-of-plastic-trash-along-coastline/#d6c45c925245>

² <https://www.mnn.com/earth-matters/wilderness-resources/blogs/how-much-plastic-enters-the-ocean-every-year>

In 2013, the average income of the wealthiest 20% of those in the United States was 15 times greater than that of the poorest 20% (\$202,600 vs \$13,100).³ When we consider the extremes of the spectrum, the figures are even more polarized.

In the 1970s, the top 1% of Americans earned just over 10% of all U.S. income. Today the top 1% take home more than 20% of all U.S. income. In comparison, the bottom 50% went from capturing over 20% of national income for much of the 1970s to earning barely 12% today.⁴

Sherri Mitchell, founder of the Land Peace Foundation, and a leader in the native, Penobscot community, summarizes the challenge before us well. She says, “We must recognize that the entire natural system is one life system, not a series of saleable, fragmented parts. The most destructive illusion held by humanity is the belief that everything is tied to an economic engine that has no heart, no compassion and places no value on life.”⁵

What this statement points to is that there is a spiritual cost to us continuing with business as usual. Because, at its core, our capitalist economy system is rooted in notions of scarcity and abundance that are ultimately destructive. We are pitted against one another in what we assume is a zero-sum game of get yours first while you can. Any abundance we might find, we are told, ought to be kept for ourselves. And, anything of value is commodified and monetized to the point that we lose sight of what has true meaning in our lives.

Now, the good news, particularly here in Vermont, is that many people have been moving us towards new economic systems that are ultimately more environmentally sustainable and that seek to honor the dignity of all people.

Vermont is a leader in establishing new models of ownership of businesses so it is not just a few who benefit from businesses as economic engines. Vermont clearly values keeping it local with our local food system being a prime example of getting our food needs met through local sources and keeping money circulating within our communities. Many organizations and businesses alike have made Vermont a leader in renewable energy and energy efficiency moving us closer to independence from fossil fuels.

³ <https://www.uua.org/economic/escalatinginequality/escalating-inequality>

⁴ <http://money.cnn.com/2016/12/22/news/economy/us-inequality-worse/index.html>

⁵ <https://www.localizeit2017.com/>

Entities like the Onion River Exchange and HomeShare Vermont illustrate how we can operate outside the system of pure monetary exchange to fulfill our needs for services. And, the movement towards establishing a Genuine Progress Indicator as a supplement to Gross Domestic Product shows that we are taking a bigger picture view of how we assess the overall well-being of our state and the people who live here. The GPI will measure over 20 factors that impact our economy, our health, our environment, communities and families.⁶

So, that is all great news.

Bringing it back to the personal, I encourage each of you to consider your place in reforming what might seem like an impenetrable and mystifying economic system. What is something you can change in your own personal life and personal habits to infuse our economic system with more compassion and more justice? Perhaps it's reducing your own consumption. Buy Nothing Day is November 24th, the day after Thanksgiving. Or, perhaps you can ensure that the money you are spending is spent locally and is spent in ways that supports workers' rights and environmental sustainability. If you have investments, you can ensure that those investments are made with social and environmental responsibility in mind.

At a deeper level, we can each strive to come to grips with the ways our economic system has shaped us and the people we love. We can own that some of us here have been the beneficiaries of skewed economic prosperity for the highest income levels while others here have suffered terribly at the continued stagnation of wages and hoarding of wealth at the very top. We can try to understand from one another how our differing attitudes towards money might create barriers in our relationships and make the movement towards collective action at times challenging. I believe that we need to do this work and what better place to start than in this loving community.

Ultimately, we know that the abundance we seek in our lives can't be measured by dollars as Mountain Girl learned in the story shared earlier this morning. To be able to know and appreciate the abundance of working outdoors, of sleeping under the stars, of wandering in open country, alone is a gift. This abundance, the abundance of our natural world and the abundance that inspires grandmothers to keep the table overflowing so that no person leaves hungry, this abundance can move us towards new visions and new realities.

⁶ <http://www.uvm.edu/~uvmpr/pdf/VTGPI-Primer.pdf>

May we feel called to act from this shared abundance.