

October 2, 2016:

Defying Gravity: Discovering Gravity

Gravity – It's something we experience every moment of our lives, but it is rarely something we think much about. This simple, invisible force that holds us on the surface of this planet, which is not only whirling around on its axis, but flying through space as we orbit the sun. Without gravity, nothing would prevent us from being flung into outer space as the world turns. It is a pretty amazing concept – one that binds the entire universe together as we know it. It is the force of one object pulling at another. Isaac Newton's theory helped us understand that a force you cannot see can have such a great effect on your life, and that no one is exempt. Objects as big as the moon are affected by the same force that controls you and me.

Today we kick off our Stewardship Campaign entitled, Defying Gravity. For those who are unfamiliar with this term stewardship, it simply means "the responsible planning and management of resources." In the life of the church, it is the time of year when we are all asked to reflect on the different ways we contribute to God's work in the church – through our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. At the conclusion of this 4-week series, we ask that everyone turn in a pledge card, in an act of promising a certain level of financial commitment to the church. We do this for two reasons. First, it allows the church to plan accurately for ministries, since we can base our ministry budget on the dollar amount our members plan to give. Second, the act of filling out a card is a way for you to set goals for your financial giving in the coming year. Committing yourself to financially supporting the church symbolizes the priority you place on returning back to God some of the blessings you have received.

Too often we get nervous when the conversation turns to money in church – we're afraid we're going to be hit over the head with scripture, with guilt, with request after request for more money. So rather than approach the topic in healthy ways, people try to skirt it – avoid it – or ignore it. But we can only run so far – and if we're being honest with ourselves and with our faith – our relationship with money is important. How we live with money, what we do with it, and our feelings about it -impact our lives, and yes, our faith too. In the focus book for our Stewardship worship series, Defying Gravity: Break Free from the Culture of More, Tom Berlin suggests that just as gravity exists in the natural world, financial gravity exists in the economic world where you and I live each day. Like the gravity of our planet, it serves a purpose and is not inherently bad or good. Berlin argues that financial gravity enables us to function in our daily lives. It is the invisible force that compels us to pursue our basic necessities— things like food, shelter, and clothing for ourselves and those we love.

These benefits of financial gravity are important for Christians to remember when thinking about generosity and stewardship, because for some reason, we are taught in the church that money and possessions are the "root of all evil." This is a common misquotation of our first scripture reading from today which _____ read. First Timothy 10 states that not money itself, but "the love of money" which is the root of all kinds of evil. Some have made unfaithful life decisions and hurt themselves and others because they made money their goal, their first priority, their first love.

The problem with financial gravity occurs when you feel it with such intensity that it changes the way you live your life. If you're paying attention, you sense it at certain moments, such as when

you examine your bank account, noting the balance is lower than you had hoped for, or when you see that your credit card bill is higher than you would like. You feel it when you open up an Internet browser and see ads posted for items that are magically in the styles and colors you like. When you walk along the streets in a downtown like Red Bank, with its eclectic mix of retail stores, specialty shops, theaters, and restaurants, you can almost reach out and touch the force of financial gravity. Enter a shopping mall, and it is palpable. There is something attempting to pull you inside each store as you pass.

Jesus recognized the challenge of financial gravity and addressed it in his teaching. In our Gospel reading today, the YOUNG MAN was seeking a deeper journey with God – how to live more faithfully – and when Jesus’s response was to sell all his possessions and give the money to the poor, he “went away grieving, for he had many possessions.” The financial gravity he felt toward his “stuff” held him back from taking the next step in his faith. Did this make him a bad person... NO! for we hear him talk of his faithfulness... how he kept all the commandments and lived a faithful life... but when he sought more, asking Jesus what more he could do, he was unable to step out in faith – giving all his possessions away to follow Jesus, just as the disciples had done. And he went away grieving, he was sad to leave. His emotional response in that moment is a testimony to the confusion and disorientation he felt. The young man was torn between two worlds. He wanted to go with Jesus and give his life fully to God. He wanted to experience a deeper righteousness. But he could not bear to sell his possessions. The forces we experience in our daily lives hold us down and often keep us from a better way of life. The gravity that pulls at us, especially when unexamined, can be oppressive.

In the very next verse in the scripture – which we didn’t read today - Jesus draws a connection between wealth and the difficulty of leading a godly life: “Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” (Matthew 19: 23-24 NRSV). This may seem a bit unfair (especially if you are rich). Most scholars believe that Jesus, in talking about a camel and the eye of a needle, was using an extreme metaphor to make a point. But did you know that there is an actual “Needle Gate” in the basement of a Russian Orthodox church in Jerusalem’s Old City. The thought is that this secondary gate had been created intentionally small so that invaders could not easily pass through when the main gate was closed. A camel, for instance, would have to get on its knees and crawl through the opening to squeeze through. Challenging, but possible. Whether a metaphor or a real gate into the city, the lesson is the same: There is something about the pull of wealth that can work against the pull of a godly life.

When I was younger, I lived under the false impression that, deep down, wealthy people were probably not godly people. I had formed a stereotype based on movies and novels that portrayed wealthy people as shallow, self-serving, and greedy. I could hold that opinion for two reasons. First, I didn’t understand that I was wealthy compared to much of the world’s population. Second, I didn’t actually know anyone of substantial wealth. However, as I’ve encountered people of wealth in my different appointments, I discovered that my stereotype was not only unfair, but the opposite was often true. I’ve witnessed that wealthy people who are faithful Christians are often the most disciplined about doing good works. It’s like they understand that if they don’t manage their money, it soon will control them.

This is the power of possessions and the “pull” that financial gravity can have on our lives. To resist that pull, we need to make plans and develop habits that will help us stop being collectors of goods and become stewards who participate in the creation of God’s kingdom. An important part of stewardship is giving, and sometimes we are reluctant to give – for a variety of reasons – most of which involve being held back by financial gravity. Over the next three weeks, we will delve deeper into this force – exploring together what it would look like to break free from the hold money and possessions have on us, staying grounded and tethered to God, and committing ourselves to getting it right. It is my hope and prayer that we find guidance and wisdom from this series – that we may more fully embrace the joy of generosity, rather than being held back by the gravity that binds us. May it be so. Amen.