

Defying Gravity Week 4: When We Get It Right

21st Sunday After Pentecost ~ Matthew 6:19-21

Welborne UMC ~ October 29, 2017

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Are there any Instagram users in the room? For those of you who are not, Instagram is the social media platform based on photography—sort of the idea that a picture is worth a thousand words. And as of September of this year, there were over 800 million active users of the social media network who practice that adage at least monthly.¹ That’s a lot of Instagramers.

One popular account on Instagram is called “Rich Kids of Instagram,” and since it’s beginning it has spawned other accounts, like Rich Kids of Switzerland and Rich Kids of Monaco. The account has over 420 thousand followers, and posts pictures like this of rich millennials flaunting their wealth by doing yoga on a carpet of cash, relaxing on an enormous yacht, or waiting impatiently for their helicopter pilot.

It brings into stark relief our scripture for today, as Jesus tells us:

¹⁹ “Stop collecting treasures for your own benefit on earth, where moth and rust eat them and where thieves break in and steal them. ²⁰ Instead, collect treasures for yourselves in heaven, where moth and rust don’t eat them and where thieves don’t break in and steal them. ²¹ Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:19-21, CEB)

Why is Jesus so crystal clear about the dangers of earthly treasures? Because he knows the power of financial gravity. He knows how tempting and seductive it can be. Remember when he was in the wilderness, he was tempted by the devil to own “all the kingdoms of the world and their glory” (Matthew 4:8). Jesus, who is fully divine and fully human, knows the pull of wealth and possessions on our lives. That is why he spends so much time in the Gospels encouraging his followers to be rich toward God.

Part of why Jesus encourages us to be rich toward God, to collect treasures that matter in the Kingdom of God, is because Jesus knew that the Kingdom of God, or Kingdom of Heaven, is not only something we will be a part of some day when we die. Rather, Jesus wants us to know that we are already in the kingdom of heaven. It is not a fantasy land far away that we claim “some glad morning when this life is O’er.”² The Kingdom of heaven is present right now, when we live as God intends us to live, and follow the paths that God has invited us to follow. As Tom Berlin writes, “Jesus told us to live a life generous in every way so that we would have

¹ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/253577/number-of-monthly-active-instagram-users/>

² 2. “I’ll Fly Away,” *The Faith We Sing* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 2282.

assurance of our salvation, confidence that we would spend eternity with God, and a sense of significance and goodness in the life we live here and now.”³

There’s a second reason Jesus wants us to live generously, and that is so that our generosity can bless others. Jesus wants our generosity to launch other people into lives of generosity.

What exactly do I mean by that? Take a look at this video to help us understand.

This took place at a camp called Summer’s Best Two Weeks. This inflated raft-looking thing is the “blob.” One person sits on the end of the blob, and it’s not that much fun until a second person jumps off the top. When the second person lands in the blob, the first person is catapulted forward. Everyone is enjoying launching and being launched.

Now here is Tony. Tony understands the concept, but he is not wild about heights. He is hesitant to jump. He is like a lot of people with generosity. He gets the concept but doesn’t want to take the risk.

Look at the other people. They are jumping and launching others. Soon they are getting launched themselves. Everyone is having a good time.

But Tony is not sure about this. Then finally, reluctantly, Tony takes the risk. He launches someone else. Then he is able to get to a place where he is launched into the air. Look at his face. That expression is much better than when he was hesitating.

When we are generous, we bless people. When our church is generous, we bless people—we launch them into the fullness of life. That’s what this faith community is all about—sharing our abundance and generosity with others so they can be blessed.

Last Sunday, our youth went apple picking. They had a great day in the orchard, laughing, dancing, and being together. They each contributed \$10 toward the apples they picked. Then they came back with 120 apples and gave them all to the food pantry. And they were gone by Thursday.

One year ago this weekend we were having our Chili-Cook Off as we are today, and it was a fundraiser for a weekend mission team to go to Evergreen, VA to do disaster relief for the tornadoes which had rolled through Virginia in February of 2016. The money was raised, the team was sent, and they worked on the home of Patty Bryant, who lost her home and her greenhouse, as well as the life of her father in the tornado. They hung drywall, insulated, constructed, and were followed by other teams. Your financial generosity supported the chili

³ Tom Berlin, “Sermon 4: When We Get It Right,” Defying Gravity Program Tools Flash Drive; Nashville: Abingdon, 2016.

cook-off, the team's generosity of time helped build Ms Patty's new house, and that house was dedicated last December 17, before Christmas.

In 2015 and 2016 Welborne hosted summer interns through the Connections 21 program. Elijah Ferebee and JoAnn Batteiger worked at our Virginia United Methodist Conference offices, and worshipped and served here at Welborne. This church's generosity housed them, fed them, and nurtured them. And just a few weeks ago, Elijah, who is now working in the Admissions Office at Wesley Theological Seminary called JoAnn to give her the news that she has been accepted to Wesley's Master of Divinity program after she graduates from Shenandoah University next May. You blessed these young adults and they are already a blessing to others.

An aside—I should tell you that JoAnn has not yet committed to Wesley—she's keeping her options open as she continues to apply to other seminaries.

There are countless other stories I could tell, we could all tell, of how the generosity in this community is a blessing to so many people. This is what it looks like when we get it right, when we place our treasure and our hearts in the right place. I want to challenge all of us today to come to think of ourselves and our church as launch pads. I want us to all pray faithfully about how we can become more generous, how we can live more fully as a church community which blesses one another, our neighborhood, and the world with the love of Jesus.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This sermon, as well as all the sermons in this series, are drawn from Tom Berlin's book Defying Gravity. I am grateful to Tom for sharing his ideas and wisdom for other pastors to use.