

“Generosity in Scarcity”
October 18, 2026

I Kings 17:8-16
Philippians 4:4-9

There’s a wonderful hymn, “Praise to God, Immortal Praise.” It’s not found in our hymnal, but it is in the old Congregational *Pilgrim Hymnal*. In one line it sings of “All that liberal autumn pours/From her rich o’erflowing stores.” These October days invite us to look around and see the great, annual generosity of the earth and, in doing so, to consider our own “o’erflowing stores” that we might be generous in our own outpouring.

Because of the beauty and abundance all around us, autumn is a good time to invite your generous financial support of the ministry and mission of Congregational UCC for the coming year. We’re hearing from members about why they support our congregation—and I thank Ruth for her words this morning. Take them to heart as you prayerfully consider your pledge for the coming year.

As I said last Sunday, in seeking to be generous people, we need to look beyond simply giving money. A liberal spirit will be generous with all things—with grace and patience, with sweat and effort, with prayer and companionship, with service and love.

We recognize, however, in *these* autumn days, that liberal spirit is challenged by a constricting sense of scarcity. There’s a lot of worry, even fear. In these days we see a pulling inward at all levels.

Last Wednesday we learned that prices in September were 3.7% higher than they were a year ago. Those with electric vehicles might not have noticed, but many are well aware that gas prices rose 9.1% for the month—and gas is up 34% over the past year. Farmers have been hit with skyrocketing diesel prices as harvest time arrives.

We keep being told that we are in a “golden age,” but many don’t see that. They are looking around for ways to pull back. Inflation has left many people wondering how they will stretch what they have in order pay for food, housing, heat, and medical care. Financial generosity seems less of an option.

In saying this, I don’t mean to discount or criticize such feelings. They come in response that growing sense of scarcity.

On another level, we see our nation pulling back from its long-held role as a world leader, thinking “America First,” with all of the narrowness of vision and action that phrase implies. Calls to limit immigration have been growing and growing violent as the administration tells us that “they” are taking “our” jobs.

We pull back. We pull inward. We pull away.

A sense of scarcity constricts our generosity.

And just as generosity is about more than money, so, too, is scarcity.

If I can speak personally, I am constricted by a sense that there is never enough time. And yet I have the same hours in a day that each of you have.

What constricts you? Where do you want to pull back?

A constricting sense of scarcity challenges our lives.

The theologian, Wolfhart Pannenberg, said that “often enough, the actual direction of the world and its history offer little evidence that a God of love and mercy, or even justice, controls it. The extent and absurdity of what seems to be meaningless suffering, the triumph and good fortune of the unjust, and the presence of sheer evil gnaw at the souls of those who believe in God’s good care.”¹

It is by no means obvious today that “in everything God works for good,” but then again that has never been obvious.

Let me be clear: Affirming God’s providential care does not mean things will go our way. They will, in some sense, however, go God’s way. Bad things happen. Evil is present. Still, with good reason we speak of God’s merciful presence in the world and in our lives.

Yes, most of us from time to time worry about whether we have “enough.”

So, it can be troubling to listen as Paul urges the Philippians: “Do not worry about anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” The amazing thing is that Paul wrote this to a congregation, many of whom were slaves and most of whom were poor. They would not know about security. And Paul himself was in prison facing a capital charge when he wrote to them. “Don’t worry. Let your requests be made known to God.”

This is as difficult to hear now as it was 2000 years ago.

It helps in times like these, then, to remember those stories of scarcity in scripture.

The story of the prophet Elijah that we heard this morning is a tale of scarcity. Drought dominates the entire chapter. Water is scarce, for God had said, “There shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.”

Feel the heat. Look at the parched riverbeds. Search for food.

What do you worry about drying up? What’s your fear?

Not enough money, not enough patience, not enough support, not enough understanding, not enough time?

The drought is so severe that it even affects a woman well-off enough to own a house. Using words that Elijah himself had used, the widow swears “As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing...”

Maybe.

I once had the experience of talking with a group of fairly wealthy people. Many of us here are doing well. They were doing much better. What I discovered as they spoke was not only were they very rich, they were also some of the neediest people I’d ever met. Affluence begets its own fears.

So I wonder: What anxiety lurks in the shadows around our own comfortable Iowa City way of life? What leads us to say: “As God lives, I have nothing.”

God, however, tells Elijah that this well-off woman will feed him.

When Elijah asks for food and water, the woman tells him that she is going to prepare a meager meal for herself and her son, so that they “may eat it, and die.”

Elijah’s response? “Do not be afraid.” And how many times have we heard those words that keep echoing through the stories of the Bible? These are the words of Joseph to his brothers; they are the message at the empty tomb. They are the words spoken over and over to us at those times when we *don’t* have enough, when *death* seems to have had the final word.

When scarcity stalks our lives, we hear: “Do not be afraid.”

Notice how Elijah doesn’t try to dissuade the woman from her plan. “Go and do as you have said,” he tells her, adding only, “First make me a little cake and bring it to me and afterwards make something for yourself and your son.” To this woman with meager resources, on the edge of death, God’s prophet says: “Think of me, do something for me, first.”

A strange response. Of course you are worried, desperate. Now turn your attention beyond yourself.

It’s like the sign on a pump out in the desert. Attached to the pump is a canteen filled with water. The sign advises that there is enough water in the canteen to prime the pump and then there will be all the water needed. And please, refill the canteen when you are finished.

Those words call for faith. They call for consideration of the person who will come along next. And they come with the promise that there is enough—and more—if what is there is used properly and shared. Hoarding will not help even in the most desperate of circumstances.

This brief story of Elijah ends with good news: “She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail.”

One Old Testament scholar tells us that the wonder of this story resides beyond its supernatural character. God is free to act beyond all boundaries of nationality, ethnicity, and even religious affiliation, providing not only for Elijah but also for a woman and her family who were not part of Elijah’s people.

In part there is “enough” in this story and in our lives because there is human interaction and relationship. Elijah had only what he received from someone else. In sharing what she had, the woman found there was enough for her and her family.

Affirming God’s providential care is an act of faith. We trust in God’s care by faith. We do not know it with certainty. We cannot know it with certainty. There are no guarantees. The outcome is not certain.

I’m still trying to understand all of the implications of this story for my giving and my generosity. But maybe we can agree with the person who said that “miracle” is simply the religious name for

“event.” Every event, even the most natural and usual, becomes a miracle once it is related to God. It is a matter of seeing. Routine has a dulling effect on us and we see things only in their immediate context. Religious perception, however, sees the deeper nature of everyday events, experiencing them as miraculous, as an expression of the providence of God.²

If we remember the feebleness of our imagination and knowledge and the dullness of our own sight as we reach after the majesty and glory of God, we will not be surprised that much in nature and history remain dark and incomprehensible. Faith seeks to understand and accept the natural lack of full understanding.³

The Hebrew word for “salvation” comes from a root that connotes “space and freedom and security that are gained by the removal of constriction.” The good news of salvation is deliverance from what “constricts” us.

How might we yet be set free from the grip of the lies of scarcity in which so many of us live? That is, how might we yet find “salvation?”

once more, in these challenging autumn days, we look around. By opening our eyes and our hearts to the abundance of God we discover how much we have received and grow in our ability to share with others.

And generosity expands as we discover that abundance.

¹ Pannenberg, vol. 2 pg. 54.

² Pannenberg, vol. 2 pg. 46.

³ Kaufman, pg. 311