

Defying Gravity: Tethered to God

20th Sunday After Pentecost, Year A ~ 1 Timothy 6:18-19, Matthew 6:24-25

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F. Elizabeth Givens

When we think about gravity-defying practices that we normal people do, air flight is the first thing that comes to mind. Hopping on a plane and journeying to another city, state, or even country, is such common practice now, that it is difficult for many of us to remember that it has not always been so.

One of the greatest advances in aviation began in the 1920's when a New York hotel operator, Raymond Orteig, offered a \$25,000 reward to the first person who could fly across the Atlantic Ocean between New York and Paris. There were many people who tried to win the prize over the next few years after the reward was offered. This morning I want to share with you about three of them that Tom Berlin also highlights in his writing:

“Rene Fonck was a World War I French flying ace whose plane was as expansive as his personality. Fonck wanted to arrive at his homeland in style with three others in his crew. The interior of his plane was more like the living room of a chateau than the fuselage of an airplane. There were heavy chairs, mahogany tables, and a sofa that could be converted into a bed. Fonck took everything, including the kitchen sink! (There was a cooking area with a small kitchen.) He brought cases of wine and champagne. He loaded up gifts for friends. Before takeoff he had a local hotel deliver a hot dinner that included clam chowder, terrapin, roast duck, and turkey. To keep it all warm, he placed it inside a heavily insulated cabinet. It is hard to know if Fonck was really trying to cross the Atlantic or just enjoy the ride. His plane was designed to carry no more than 20,000 pounds. Fully loaded, it weighed in at whopping 28,000 pounds! He actually had to retrofit an extra wheel on the tail section to support the load.

Gravity defeated Fonck. Even with full power, the plane only made it to the end of the runway. It rolled over a small incline, toppled forward, and burst into flames. Though Fonck and his navigator made it out, the other two crew members did not.¹

Millionaire **Charles Levine** financed another team that may have had the best chance to claim the Orteig Prize. He had a great plane and a qualified crew, but they never functioned as a team that had the single goal of getting to Paris. Levine was all about drama. He wanted two pilots ready, and he planned to choose between them on the runway just before departure, thus attracting greater publicity. He eventually abandoned that idea but nevertheless chose two flyers, Chamberlin and Bertraud. These two disagreed on virtually everything from the flight plan to the equipment. Just when it appeared that things couldn't get more dysfunctional, Levine presented Chamberlin and Bertraud with contracts the night before takeoff that essentially said he would not share any money from publicity on the trip. Bertraud filed a temporary injunction on the flight and they were grounded.²

Charles Lindbergh wanted to be the first person to fly from New York to Paris and claim the prize. He was personally involved in every aspect of the trip. Lindbergh was in the factory as the plane was built and made sure to keep it simple. *The Spirit of St. Louis* had only one engine, so as to conserve fuel. It had one seat for one pilot to save weight. Lindbergh famously trimmed excess paper from the edges of his navigational charts to save weight. There were no luxuries, not even a forward windshield. Unable to see straight ahead, Lindbergh navigated by using the side window and a small periscope to see what was in front of him.

Lindbergh landed near Paris on May 21, 1927, a full 33½ hours after he took off from New York. Thousands of cheering people waited for him. The press dubbed him “Lucky Lindy” in honor of his success.³

In those days, a flight from New York to Paris did not happen by luck. It took careful planning and intentionality. This is what I want you to hear in the story of the Orteig Prize: *Generosity does not just happen by luck*. Generosity happens by design. Though [we learned last week] that 45 percent of U.S. citizens give no money to charitable organizations of any kind, we can be certain that many wish they had done so and hope to be generous in the future.

The problem is that we are like the competitors for the Orteig Prize:

- Some of us are like Fonck, so weighed down by the gravity of possessions that we are unable to experience the freedom of generosity.
- Some couples and families are like Levine and company. They have competing financial goals and conflicting personal values, and they lack basic communication skills, especially when the topic is money. They will never break free from the culture of more.

If you want your life journey to be a generous one, you need to be like Lindbergh. Generosity happens by design. Those who are generous know that to make a real contribution with time or money, they need to think about what they want to accomplish, plan a strategy that fits their other financial and time allocations, and then muster the courage to act. Just as Lucky Lindy did not count on good fortune, we must have a clear plan of action to be generous.”

So how do we make a plan of action to be generous? Talking to people with a track record of financial generosity yields three secrets that we can follow:

Secret #1: Make a Budget

The practice of making a budget can be a means of grace that reminds us that all of our finances matter to God. When a disciple makes a budget, we begin with the portion of our income that we intend to offer to God. We don’t wait to see what is left over. Now, that budget may take several months or years to implement—changes in financial habits don’t happen overnight. But with a plan in place, we can turn to addressing the plan, instead of always hoping something will change.

So, here's a great image of why a budget is important. I don't know how many of you have ever done one of these high adventure ropes courses. It involves a bunch of different challenges and can be a great team builder. But listen to the instructor talk about the safety features.

Pay attention to what he says about the carabiner. As long as the carabiner is attached, we will be safe if we fall. A budget is like a carabiner. That's why last week I asked you to start thinking about your budget, and began to give you the financial planning worksheet that we also handed out this morning. I hope this simple worksheet will help you think about your own carabiner.

Over the course of my ministry our country and region have gone through some hard economic times. Do you remember the closure of Circuit City and the impact it had on many families and individuals? Or massive layoffs at Genworth? I knew people who were losing jobs in all of those instances, and I would check on them and ask how things were going. The folks who had a budget, who had saved and payed down debt, usually said something like this: it's tough. I need to find a job. But right now, we are OK because we have savings to fall back on. So I'm just focusing on the next steps because we can survive for a while.

They weren't panicked. They weren't over anxious. They were able to take the next steps forward without being paralyzed by fear—because they had a carabiner, a safety anchor—because they had planned and budgeted in previous years. That safety anchor also allows us to have a plan for our generosity, a plan for the ways we want to be tethered to God by giving back.

So secret 1, a budget. Secret 2? Live simply.

We've been emphasizing simple living in this series, primarily through our daily invitations to clean out our homes—closets, drawers, attics. I want to remind you again that Welborne is offering to help you with that next week, on October 29, at our Shredding Event, when you can bring up to three banker boxes of paper records that need shredding between 12:30 and 2:30 and we will have a shredding service here on site.

Generous people live simply. Thomas Stanley and William Danko, authors of *The Millionaire Next Door*, discovered this years ago. Often people of high net worth live in average homes, drive their cars for many years, and don't stop at expensive designer boutiques. They have a clear distinction in their minds of wants and needs, and that distinction and using a budget moves them toward simplicity.

As Tom Berlin writes, people weighted down by financial gravity “usually see simplicity as *absence*. They assume that *simple* means the bed is hard, the car is undependable, and the shirt is camel hair. Because people see simplicity as absence, there is no motivation to practice it. The good stuff, they assume, is inside the ads on the computer screen or in the deals offered by local retailers. Gravity-bound people pursue these things with abandon and believe these are the path to the good life.”

This is why many of us find our cabinets, drawers, closets, pantries, attics and other places full of stuff, stuff and stuff. Through my preaching, especially two weeks ago, and our daily challenge cards or Facebook posts we've been encouraging simplicity. Here are a couple of the stories I have heard about what's happening:

- One of you downsized your photos and made an album for each child—and also keeping a few pictures of an event—not ALL the pictures of an event.
- Another one of you in cleaning out a drawer found a precious reading that you wanted to keep and had forgotten all about—and were able to read and reflect on it and put it in a better place for memories.
- Another person cleaned out four bags of trash from a room in just a few hours.

Each of these stories is about someone working to defy gravity. Gravity-deifiers don't see simplicity as absence of things—rather they experience simplicity as freedom from things like the pressure of being in debt, and the stress of having more than we need. Gravity-deifiers who lean into simplicity don't see it as self denial, but as self-fulfillment. In simplicity, they discover what really brings them fulfillment. In the words of Paul writing to Timothy, simplicity allows us to “take hold of what is truly life” (1 Timothy 6:19, CEB).

Secret 1, Budgeting. Secret 2, Simplicity. The third secret of living a generous life is setting goals for generosity. Generosity does not flow from us when it is an afterthought. When we are living our lives for Christ, and as Christ's people, generosity is on the forefront of our minds. And it stays there because we care about being a part of what God is doing in the world. We are paying attention to the places where the wounded are being healed, the broken are being repaired, the oppressed are being set free—and we are living our lives in ways that supports those activities of the Holy Spirit. We are intentional about giving our resources of money, time, and energy to be a part of what God is doing in the world.

“One practice that enables people to make the journey of generosity each year is to set numerical goals for the good they hope to do with their time and money. They pray about God's calling in their lives. They consider what activities bring joy to God that also uniquely bring joy to them. Then they find ways to participate. As these activities are discerned, financial goals for giving are projected for their annual giving.

Inevitably someone will say, *I can't do that. I can't afford that.* If that is how you feel, you need to set a generosity goal and get serious about your life and journey. [Returning to this same place in Paul's letter to Timothy,] Paul talks about the outcome of generosity: “When they do these things, they will save a treasure for themselves that is a good foundation for the future. That way they can take hold of what is truly life” (1 Timothy 6:19 CEB).”

I know we all want to take hold of what is truly life. I know we all want to be generous. I also know it takes intentionality, and changing practices. I hope as you take a look at this Financial Worksheet over the next few weeks with your family, and you think about your own practices of budgeting, simplicity, and goal setting, I hope that the

Holy Spirit will be working mightily in your midst. I know that all of us long to live a gravity-defying life, free from the extreme hold of financial gravity. I also know that abundance comes with planning and intentionality. May we all have the space in our hearts and lives to do the hard work that is necessary to shed the overwhelming weight of gravity and tether ourselves to God.

1. Tim Brady, "The Orteig Prize," *Journal of Aviation/Aerospace Education & Research*, Volume 12, Number 1 (Fall 2002), pages 48-49.
2. *Ibid.*, pages 54-55.
3. <http://www.charleslindbergh.com/history>
4. Thomas J. Stanley and William D. Danko, *The Millionaire Next Door* (Atlanta: Longstreet Press, 1996) (<https://www.nytimes.com/books/first/s/stanley-millionaire.html>).

This sermon, as well as all in this series, are based on the work of Tom Berlin in Defying Gravity. I am grateful to him for being willing to share his wisdom with other pastors and churches.