

1 One year my in-laws returned from a trip to China with some little replica figures of the Terracotta Army. The Terracotta Army is a massive collection of excavated, life-sized sculptures depicting the armies of Qin Shi Huang (CHIN SHE HWONG), the first emperor of China. He ruled in the third-century B.C., at a time when various provinces were at war with one another. A great military leader, he conquered province after province and created one nation, launching the Qin dynasty, for which China probably was named. Qin Shi Huang had an expansive vision for his country. His public works projects included the unification of diverse state walls into what later became the Great Wall of China and a massive new national road system.

One of the emperor's greatest concerns was his own death. He even undertook a futile search for an elixir of immortality. Realizing that he would in fact die one day, he used his wealth and power to build a city-sized mausoleum for himself. Craftsmen created the life-sized terracotta army to guard it. The purpose of the warriors, cavalry, soldiers, and horses was to protect the emperor in his afterlife. The army took years and years to build.

By the time Qin Shi Huang died in 210 B.C., his mausoleum was surrounded by more than 8,000 soldiers, along with chariots and horses.¹ If you could imagine all 8,000 of these terracotta warriors and horses in their true size over the extent of an entire city, wouldn't you wonder at how China's first emperor got away with focusing so many resources on himself and his imagined experience of the afterlife, in which he believed he'd need to protect himself with a powerful army? How different that image of eternity is from the Christian one.

2 Two hundred years later and 4,000 miles away, a Jewish rabbi named Jesus of Nazareth began teaching people about another kingdom, called the kingdom of God. Like Qin Shi Huang, Jesus was bringing people together, but not in a nation of physical boundaries or a dynasty based on birthright. Jesus was welcoming people into a kingdom that would extend over every national boundary and unite people across time.

¹ <http://science.nationalgeographic.com/science/archaeology/emperor-qin/>

Rather than teaching people to amass fortune and power in this life or creating a false sense of security for the afterlife, Jesus taught his followers to be generous with love, forgiveness, and kindness. He often taught them to be careful about the unusual gravity of money, wealth, and possessions that would draw them away from God's kingdom. One day he told them a story about a man who had an unusually bountiful harvest. Rather than sharing the harvest with others who had harvested smaller amounts, the man decided to build a bigger barn to hold the grain so he could sit back and relax, secure in the knowledge that he had enough grain stored away to secure his future without having to worry. Jesus finished the story in this way:

“But God said to him, ‘You fool! You will die this very night. Then who will get everything you worked for? Yes, a person is a fool to store up earthly wealth but not have a rich relationship with God.’”²

We usually think of riches coming from God to us, but what does it mean to have a rich relationship with God? Both Qin Shi Huang and Jesus were teaching about the real purpose and value of riches through their words and actions. One spent his present moments hoarding his riches, building the ultimate bigger barn, a palace mausoleum guarded by terracotta warriors he thought would support him in eternity, but which wound up being covered over with dirt where they slowly began to break apart. The other, Jesus, would have none of that. He told people to be rich toward God

3 Did Qin Shi Huang have a rich relationship with God? Apparently not. Like the farmer with the big harvest, he failed to understand, recognize, and respond to both the source of the blessing and the purpose of the blessing, without which he had no relationship with God. Friends, many of us are more like Qin Shi Huang than we'd care to admit. We receive an annual bonus, an unexpected tax refund, an inheritance, or even our regular paycheck or alliance, and we immediately allocate the funds to our purposes, usually not stopping to thank God and only rarely asking for God's direction in using the money.

4 If you think the Old Testament is outdated and no longer relevant for modern Christians, think again. We find one of the most important passages about giving in Genesis

² Luke 12:20-21, New International Version (2011)

12, where we learn that God’s people have been blessed to be a blessing. God says to Abraham, “Leave your country, your family, and your father’s home for a land that I will show you. I’ll make you a great nation and bless you. I’ll make you famous; you’ll be a blessing. I’ll bless those who bless you; those who curse you I’ll curse. All the families of the Earth will be blessed through you.”³ So you see, having a rich relationship with God means listening and following God’s leading so closely that we’re willing and able to share the riches God has entrusted us with others as a blessing to them.

5 Jesus taught, “Don’t store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”⁴ People with a rich relationship with God treasure that relationship and orient their attitudes and actions in everyday life around blessing God by being a blessing to other people.

Why does Jesus teach us these things? Because he wants the best for our lives. He wants us to know that we were already experiencing the coming of the kingdom of heaven because, in a sense, God’s kingdom is here and now whenever we do the will of God and align our lives with God’s purposes. When we accept the forgiveness of Jesus and understand deeply that it’s a gift of grace, not something we’ve earned, that understanding tethers our lives to God.

But Jesus also wants us to lean into God’s plan for blessing all the people of the world. God’s plan for accomplishing that involves a vast network of people recruiting people, something we see happening all the time in the Old and New Testaments. When we learn to receive God’s power of defying gravity rather than being weighed down by our possession obsession, we can actually be launch pads for other people, inspiring them to defy gravity through our example of generosity in the name of Jesus.

6 {Play “11.17.19 The Blob” (1:49) immediately, with video music low in the background as Pastor talks through} I have a video that elaborates on this launch pad

³ Genesis 12:1-3, The Message

⁴ Matthew 6:19-2, New Revised Standard Version

metaphor. 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 on. When the second person jumps off the diving platform and lands on the blob, the first person is catapulted into the air and water. You can see everyone enjoying launching and being launched. {Pastor Pauses}

But now we meet Tony. Tony understands the concept, but he’s clearly not wild about heights. He’s not sure about putting his trust in the blob, and so he’s hesitant to jump. All the people around Tony take the leap of faith and jump, launching others in defiance of gravity. Everyone around Tony is laughing and splashing and having a good time. Everyone, that is, except Tony. Tony’s reaction on the diving board is like the response of many people when they face God’s call to generosity. They get the concept, they probably want to jump, but they just can’t bring themselves to take the risk.

But finally, reluctantly, Tony takes the risk. He launches himself off the diving platform, lands on the blob, and launches someone else into the air. Soon after he’s able to get to a place where he himself is launched into the air. Did you see the expression on his face? How different was that expression from the one that was on his face as he fearfully peered over the edge of the diving platform?

7 Do you have a rich relationship with God, full of trust that leads you to generously share God’s blessings with others? Or are you more like Qin Shi Huang, pouring yourself into amassing your own terracotta army for the afterlife? Maybe you’re more like Tony, curious about and interested in reaching the goal, but not quite ready to make the jump. When we develop rich relationships with God, we learn to defy financial gravity and give generously in blessing others. The surprising thing is that our examples of generosity tend to launch others, helping them to take the leap of faith into the adventure of defying gravity with God.

In a few minutes we’ll be taking the next step on that adventure when we consecrate our promises to God. Life is about so much more than food, clothing, Netflix, and taxes. Let’s take a leap forward together into a life of greater generosity.

**This message adapted from the original sample sermon by Pastor Tom Berlin, in Defying Gravity: Break Free from the Culture of More- Program Tools (Abingdon Press).*



Bill Reinhart, Pastor
pastorbill@buffaloumc.com