

**In These Times of Scarcity**

**A Sermon Delivered**

**by**

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**at the**

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**on**

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## In Times of Scarcity

Thanksgiving, 2008

I never realized I grew up poor until I was in high school. I was shocked when my father told me that my hope to attend even a state college up in Buffalo would go unfulfilled because he didn't have that kind of money. The cost at that time for the college was about \$400 a semester. I never felt poor, even while growing up in the only white family in a rather depressed neighborhood. While white flight took place before my eyes in my early elementary school years, I thought we stayed there because we liked where we were living and also because Adlai Stevenson would want us to. I later learned that my parents just couldn't afford to move.

I'm glad my parents never let on to the fact that we were poor. All those potato soup dinners served several times a week were believed by me to be a normal dietary staple, and when my mother made me a Davey Crocket coonskin cap rather than buy one I felt it was an honor.

I don't think I was ever deliberately duped as a child. My parents never pretended to be wealthy. I never lacked for anything. Thanksgiving always brought relatives to the table at our house: a curious mix where by marriage we became an extended family that included African-Americans, Southern Baptists, Roman Catholics, Unitarians, and Jewish refugees. As a child I thought this, too was perfectly normal. My mother always alluded to America as the great melting pot, and so I surmised that our family had melted just fine and followed American protocol.

There were no rich aunts or any relatives of wealth. We were blessed instead with plenty of eccentricity and playful humor. Spirits always ran high, and when Kennedy was elected the spirits soared even higher, not because anyone thought their economic condition would improve, but because a great man of prestige and stature, education and culture would make everyone proud to be an American.

There was a distinct change in the air, not all that different from today. The obvious exception, however, is what is euphemistically termed these days as the "economic downturn." This phrase leaves room for a bit of optimism as though a downturn were just a slight dip in the road. Many still believe, contrary to the laws of physics, that what goes down must eventually come up. Defying gravity lies at the core of America's faith.

Returning to the era of excess may not carry the potential so many hope for. Our efforts at salvation by bailout have only produced greater debt and a few golden parachutes for bank executives. Decades of America's rabid consumerism have grounded to a virtual standstill; the upcoming holidays look bleak for merchants and for most of us. Although socialism remains the dreaded word, a sure signal to prepare for the rapture, most Americans implied by their vote on November 4<sup>th</sup> that a redistribution of wealth may not be as inappropriate as claimed by people owning seven houses. There may be some movement to the left, but it's no French revolution, the guillotines have not been taken out of mothballs, but it seems that the luxury of unlimited bounty – The American way – will take a hit. We popped the stock bubble, the tech bubble, the housing bubble...and now we're out of bubbles, while wealth, and the mania for more, flounders in a bubbleless environment.

I think the economic writer, Michael Powell captured it well when he wrote: "Bubbles breed greed, which in turn breeds complicity in banker suites, hucksters, and the common man or woman intent on capturing a gilded thimbleful of wealth." Wasn't it the poor man's dream of a thimble's worth of gold that kept trickle-down economics alive long enough to create this unmanageable debt - - the dream of

unlimited prosperity captivated many imaginations and brought us to an untenable lifestyle in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Our portfolios look radically different from less than three months ago. Perhaps its gallows humor but I hear people referring to their 401(K) as a 101(K), and many folks resigning themselves to work until age 90 and beyond.

At times like these I think back to my years of sheltered poverty, and begin to think that a person's standard of living is a matter of perspective as well as income. I'm not trying to romanticize things, but I do believe that things unconnected to money ought to be valued more. Let's start with friends and family.

Even our quaint and sentimental history of that first Thanksgiving in 1621 places opulence and life's blessings into a framework which we have somehow lost. The very preciousness of life, having survived the onslaught of harsh climate, disease, and the challenges of a new world, is worth a celebration. Just having survived it all deserves our thanksgiving, and blessed with even a modest bounty deserves our profound gratitude.

This Thanksgiving, 2008, is about as different as any Thanksgiving we have ever experienced. For a rather extended period of time most of us have been in the driver's seat on the road to upward mobility and economic progress. In these past decades prosperity has begun to feel like our birthright. But now the economic downturn looms as more than a glitch in our relentless accumulation; it signals a time of great scarcity. It is sobering to think, and much of America remains in denial, that we are entering a time of scarcity in almost every commodity imaginable from gasoline to food to spirit. Baby boomers have raised their children with nary an experience of deprivation. We Boomers and our children have been spoiled by plenty and the indulgence that goes with it.

My intent this morning is not to induce guilt or shame or embarrassment. But let's be honest, it was an intoxicating ride for many of us. My point this morning is that our fun ride has not just been temporarily derailed as we wait impatiently for the Dow to creep up again to put us back on track. This age of scarcity is real, and the elixir to renewed hope lies not with an economic system in need of tinkering, but something far greater and actually in our control. Our moral compass is what broke and brought our economy to its knees.

Margaret Atwood reminds us that we are most fundamentally, social creatures who must interact for mutual benefit. Without a sense of fairness and also a level of trust, without a system of reciprocal altruism and tit-for-tat – one good turn deserves another and so does one bad turn – no one would ever lend anything, as there would be no expectation of being paid back. And people would lie, cheat and steal with abandon as there would be no punishment for such behavior.

Didn't Alan Greenspan just recently confess to a congressional committee that he thought our system of capitalism didn't need any regulations because of this intrinsic sense of fairness? He was appalled by the greed that undermined all provisions of trust. His basic economic theories were now forever changed because deception had evolved as the norm. With all due respect to Greenspan, I think what changed was not his economic theory as much as his moral philosophy about humankind. When left to our own devices we fail miserably.

Even children begin by saying, "That's not fair" long before they start figuring out money. They exchange favors and toys and punches early in life, setting their own exchange rate. Almost every human

interaction involves debts incurred – debts that are either paid in which balance is restored – or else not, when everything goes “TILT.”

A simple example: You’re in your car, and you let someone else go ahead of you, and the driver doesn’t nod or wave or offer a thank you honk. How do you feel? What’s wrong with this guy. The last time I’ll do anything for him. But I also experienced a sense of fairness when I received a ticket for jaywalking last Tuesday. Two stern cops were very officious, and as I apologized for my egregious mistake, I said, “My only defense is that I am a New Yorker.” They both chuckled, and for this gift of levity, I walked away with a warning. It was fair.

I wonder how many bankers routinely say the Lord’s Prayer, the part that goes: “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” And yet they ardently refuse to even renegotiate some of the mortgage rates bordering on usury. Do the investment brokers realize that in the language of Aramaic, the tongue in which Jesus spoke, the word for “debt” is the same word for “sin.” Fairness beckons all human interaction involving debt. The way we negotiate debt and ultimately deal with debt paves the road to either justice or bankruptcy.

Fairness lies at the root of all religions. If you are treated unfairly in this life, you will get your reward in the next life. It balances out, just as those who are first in this worldly life will be last in the hereafter. The appeal is obvious, going back to that innate sense of what is right we all felt as children.

In an age scarcity, we will not only be forced to surrender the comforts and luxuries to which we have grown so foolishly accustomed, but we need to enter the uncharted territory which one of my mentors, Peter Gomes, describes as “counting ourselves rich not by what we have saved but by what we have shared.” And then he adds the open question: “And how shall we do it?”

I raise this question at Thanksgiving because it is easy being thankful when things are going well and the proverbial larder is full. From the age of 26, when I felt embarrassed by earning more money than my father, the sense of accomplishment and bounty has been my good fortune uninterrupted. My children have never known otherwise and have never once tasted a cup of potato soup.

But we enter a new era. And if Thanksgiving is solely dependent on our material bounty, then this holiday may well vanish from our calendar. Thanksgiving, from the very beginning, always meant celebrating with deep gratitude all that endures when material things pass away. Is not Thanksgiving less an accounting of possessions and more a spiritual journey that awakens our senses to the preciousness of our merely existing and to the wealth of intangible assets that bless our lives?

In this age of scarcity we have now entered, we must realign our moral compass with a new sense of purpose and spirit. We will have to learn to make more of less, and recalibrate the scales of justice fairly again in our transactions with our neighbors. We will need to share better and serve others if we hope to survive this new age. It will require a revolution of the heart and a shift in moral perspective. I have a deep belief that a moral bubble is one that will never break. Imagine, a sense of fairness growing wider and wider and wider...and always remaining intact.

May all that we hold sacred and holy grant that it may be so...this gratitude for all we have ignored for too long, and that a wider sense of fairness infiltrate our system of commerce. In an age of scarcity, the essence of our humanity, our love, and our transactions with others gets writ large. We will come to know ourselves more deeply, as the need to compromise our wealth, entitlement, and expectations tugs our conscience and huge decisions about selfless giving surface to the fore. The age of scarcity will feel like a revolution, not of the Bolshevik variety, but a revolution of the spirit where we turn to our

neighbor and ask what we might do for them. We can always do with less than once imagined in the gilded age. In this age of scarcity we might begin to recognize who we really are. Amen