

“What We Need is Here”

Reading and sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno
August 16, 2015

“The Wild Geese” by Wendell Berry
Horseback on Sunday morning,
harvest over, we taste persimmon
and wild grape, sharp sweet
of summer's end. In time's maze
over fall fields, we name names
that rest on graves. We open
a persimmon seed to find the tree
that stands in promise,
pale, in the seed's marrow.
Geese appear high over us,
pass, and the sky closes. Abandon,
as in love or sleep, holds
them to their way, clear
in the ancient faith: what we need
is here. And we pray, not
for new earth or heaven, but to be
quiet in heart, and in eye,
clear. What we need is here.

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Tomatoes bursting with color and heat. Peppers that smell like spicy sunshine. Thick and juicy cucumbers. There's the mint running rough shod like a cowgirl at the rodeo. Zucchini and summer squash producing at such a rate that you're wondering why you planted as many as you did and who can take some of them off my hands and how much zucchini bread can I possibly bake?

'Tis the season of abundance.

But in every season, there is abundance everywhere. You don't even have to look very hard. You need only to pay attention.

Here's a story for you ...

It is May 14, 2014 my friend the Reverend Dr. Catriona Grant and I meet at the New London eatery, On the Waterfront. It is a somber meeting. The diagnosis is confirmed: breast cancer. We raise a glass for the journey. Share a great meal and a few good laughs, even.

So another cancer story begins.

One year later, Catriona and I meet at On the Waterfront yet again, this time to commemorate all that has transpired in the year since diagnosis. We remember the sorrow, fear and pain. The loss of hair ... of confidence. But more importantly, we hold close the grace-filled intimacy that comes with cancer. We remember all of the doctors and nurses who have been like angels to Catriona. The miracle worker of a bra-fitter who takes her job so seriously and is so warm and funny that getting a new bra for a new breast almost seems like one of the most fun things to do ever. All the friends and family who stepped up. The congregation that brought meals to the doorstep and otherwise carried on with aplomb. We praise and heap love onto Catriona's partner who although only six months into the relationship at the start of the cancer ride, held in there with steadiness and humor that was stunning. He's a gem.

And she's a gem and she's doing great!

It is a beautiful night and there is much to celebrate.

And then to our surprise here comes a bunch of First Congregational Church of Ledyard folks! We exchange greetings as well as the obligatory banter and laughter that comes when those who live east of the river cross the bridge to this side.

Catriona and I are just finishing our dinner when the server arrives with the appetizer special that we had contemplated but ultimately resisted. She says that our friends at that table – she points to the Ledyard folks – sent it over to us with their compliments.

So sweet!! We were so moved ... and so happy to try the crab-stuffed mushrooms!

Now we are onto dessert and are enjoying the most sublime lemon cake. And we think, "Wouldn't it be nice to return the treat and send the cake to the other table?" So on our behalf, the server brings the cake to the table from whence the appetizer had come. Equal amounts of delight are expressed. It was so much fun.

By now our meal is winding down just as Ellen and Bruce Cummings arrive for dinner. Greetings are exchanged. Ellen makes me laugh just being in the room with her so as ever, and with Bruce, they've got me cracking up immediately.

Lingering in all the good feeling, Catriona and I express our gratitude for such a wonderful night. So much laughter and so many sweet surprises. An abundance of good life.

But then that our server arrives and says, “I don’t know who you two are, but I want to go out with you sometime. This couple over here (she points to Ellen & Bruce) picked up your tab.”

Well, we couldn’t believe it. We couldn’t believe our good fortune that we both serve congregations peopled with such extraordinary people. We couldn’t believe the abundant generosity that just kept on spilling forth.

(And, of course, of the night before, the next day the text read, “That’ll preach!”)

Who would think that a story that starts out essentially as a cancer story would turn into a story about intimacy and gratitude? And ultimately, would turn into a story about abundance?

And I’m talking about the part of the story before the crab-stuffed mushrooms even landed on our table!

Abundance is how you look at it. It’s an attitude you chose when faced with crisis. A holocaust survivor famously built an entire psychology around this idea: that we always have the power to chose our attitude in the face of the most dire circumstance.

And then there’s the second part of the story that serves to illuminate the sense of abundance that preceded it: abundance begets abundance. Giving begets giving and in the giving, everyone is so full of joy.

What we need is here.

Abundance requires a spiritual effort to live one’s life aware of all that we have lest we live with an unwarranted sense of scarcity. Because when said unwarranted sense of scarcity logs into our minds, our hearts shrink.

It’s simple: if we have food, shelter, and a reasonable sense of security, we are living in abundance.

What we need is here.

And love. We ourselves generate love! We ourselves generate the love that makes the treat of the crab stuffed mushrooms ... the lemon cake. When we pick up the tab. That’s love. That’s kindness. And we are ourselves the love generators of the world.

And as love generators, we must never forget that there are too many people who are without food, shelter, and a reasonable sense of security. These are our kin who do indeed live lives of scarcity. It’s breaks our hearts a thousand ways to Sunday.

This past week I was on retreat at Wisdom House. Wisdom House is run by the Daughters of Wisdom, an order of women religious who have a deep commitment to environmental justice, the arts, and interfaith dialogue. There on the wall was posted a letter from their colleagues who were in Iraq in 2014 when ISIS invaded the country. The letter was chock full of details about the brutal conditions in which the Iraqi people were being forced to live. It was heartbreaking

So, we can't be naïve about the abundance of abundance. That would border on cruel, after all. Let's hold close to those people – too many to contemplate – whose lives are full of terror and despair. It is right that so many of us heard the admonishment, "There are children starving in the world." at our childhood tables. For it was and continues to be true. That being so, it makes our perspective that much more imperative, all things being relative.

We pray that all of our kin here and abroad will someday live in abundance and peace and without fear or scarcity.

I have been treading the scarcity waters of late and was woken up and turned around by the spirit of abundance just last week. Here's what happened ...

George Fargo spent part of his childhood at All Souls. His father tended the coal-fueled boiler back in the day. George dropped by the church last week. Whenever he drops by, he helps around the house, so to speak. He'll straighten the chairs here in Unity Hall. Put return address stickers on envelopes. Whatever needs doing, George is our man and we are so grateful.

On this day, he stops by my office to say hello. As well as the catching up, he has a question: "When will the capital campaign kick off?" Well, I said, we're slowing things down a bit. I tell him all the sound reasons for the slow down. He listens carefully. Takes it all in and then he shakes it off. He's ready to make his gift now!

Truth be told, I've been concerned about the capital campaign that looms on our horizon like uncertain weather. Generosity begets generosity. I learned that the last time we had a capital campaign. But that campaign kicked off in 2006 a full two years before the crash of 2008. And even though it was a three-year campaign, plowing right through the hard times, the congregation successfully met our financial goals. And here we are in this building.

Yet, the world has changed since then. There's an undeniable sense of financial vulnerability that permeates our lives. We must be honest about this. As well, a good many of the old saints who led with large gifts last time have died. Jean Hanor. Esther & Dick Goodwin. Derry Bortner Ryder. Adrianna Vail: their memory a blessing.

So, the decision was made to both slow down and to scale back the building plans and therefore, the capital campaign that will raise the funds to build a community room and kitchen. I share that news with George. He hears me but I see that he sees little connection between what I'm saying and the fact that he's ready to give his gift.

So I do what should have come naturally. You don't kick a gift angel in the mouth, friends. Generosity incarnate stood before me, smile on his face, no question in his mind. "I'm ready to give you my gift now!"

And with his permission, I share with you that we have our first large gift. Today George Fargo is putting down his check for \$10,000. He gives his gift in honor of his father. A reminder to me and to all of us that sometimes when we are slipping into a sense of scarcity, abundance kicks us in the backside and says, "Everything is going to be okay."

Scarcity is no way for a congregation to pursue its mission. We must be fiscally responsible and reasonable. But we cannot let a sense of scarcity hold us back. Ever. And I thank you George, for the reminder: what we need is here.

In capital campaigns, in love and in life ... we best be reminded of the ancient faith: what we need is here.

Don't forget, Friends.

Blessed be. Amen.