

Spend Less to Get More  
John 15:1-8  
November 9, 2008  
St. John United Methodist Church  
Anchorage, Alaska  
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Advent conspiracy. Someone's out to mess with your Christmas! We started last Sunday with the theme of Worship Fully when Pastor Jo Ann kicked off this four-part series to help think about Advent and Christmas. Let's watch a brief video that will give us a clear picture.

**VIDEO CLIP from [www.adventconspiracy.org](http://www.adventconspiracy.org)**

Was there anything in your spirit that resonated with this video? The suggestion is that if you and I want Advent and Christmas to be filled with meaning and spirit we need to build four practices into our lives. Last Sunday Jo Ann talked about Worship Fully. Today I have the theme of Spend Less. Next Sunday is Youth Sunday and they will deal with the theme of Give More. Finally Rose will talk with us on the theme of Shop Better. Oops. I'm sorry. It's really Love All.

We begin today with the Bible. John 15 has Jesus talking about vines and branches. He often used agricultural illustrations to help people understand the spiritual world. People knew that in order to get the best and most fruit it was necessary to prune some branches. The principle is simple. More is not always better. Making reductions in just the right places often leads to more.

What in your life needs to be reduced? In our consumer, spending culture we are taught to be in touch with what we want to add to our lives. Being citizens of the kingdom of God often means that our values contradict the values of secular society. I'm going to give you three minutes to turn to a neighbor and talk about what branches in your life need to be pruned. Do you need less junk food in your diet, less time spent watching TV, less time working, less spending on extra things? What in your life needs to be reduced? Go ahead and share with a neighbor for three minutes.

There is an underlying principle to our beliefs and practices regarding giving. We generally look at our giving from a position of scarcity or abundance. Regardless of how much we have some of us have a tendency to believe that we don't have very much or we fear that we are about to enter a time of scarcity.

Walter Brueggemann, professor emeritus of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary, sees as a recurring theme throughout the Old Testament the conflict between the "liturgy of abundance" and the "myth of scarcity." The Bible starts out in Genesis 1 with a liturgy declaring God's abundant blessing on all creation. At the end of each day God declares that day's work to be "good." It is not until we get to Genesis 47 that we encounter scarcity. Then Pharaoh organizes a plan to save up food for a coming famine. Even in the wilderness, God provides Israel with enough. But the people are frequently fearful that there will not be enough.

Brueggemann sees Americans functioning in the world today much the way Pharaoh did in Genesis. We, the richest people of the world, are the main coveters. "We never feel that we have enough," says Brueggemann. "We have to have more and

more, and this insatiable desire destroys us. Whether we are liberal or conservative Christians, we must confess that the central problem of our lives is that we are torn apart by the conflict between our attraction to the good news of God's abundance and the power of our belief in scarcity — a belief that makes us greedy, mean and unneighborly. We spend our lives trying to sort out that ambiguity.<sup>1</sup>

What about you? When you think about what you hope to give to St. John for 2009 do you ponder your devalued 401K? Do you allow fear to make you believe you can't give like you want to? Do you tend to give out of a mode of scarcity or abundance?

Why do we get into scarcity mode? Perhaps we still hold on to the idea that money will bring us happiness. Does it really? Should we give less to God in order that we might have more to make us happy? We're reasonable people. Let's look at the facts. The Washington Post in 2006 reported on a study in the journal called SCIENCE. This study found that the belief that high income is associated with good mood is an illusion. People with above-average income "are barely happier than others in moment-to-moment experience," says the journal. They tend to be more tense, and "do not spend more time in particularly enjoyable activities."<sup>2</sup>

When you live your life spiritually you come to understand these things. You are given the gift of seeing the values imbedded in our culture for what they truly are. As God's people it is not scarcity that should drive our giving. It is abundance! We have all we need, and much of it can be given to God's work in the world. This is because we live, not by fear, but by the power and the generosity of God!

Remember our principle. To help us relax and enjoy Advent and Christmas this year we need to spend less, and we'll receive much more. I leave you with this practical idea you and your family can do to live out this principle.

One Sunday morning the Rev. Ethel Stears startled the congregation at St. Paul's United Methodist Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, by saying, I don't want anyone in this church to ever spend another nickel. She then went on to explain that they were being asked to bring all of their nickels to church to help buy hot lunches for children in Haiti. A gallon jar was placed in the narthex to collect the coins. In six months, over \$400 was collected. One St. Paul's first grader was quizzed by her public school teacher what coins she would give a storekeeper if she bought something which cost 32 cents. A quarter and seven pennies was her answer. But, wouldn't a quarter, a nickel and two pennies be better corrected the teacher? Oh, no, was the shocked reply. We don't spend nickels at our house. The nickels go to feed hungry children.

We don't spend nickels at our house. Think about the principle of giving these United Methodist children were learning. It's a principle that needs to be built into our lives and our giving. Spend less. Get more from God. It really works.

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<sup>1</sup> —religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=533. Retrieved December 6, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> *The Washington Post* (July 3, 2006).