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Title: When We Get It Right

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Scripture: [1 Peter 4:7-11](#)

Text: [Luke 16:10-13](#)

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When We Get It Right

Defying Gravity

I never remember receiving an allowance as a kid. When I was about 13, I started thinking of all the stuff I needed. At the top of the list was a motorcycle. So, I asked my dad for the money to buy a motorcycle. After he stopped laughing, he said, "Son, you can get your money the same way I get mine – work for it." I already had a

paper route but my dad's words sounded like a double dog dare to me so I went to the local country club and asked if they had any jobs that I could do. I must have thought that the country club would pay more than other places since only rich people could join the country club. They asked me if I could wash dishes - so at the age of 13, I washed dishes. And, I washed pots and pans. The pots and pans were the worst.

When the manager of the country club bought the local hamburger joint, I followed him and started flipping burgers at the Burgerteria. When I was 14 ½, I bought that motorcycle (what were my parents thinking), a little 100cc Honda that I rode to Junior High School because that was LEGAL in Kansas at the time (what were lawmakers thinking). Since then, I've worked for the things that I needed and the things that I wanted. But I look back at that motorcycle and realize that was the start of experiencing the weight of financial gravity in my life. I sold the motorcycle and took on payments for a new 1978 Ford Mustang II Ghia. I thought it was a sweet ride but, looking back, those were not the Mustang's best years. Financial gravity became a serious weight as wants outpaced both needs and my income.

This morning we conclude a sermon series on Defying Gravity. Unfortunately, not a one of us has learned how to levitate because that would be really cool. However, hopefully, a few of us have learned something about the things that hold us down, the things that prevent us from being our best selves. That's exactly where we began three weeks ago. Just like the planet earth is in this gravitational sweet spot that allows us to survive without being crushed against the earth or hurtle out into space,

healthy individuals find the gravitational sweet spot where they are not crushed by a society that constantly tells them that they need bigger and more. Recognizing that financial gravity is indeed a danger was step one for spiritual growth in this series.

Two weeks ago it was about breaking free of the things – and most of the time they are things – that hold us down. We studied the prodigal son who quickly wasted his large inheritance on extravagant living. The only way out of the black hole comes from the realization that everything about you is a gift from God – your life, your talent, your resources are an inheritance from God and should be cared for as a steward honors the giver by using those gifts appropriately.

Last week, we said that we are always tethered to something. Are we tethered to our possessions or are we tethered to God? When we are tethered to our money and our possessions, our generosity can't get off the ground. But when we are tethered to God, generosity begins to take root in us – to become a part of our very being.

That's where we land and end this series today. The last chapter of the book that we've been using as our guide for this series is called "When We Get It Right." This last chapter of Tom Berlin's book talks about our generosity as a total Christian. He contends, and I agree, that we simply will never grow in the love of Christ unless we allow God to form a generous spirit within us. Financial generosity can be a helpful starting point because it can free us from a resistance to giving in general. If we can't even be generous with our finances, it likely says something about the stinginess of our love and our grace and a host of other qualities that would be normative for persons who follow Jesus Christ.

I used the reading from Luke this morning because that is what the author of the book suggested. What I just read comes at the end of a parable of Jesus that is sometimes called the parable of the dishonest manager. The manager is fired by the master for squandering the master's property. The fired manager attempts to make amends by summoning the master's debtors one by one and cutting a deal with them to get some money back though not the full amount. At first the master is commending of the shrewdness but then comes our lesson for today – a summary of the meaning of the parables Jesus has just told.

"And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters...you cannot serve God and wealth." It's a clear statement from Jesus himself about who or what is your master. Is it God or is it your stuff?

The First Peter passage that was read earlier is even more to the point if that's possible. "Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ."

We are caretakers of God's gifts. Which of our gifts are God's you may ask? The answer to that as a Christian is easy. All of them! We are stewards of the manifold grace of God. We are stewards of this earth and of its abundance. It is up to us to bear fruit in this place and plant seeds so that others may bear fruit. On Wednesday morning after prayer breakfast, Ken Nelson and I were talking about how many fruits come in a seedless variety these days. There are seedless grapes and seedless watermelons to name just two. Don't get me wrong, when it comes to food, I like the simplicity of less or no seeds.

But, if we make a spiritual analogy of the seedless fruits, it doesn't work out quite as well. Christians are like God's natural fruit, sometimes filled with seeds – a grape has only about four but a watermelon can have as many as 800. God has placed seeds of faith in us. God has placed seeds of hope in us. God has placed seeds of service in us. God has placed seeds of generosity in us, intending for us to plant, water, tend, weed and harvest a wonderful crop that glorifies God, the giver.

When we don't use our seeds of faith, hope, service and generosity, when we ignore the seeds God has placed in us for this purpose, others don't hear the saving news of Jesus Christ. The crops that are produced in the things of the world – the bigger and more and better of what the world offers – are short lived. They tend to be self-serving and do nothing to help anyone except perhaps ourselves.

Tom Berlin tells a story in the book that is very similar to my story. He talks about meeting his future wife, Karen, and falling in love. Karen was the generous one of the two. Karen knew what life was like without Christ in her life and she knew what life was like with Christ. A tithe – giving 10% of her income to charity – felt to her like a small amount to give if it would help the church lead others to the life of discipleship she enjoyed. Karen's whole life embodied generosity.

When Tom fell in love with Karen, she shared that the practice of tithing would need to be a part of their life together as a married couple. Tom was in love. He said, "fine, whatever you want." He confesses in the book that

his response was not because of his faith or his generosity, it was because love makes you do crazy things. He said it this way, "she could have said I had to wake up every morning, paint myself green, and pretend to be a head of broccoli, and I still would have said yes." Then he recounts going to church the weekend after their wedding. Money was tight and here she was, writing a check to put in the offering. She handed it to him to put in the plate so he could share her joy. He glanced at the amount and was startled. How could they give that much? That money would just be gone and they needed money. He then adds that he felt like doing a tug of war with the deacon when they tried to pry the check out of his hands. Karen led Tom on a path that led to generosity. 1¹

My wife, Ruth, led me on that same path. I never wrestled with a deacon who was trying to pull the offering from my clinched fist but I did at first think there were better things to do with that money. Today I think there is NO better thing to do with that money. Berlin says and I agree, "one of my greatest joys now is to join with others who also enjoy giving their time, talent and finances so that together we can help advance God's kingdom here on earth. In many ways," he says, "the practice of generosity gave me purpose in life and in so doing, it freed me from many of the concerns and anxieties I carried. It changed more than my checkbook."

I ran across a story this week about an old one dollar bill and an old fifty dollar bill both being retired from circulation. They were chatting on the conveyor belt on the way to the shredder. The fifty dollar bill was recounting its travels all over the county - to Las Vegas, to the finest restaurants, to political fundraisers and a recent cruise to the Caribbean. The one dollar bill was jealous and told the fifty that he was fortunate to have been all those fancy places. So the fifty asked the one dollar bill, "where all have you been in your lifetime?" The one answered, "well, first to the Methodist church, then to the Baptist church on the corner, then to this Disciples of Christ and then to the Lutherans." "Excuse me," said the fifty, "what's a church?" 2²

All of us can defy gravity. It takes a first small step, followed by another and then another. It takes a shift in our view of the world. We must learn to see our lives as belonging to God and trust that God will direct our lives in a generous way that will bring us joy and significance.

One day, the father of a wealthy family took his young son to spend a few days with a poor farm family in hopes of making him appreciate their wealth. He spent a couple of days and nights on the farm. On the way home from their trip, the father asked his son, "How was the trip?"

"It was great, Dad." "Did you see how those who are poor live?" asked the father.

"Yes," said the son. "So tell me what you learned from the trip." said the father. The son thought for a minute then answered, "I saw that we have one dog and they have four. We have a pool that reaches to the middle of the garden and they have a creek that has no end. We have imported lanterns and they have stars at night. Our patio reaches to the front yard and they have the whole horizon. We have a small piece of land to live on and they have fields that go on beyond what I could see. We have servants who serve us but they serve others. We buy our food but they grow theirs. We have walls around our property to protect us, they have friends to protect them."

The boy's father didn't know what to say. Then the boy added, "thanks, Dad, for showing me all of the blessings that they have that I can only dream about." ³

The point of this story resonated with why I desire to defy gravity. Whether we feel rich or poor, blessed or stressed, isolated or surrounded – will depend more – much more – on our ability to serve and share than on the size of our bank account or the stuff in our closets.

Today, we remember in worship those 13 members who have passed since last All Saints and the many more that we remember in our own lives – all impacting our lives. Of the thirteen listed, I knew each one. Some better than others but I learned from each one. Thankfully, each one planted seeds in this church and in me. Their faith, whether we recognize it or not, has influenced us sitting here today. When I welcome new members in membership class, I say that each person makes our congregational life richer and deeper. These thirteen did that indeed. May their faith in Christ grow in us and be shared with others.

God longs for us to experience a life in Christ that will make us generous in all ways, with our kindness, with our compassion, and with our love as evidenced in the use of our time and money. Such a life enables us to break free of our false gods and be tethered to God's kingdom so that the Spirit of God will be evident in all of our living. That's when we'll know that we've got it right.

¹ Berlin, Tom. *Defying Gravity: Break Free from the Culture of More*. Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN, pages 86-87.

² Found at www.lincolnrails.org/clientimages/39293/stewkalimagesanddocs/badstewardshipjokes-travis.pdf.

³ Ibid.