

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

24th Sunday after Pentecost
Year C

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October 30, 2016

Text: Genesis 11:1-9

Title: “Move Out of Scare City: Towers of Power”

Lynn and I have been participants in the Financial Peace University class that Ann and Larry Davis are so ably leading. I asked Lynn to join me in it because I had heard a great deal about the program for many years but had never explored it before. Some congregations are requiring new members to take the class before joining because how we handle our money and possessions is a significant part of what it means to follow in the ways of Jesus. The teachings of Jesus on money and possessions outnumber the teachings about prayer. “Where your treasure is there will your heart be also.”

So we are taking this class because I wanted to experience it as a participant before asking others to take it in the future, and I also trust that there are some things I can learn about money and faith because I am still on the journey with God, also.

Now there are a few things that I disagree with Dave Ramsey about—he is the guy who developed this program—but it’s still an excellent class. It really is. It’s excellent because it challenges some of our culture’s lies about money and possessions. It’s excellent because it offers clear strategies for overcoming debt that can weigh down the soul. It’s excellent because it is based on solid biblical teaching about money, possessions and giving. It’s so good I am hoping that we will be offering it at least once a year from here on out because one of the most often cited reasons for marital or relationship struggles has to do with money. People fighting over money. It can ruin a family. It can ruin a business. It can ruin a life.

Why is it that so many have this difficult relationship with money and possessions that can result in allowing differences to divide us? Why is it that couples somehow get so entangled in financial disagreements that they wind up splitting over those differences? Why is it that families—and we all know stories or have experienced them ourselves—find themselves so deeply angry with one another when it comes time to settle estates that they stop relating to one another? Why in the so called greatest country in the world, do we all seem to have this nagging fear that we just don’t have enough?

Let’s take a look at this video clip...

Most of us in this room I’m guessing are not helicopter owners, but we can all place ourselves somewhere on the continuum imaged in the clip. Something about comparing

ourselves with others and having more, wanting more is deeply embedded in our culture and in us. Why are so many so afraid that we don't have enough when we have garages or basements or storage spaces filled with stuff, spaces themselves that are larger than some people's homes? How does the spiritual life—life with God—speak to this “wanting more” tendency?

As I said, Jesus teachings in the New Testament are rife with lessons about money and possessions. But it's not just New Testament teachings but Old Testament teachings, too, that address this human condition. The story in Genesis tells of a people who were afraid they would be scattered to the farthest reaches of the known world. They had a town hall meeting and decided the way to address their fear was to build something impressive, a tower so high it would reach the clouds, so high that it would be clear that whoever built it were people of power, people of substance. The plan was to make a name for themselves. That--so they thought--would ward off the fear of being scattered.

As the foundations are being laid and the bricks start to stack up, the dust of construction blowing in the winds, supervisors barking orders to the laborers--“More MUD!” as the mason used to yell to people like me who worked summers as a mason tender—God decides to check out the activity. God hears the talk among the people, how afraid they are of being scattered, how important the building of this tower is in order to keep them all together, how vital it was to build a legacy so they would never be vulnerable to a diaspora. God hears all of this on a walk through the building site.

So God goes back to the heavenly council. You may have noticed that God speaks here as if God has partners: “Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech.” God has a council and tells them what is happening on earth needs to be changed. Surely God's motive for making a change isn't related to fear of them, for God is God after all. Just because the men and women on the ground have great building skills does not threaten who God is. God is God and no building is going to change that fact.

Years ago my mentor and friend, Dalton Bishop, shared a thought about God that has stuck with me ever since. We were talking about the power of nuclear weapons and he said, “God is not afraid of our firecrackers.” We have built them out of fear and think they are a great achievement in keeping us safe. Our opponents are afraid of them as we are of theirs, but God is beyond them all. God's power and presence is greater than even our most impressive capabilities.

So God decides that this fear-induced building project is not a good thing in the long term for men and women, and that action was required. So God introduced diversity of language in order to make it impossible to communicate clearly and continue this work. God actually created the conditions for their worst fears to come true: they did scatter across the face of the earth. So the thing they feared the most—the loss of being a homogeneous, protected people—God used to give them diversity. Rather than protect them from their fears, God forces them to face them. Turns out that their tower of power was not what was best for them in God's eyes. Turns out that making a name for themselves was not their greatest source of strength.

Douglas Donely, pastor of University Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, wrote that ever since then, “Babel has come to represent individualism” and that we all have a Babel component in us. Babel in us is the notion that Berlin Walls keep people in—and out—and that this will keep us safe and united and strong. Babel in us is the incessant drive to have more, more, more whether of money, of power, of prestige, more ...something. Babel is built on the

foundation of the fear of not having enough.

Quoting Pastor Donely:

Babel is what makes a distinction between rich and poor. Babel is what makes people think they can own other people. Babel is what makes people think they can condemn other people. Babel is what makes enemies. Babel is what makes wars to happen. Babel is often lived out in individual and corporate sin, because we tend not to look to God, but to ourselves for the ultimate answers. And what we end up with is confusion. None of us speak the same language anymore. We all have a Babel component. (p. 4, Feasting on the Word)

What is so beautiful, though, about this Babel people and the story that we share with them is that God does not live into their fears. God does not allow their fears to prevail. God will not let them live their lives imprisoned by the self-built walls on the foundations of their fear. Instead, God forces them to move out of “Scare City”.

If you haven’t picked up on the play on words, over the next 4 weeks we will be exploring the tendency we experience in our culture of living with a sense of scarcity, that we don’t have enough and that there just isn’t enough. We live in Babel when we constantly and consistently live with the notion that we don’t have enough when the truth is that all around us there is abundance.

Unfortunately, as the Financial Peace University class is revealing, a good part of the American public do not believe in abundance. We believe in scarcity. Some of the statistics about credit card debt that Larry and Ann shared during the class alarmingly point out that too many live out of the notion that we simply do not have enough and going into debt to get what we think is enough only leads to going into debt further because that last purchase wasn’t enough either. We cannot reach the heavens by building a tower of debt. Somehow, some way moving out of this scare city is God’s will and way.

I’d like you to find a hymnal if you will and turn to page 423. One of the greatest early theologians, Augustine, wrote a prayer as a reflection of Matthew 11:28 in which Jesus says

“Come to me all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

In response to these words of Jesus in Matthew, Augustine prayed—will you read it with me?

Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in thee.

Sundar Singh was an Indian missionary who had a dramatic conversion experience after his mother died. He was of the Sikh branch of the Hindu religion who once publicly burned a copy of the Bible as a demonstration of his opposition to Christianity. But like so many before him, God found a way to touch his heart and transform his life after his mother died. He, too, shared

Augustine's experience of God being the only One in whom hearts can and will find rest. Will you read it with me?

In comparison with this big world, the human heart is only a small thing. Though the world so so large, it is utterly unable to satisfy this tiny heart. The ever-growing soul and its capacity can be satisfied only in the infinite God. As water is restless until it reaches its level, so the soul has not peace until it rests in God.

I am so grateful for the Babel Tower teaching because it is a clear expression of unfounded fears being handled by God.

It feels nearly impossible, though, to live in this culture and not face the fear of scarcity. It's the backbone of our capitalist way. There's always another iPhone upgrade on the horizon that we simply must have, always the next newer model, always...something. It's not that buying these things is a bad thing. It's just that if we are doing so out of fear that we are not adequate without them, if we are building a tower of debt out of fear, then we are missing the rest—the heart's rest—in God.

Are you building any towers out of the fear of not having enough, not being enough? If you are then how might God be calling you to move out of the city that represents your fears?

Let me suggest one simple thing: instead of playing the comparison game demonstrated in the video. Think about your life and write down somewhere what it is you are grateful for. Look for the abundance you already have and give thanks to God rather than yearning for more of what you don't have.

When we are able to see the abundance in our lives and feel gratitude rather than comparing ourselves to others around us, then we share Sundar Singh's conviction that "The every-growing soul and its capacity can be satisfied only in the infinite God. As water is restless until it reaches its level, so the soul has not peace until it rests in God. Amen.