

## “Lighten Up”

Prof. Mark S. Burrows, Ph.D.  
The First Congregational Church of Camden, UCC

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Lighten up: the *double entendre* is delightful. Said one way, with a stern voice, it sounds like a harsh criticism: *Lighten up, man!* Said gently, with a twist of humor, it invites us to consider an alternative to whatever it is that is burdening us. And somehow, the verse comes to the core of one of Jesus’ most persistent admonitions: “Fear not.” More on that in a moment. First, though, the gospel text we heard this morning, from Luke’s gospel, reminds me of a verse that has long struck me from the Koran, in this case from the *sura* entitled “The Cow”: “They [i.e., the unbelievers, doubters, or confused] will question you concerning what they should expend. Tell them this: “The abundance.”” (see “The Cow,” from the Koran 2: 219) If this is the first question, I suppose that the second will follow close behind: “But what is the abundance?”

This question lies at the heart of the gospel story we have heard this morning, which begins with Jesus’ startling assurance: “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your God’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” Or, in the parlance of our day, “lighten up!” Remember: the abundance.

Now, I was taught – at least I think so, though perhaps this is something one simply picks up along with the occasional virus and, perhaps, a measure of good manners – that there are three things one does not talk about in polite company. I expect that you know them: money, sex, and politics. Of these, only one – sex – was a topic Jesus never addressed, at least not directly. The other two were a constant in his teaching, and they had everything to do with “the abundance,” understood in his characteristic manner in terms of money and politics, those two core realities that occupy us throughout our lives.

It is not that Jesus formulated some kind of voting preference in his day – or for ours, for that matter. At least, not directly. What did occupy him, again and again, had everything to do with an alternative way of life; a gift of such an abundance that it opens us to life, inviting us to open ourselves to the other – to those in need, to those “others” whom we do not understand and perhaps fear as our enemy. This abundance asks us to forgive as we have been forgiven. It invites us to divest ourselves of privilege – “For the first shall be last, and the last first” – and take the lowest place at the feast.

All of this is what Jesus sums up with a phrase he used persistently, and suggestively: “the kingdom of God” (*basileia theou*). For this “kingdom,” subverting our expectations and

startling our complacencies, offers a form of life truer and deeper and more generous than what one comes to know in the everyday sphere of worldly politics. And it is for this we pray each time we remember the prayer Jesus taught us to pray: “Thy kingdom come. . .they will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” For what is this but a prayer for, and an offering of, “the abundance”?

The abundance. Now, finally, there is nothing else that matters in this life. Not money, convenient and even necessary as it is in our society. Not status, which comes and goes, wrecked by the foibles of our lives—or others’ misadventures. Not possessions, which as Jesus reminds us in this little sermon we overheard, in Luke’s version, where he admonishes his followers, weak with fear and heavy with doubt: “Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.”

There is it again: the abundance.

What is this but Jesus’ way of reminding us of the only values that matter. It is his way of saying, as he does in a thousand ways in his parables and teachings: “Give yourself to what endures beyond this life, so fraught with uncertainty, indecision, and impermanence. Give yourselves away. Which is to say: Give yourselves to love. To God. To the others who surround you. Give yourself recklessly and without thought of what you will lose in the giving. For you have but one life, and each day comes but once.

And this, when all is said and done, is the abundance.

Some of you will know the Danish film that came out in 1987, a cinematic version of the short story by the Danish writer Isak Dinesen (Karen Blixen’s “nom de plume”). The movie portrays a family of earnest Christians, centered on two sisters – Martine and Philippa – who carry on the ministry of their father, a rather dour pastor in the little village set in 19<sup>th</sup> century Jutland. One of the sisters, Martine, was courted by a charming and handsome Swedish cavalry officer. The other, Philippa, gifted with a marvelous singing voice, was encouraged by her teacher, Achille Papin – who was madly in love with her – to pursue a career in opera, but after her father’s death she renounced fame and the wealth it promised to bring as decadent and against what they understood to be “Christian values.” Both renounce any hope of marriage or career, choosing instead to carry on their father’s ministry.

The story unfolds in an unexpected way as the two women, now spinsters, receive a guest, Babette Hersant, who is a refugee from the counter-revolutionary struggles of that time. She comes bearing a letter from Papin asking the sisters to offer her refuge in exchange for her services as a cook. The sisters are hesitant at first but finally agree, as long as Babette will agree to cook only those bland foods they deemed appropriate. She does this for fourteen long years, renouncing what she knew of the culinary arts and serving these women. But one day she receives word that she had won the French lottery and is to receive what was a fortune by the standards of the day.

In the wake of this news, she confides in the sisters that she has but a single request of them, namely, that she be allowed to cook for them, and for the struggling little band of followers they lived with, a real French meal. They are reluctant, but realize that she had never asked a thing of them and this seemed reasonable, particularly because they presumed this would be her parting gift.

She takes the large sum of money and begins to plan the meal, and the two sisters meet with their little congregation, instructing them not to show any sign of enthusiasm for what they were beginning to sense would be a decadent dinner.

The dinner itself is astonishing, with course after course accompanied by vintage French wines. Only the officer, who had returned to visit his elderly mother, realizes how remarkable this feast really is and, alone among the other guests, opens himself to the wonder of it all. Gradually, the other guests enter into this wonder, and the feast becomes the occasion for signs of forgiveness between those long estranged from each other. The evening ends, after the last course and the final wine had been consumed, as the party goes out to the village square and begins to dance with each other under the spacious skies.

The final scene is the unexpected climax of the story. After a long night of cleaning the dishes and bringing the kitchen back to order, Babette meets the two sisters the following morning. They assume she will tell them that she is now planning to return to Paris. But she stuns them when she confides that, no, she had no intention of doing so, and, anyway, the money was all spent on the feast. They are shocked by this revelation, and Martine blurts out, “Now you will be poor the rest of your life.” Babette’s answer goes to the heart of the matter: “I am an artist, and an artist is never poor.”

Again, the abundance.

In some ways, the story of Babette’s feast is another version of Jesus’ admonition: “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”

What is this kingdom? It is the way of abundance, for God gives us nothing less than a love deeper than anything we can imagine – but not less than we long for. He calls it “treasure in heaven,” beyond the reach of thieves and without fear of rust or moth, those quiet enemies of worldly things.

And Jesus left his followers with a way of discerning what this abundance is all about, in the form of a simple claim: “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

You see, this is Jesus’ way of speaking about two of those three unmentionable things: in this case, money and politics. It is his way of saying: “Give yourself to what endures beyond this life, so fraught with uncertainty, indecision, and impermanence. Find yourself, in love, and then learn to give yourself away. Which is to say: Give yourself to love. To God. To the others who surround you. Give yourself recklessly and without thought of what you will lose

in the giving, remembering the magnitude of the love you have received as a gift, unmerited but not undesired.

And remember that “[t]hey will question you concerning what they should expend. Say: ‘The abundance.’” And when they ask – or you wonder in doubt or confusion – what this is, remember that you are artists in this life, and an artist is never poor. We might even say, rendering Jesus’ sentiment in the language of our day: Lighten up. And “do not be afraid, for it is God’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” Which is to say, the abundance. The abundance. The abundance.