

## ***Defying Gravity: Discovering Gravity (Week 1)***

18<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost, Year A ~ Matthew 19:16-20 (Off Lectionary)

Welborne UMC ~ October 8, 2017

Duct Tape. Plastic Bags. Foil Pouches. And a small knife.

These are the essentials for cooking in a zero gravity situation—at least, that is the testimony of astronaut Sandra Magnus, the flight engineer for Expedition 18 on the International Space Station, where she logged 133 days in orbit back in 2008. That would be like us going into orbit today and not coming home until February 17 of next year—19 weeks. And this would be our daily culinary choice.



I can imagine getting pretty tired of freeze dried food. Sandra Magnus did, and so she did some experimenting with different cooking techniques while on the International Space Station, partly for science, and partly to keep the crew better fed and happier. She discovered lots of ways she needed to improvise in a zero gravity situation:

- You can't just lay your ingredients pre-measured on the counter. If there's no gravity.
- You can't pour liquids from one place to

another. If there's no gravity.

- You can't throw the dirty dishes in the sink to wash them later. If there's no gravity.

So Magnus developed techniques like gathering ingredients in a large plastic bag and velcroing the bag somewhere close to her for easy access. Duct tape, sticky side up, is used to stick scraps and trash to, until the whole strip can be wadded up and thrown away. Liquids are transferred from one plastic bag to another by cutting a small hole in the bags. And with lots of time and lots of careful technique, some pretty tasty meals can be cooked up.<sup>1</sup>

Gravity is important, and we can take for granted how powerful it is. Since Sr. Isaac Newton first saw the importance of falling apples, we have known gravity existed—and that it is a consistent force in our lives.

This month we're going to learn about a different kind of gravity, but a kind that is just as powerful. Financial Gravity. Financial gravity arises as a force because we all have needs that must be met—food, shelter, and clothing are the basic needs. As heads of households, we are just as responsible for getting these things for our family unit as hunter gatherers were in prehistoric times.

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<sup>1</sup> For more details, see Sandra Magnus' blog here:

[https://www.nasa.gov/mission\\_pages/station/expeditions/expedition18/journal\\_sandra\\_magnus\\_7.html](https://www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/station/expeditions/expedition18/journal_sandra_magnus_7.html)

As Tom Berlin writes, the problem arises when “that force is felt with such intensity that it begins to control us.”<sup>2</sup> Do you know that feeling? It’s the feeling you get when you open your browser to Amazon to order just one thing and you see all the possibilities luring you in.....the book ideas related to the book you ordered last week. Wonder Woman costumes because you just bought the movie. When I logged on this week there was also the “Interesting Finds” updated just for me—which included a huge array of kitchen gadgets shaped like cute animals. Really. I would have felt the impact of financial gravity had I utilized the so tempting “Buy with One Click” feature one too many times, and only then taken a look at my bank account or credit card bill. Can you hear what I am saying, friends?

The key to managing financial gravity is to make sure that you have just the right proportion of force. Take a look at this video to see what I mean.

VIDEO: Embedded in Power Point

“All of us feel the force of our needs. These are normal things of life. As an adult, you have to figure out the income that can provide for those needs. Needs are like the weights stacked on this training sled. A short list would include food, shelter, clothing, and things that allow you to work and live, such as [healthcare], transportation and communication.

The problem is that we live in a society that constantly tells us we will be better off if we have more and better things. *Soon we move well beyond our needs into the zone of wants.* For most people, the list of wants is never short: a newer car in a better model, a faster computer, a larger home, a flatter TV, a designer dress or suit, an expensive hobby. As we add these to our lives, we can feel the added force of financial gravity holding us down. What we hoped would bring us freedom actually brings us exhaustion. Like the man in the video, we are harnessed to our possessions in ways that wear us out.”

On the other end, if we have too little financial gravity, if the weights on the sled are too light or haphazard, we have no intentionality about how we use our financial resources. We accrue expenses with no sense of their connection to income. This is epidemic among college students texting mom and dad for a refill of their checking account and having no idea where the last \$500 went. They are floating without enough financial gravity.

The irony is that our culture promises us that if we have the bigger car, the nicer house, the flatter tv we will be happier. We will feel better. We will be content. The reality is that we find ourselves using words to describe ourselves like cash-strapped, and house poor—not happier and more content.

This complex relationship with money and possessions is an ancient problem. In our scripture today, the young man comes to Jesus and says, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” This guy has good intentions. He wants to live a good life. He wants it so much that he screws up the courage to go ask Jesus what he’s missing. He’s doing all the basics—Jesus checks them off:

- Murdered anyone?   Nope
- Adultery?            Nope
- Steal anything?      Nope
- Bear false witness?  Nope

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<sup>2</sup> Tom Berlin, “Sermon 1, Discovering Gravity,” Defying Gravity Program Tools Flash Drive, Abingdon Press, 2016.

- Honor your parents? Yep
- Love your neighbor as yourself? Yep

Jesus is impressed, undoubtedly. And the young man says, I've done all of these! What else is there?

"If you want to be complete, go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor. Then you will have treasure in heaven. And come follow me." (19:21)

That's quite an offer. Jesus is inviting him to join the disciples, to join the community who lives and travels with him. Think about what the possibilities are. The miracles he would have witness, the lives he would have helped transform. Like James and John, he might have been there to witness the empty tomb. Like Peter and Paul, this young man could have become a missionary and spread the Gospel. Seems like an offer too good to refuse. Except. The financial gravity that holds the man to his possessions is just too powerful. He can't do it.

Scripture says the man leaves grieving or sad, depending on the translation. He is not at peace about this choice. He knows he has thrown away a once in a lifetime opportunity. He is in turmoil in his soul. But he just cannot make the choice to step away from the strong pull of his financial gravity.

Jesus watches him leave and says to the disciples:

"I assure you that it will be very hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven.<sup>24</sup> In fact, it's easier for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter God's kingdom." (19:23-4)

As he comments on this man's choice, Jesus brings up the kingdom of heaven. This is a different kingdom from the kingdom of self. The kingdom of self is the kingdom we live in every day. It's the kingdom we've constructed: family, friends, work, education, entertainment. It's everything we touch and see. It is made possible by financial gravity. We know this kingdom of self is not inherently bad, because in Genesis we learn that God created us to find pleasure and have dominion in the world. The problem is when our perspective gets messed up, and we begin to confuse the kingdom of self with God's kingdom. You know, that little voice in your head that says, "I've worked so hard, I really deserve this." That yearning in your heart to keep wearing nice looking clothes or driving a nice-looking car because, well, that's who you are.

No. That's not who we are. That's who we are when financial gravity has an intense hold over us. But that's not who we are. We are followers of Christ and citizens of God's kingdom.

Did you notice that Jesus didn't say it's impossible for the rich person to enter the kingdom—just very hard? In fact, he follows that up by saying that with God all things are possible. That's precisely what we are going to be focusing on for the next several weeks—how it is possible for us to bring the hold of financial gravity on our lives back into a better proportion. We want our financial gravity to anchor us just enough that we are free to live as those who joyfully choose to follow Jesus—not those who walk away from him grieving. How do we do that?

To answer that question, you need to join us in worship the next three weeks! I also want to invite you to join the small group that I will lead with Joy Crawford on the next four Wednesday nights at Panera on Ridge starting at 7:15.

But we begin today with one way to help you experiment with the impact that financial gravity has on your life. When you leave today, I will have a gift for each family. It's a Defying Gravity Family Card pack. In it is one card for each day of the next four weeks, starting today. On the cards are things to think about and small tasks to do as a family to help you address the impact of financial gravity in your life. Today's task is simply to think about why it is so hard to clean out drawers, closets and other spaces in our homes. Take one of these card packs home and put it on your kitchen island or table and turn over a new one each day and tackle it for your household. Look for how God might work through these words to help you become aware of the impact of financial gravity on your life.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> With thanks to the resources in *Defying Gravity* for providing the framework for this sermon.