

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham

“Children of God: Keeping Our Balance”

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Deuteronomy 26:1-11

I Timothy 6:17-19

She was at the top of her game. She was the actress that people loved to watch. Her comedic skills and timing were uncanny. She was married to one of Hollywood’s sexiest men. In other words she had it all. Then on January 16, 1942 the plane in which she was riding slammed into a mountain side killing her, Carol Lombard, and everyone else on board. She had been promoting war bonds when she died, leaving behind a grieving husband, Clark Gable, and a grieving public. Yet there was another group of people that mourned her as much or more than anyone else. These were the ordinary people who worked on her movies. The best boys, the grips, the makeup artists...everyone who ever worked with her mourned her because she was their friend. Lombard had no private dressing room. She had no personal assistant to keep people away. She hung out with the cast and crew, treating them like family. She was one of them. Even in a world in which Hollywood starlets were royalty, she was just Carol. She had balance in her life and knew what mattered. The question for us becomes then how do we do the same? How do we maintain our balance life?

The obvious answer to that question is that we don’t become movie stars, or star athletes or people who appear on magazine covers. Granted that makes it easier, but only by a little. I say that because we human beings have an amazing way of turning a little success into very large egos. It doesn’t matter if we are simply big-man or big-woman on campus, part of a winning team, running a successful company, accumulating a Bill Gates-like fortune or we are simply a better employee than those around us, we still find it difficult to maintain our balance. In fact how many of you have ever known someone who thinks far more of themselves than they ought to; far more of themselves than any of their achievements warrant? The temptation to lose our balance becomes even more pronounced when we are given accolades, promotions or atta-boys. It becomes easy for our pride to take over and cause us to become different, to begin to think that we are somehow better than those people around us. We lose our balance.

I believe that this is why the scriptures have a love-hate relationship with success and wealth. On the one hand success is lifted up and seen as a blessing from God. Abraham is one of the scriptural examples. He starts out a fairly well off man, meaning he has slaves and animals, but then ends up being a very wealthy man with considerable power. There is no hint in scripture that his kind of success is not something we might want to achieve. Hard work, prudence and a little Godly intervention are given the Biblical stamp of approval. On the other hand though we have Jesus reminding his hearers that it will be harder for a wealthy man to get into heaven than it will be for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. He tells his followers that they are not to lord it over one another and are to continually exhibit humility, be last and not first and be willing to sacrifice everything for God. So the question again for us is, how do we find the balance? How do we find the balance between these two Biblical positions? The answer is by exercising three spiritual practices, each found in our morning’s lessons.

The first spiritual practice is gratitude. Gratitude is found at the heart of both of our lessons. The people of God were to never forget that they were the beneficiaries of God's amazing acts. It was God who saved them. It was God who fed them. The people were to be obedient to God, and follow God's ways not out of fear, but out of gratitude. And what gratitude does for us is that it reminds us that we are not lone wolves making our way by ourselves in the world. Instead we are reminded that our success is shared success. It is shared by those who reared us, taught us, encouraged us, prayed for us and prepared the world around us in such a way that we can be successful. This takes nothing away from our own hard work and dedication to our lives, it simply puts our success in perspective...it helps us to maintain our balance.

The second spiritual practice is enjoyment. I realize that this one may come as a surprise. As the inheritors of the great Puritan tradition many of you may have been expecting me to say just the opposite. However again, at the heart of these texts is enjoyment. In Deuteronomy the people are told that they are to celebrate with all the bounty that God has given them. Paul tells us that God provides everything we have for our enjoyment. This is actually one of the great themes in scripture. In Ecclesiastes we read that there is nothing better than that people eat, drink and enjoy the fruits of their toil. Jesus turns water into wine at a wedding. What his spiritual practice does is remind us that the end goal of success is not success; it is the enjoyment of God's creation. It is the enjoyment of our families, of our friends, of God's creation and of God's love for us. Enjoyment helps us find balance by remembering why we strive to be successful in the first place.

The third spiritual practice is generosity. Again, generosity is woven into the fabric of these stories. In the Old Testament text we find it in the fact that everyone participates in the great celebration. "Then you together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you shall celebrate..." In other words no one is left out. Those who have will share with those who do not have. This example ties in with our texts from last week which also incorporated those in the margins such as widows and orphans. In Paul we read that the rich are to be "rich in good works, generous and ready to share." Generosity reminds us that what we have been given is not ours to keep but a trust to be shared. This theme also runs deep in the scriptures. In fact it is at the heart of God's restorative work in the world that Abraham was not only to be blessed, but to be a blessing to the world. You and I, as Abraham's spiritual offspring, are to see generosity as one of those ways in which we too bless the world. Generosity helps us to maintain our balance by reminding us that our success is to be shared.

The challenge before us is to practice these spiritual disciplines. It is to be intentional about putting them before us every day. For I believe that when we do, we will find the spiritual and life balance for which I believe we all long. And so this morning when those of you who are making a financial commitment to the life of the church bring forward your pledge cards, I encourage you to see this act as a spiritual one; as an act of gratitude for what God has done for you; as an act of enjoyment because you find joy in being in the midst of this community; and as an act of generosity in that you are willingly sharing a portion of what you have been given. And in so doing, find spiritual balance for your life. And then for all of us my challenge is that you will engage in gratitude, enjoyment and generosity such that you can find a spiritual and life balance which will bring deeper meaning to all areas of your lives.