

A Sermon Preached by Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian Church on October 24, 2021.

THE TOWER OF BABEL

Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad on the face of the whole earth. Genesis 11:4

During an interview in 1980 by William F. Buckley on the old PBS show, Firing Line, the British writer, television personality and journalist Malcolm Muggeridge noted the necessity of the great European Cathedrals having both steeples and gargoyles. He said:

The steeple is this beautiful thing reaching up into the sky admitting, as it were, its own inadequacy- attempting something utterly impossible- to climb up to heaven..... The gargoyle is this little man grinning and laughing at the absurd behavior of men on earth, and these two things both built into this building constructed to the glory of God.

I believe that Muggeridge's words illustrate a truth found in our core story for today from Genesis. Today we focus on the Tower of Babel. This story reminds us that human beings cannot build lives of meaning apart from God.

If you can recall pictures of gargoyles, they are ugly little people or beasts which look down from high on a cathedral laughing at the pretensions of humankind. Dante called his great opus The Divine Comedy; the gargoyles see the comedy in the workings of human life.

Think for a moment of how human beings seek to build Towers of Babel through the struggle for fame and glory. One of the great motivations for generals, politicians, athletes, artists, writers, presidents of PTA's, Rotary, Lions Clubs, Fraternal organizations and so many others is the search for prestige and respect. We humans want good press; we want others to think highly of us. Most of us would like to be remembered for our accomplishments, we all like to receive credit.

Yet the gargoyles are laughing because they know that fame and glory and prestige do not last. The Romans knew this truth. A general who led the Roman legions to success on the battlefield would often be given a great parade into Rome to celebrate his success. The general would march into the city with his troops. They would bring with them all the booty they had captured in battle. The people of Rome would come out to shower the General with appreciation. It was a time of celebration that made the General feel at the top of the world.

Yet as the General made his way into the city riding on his chariot with him would be a slave, whom all the time the crowds were cheering, would whisper in his

ear, "Glory is fleeting, glory is fleeting." If you seek to build meaning through power and fame it all slips away.

Or think of how men and women try to build Towers of Babel through accumulating material goods. We want more and more money. As a nation we have bought into the notion that the only measure of success and the sure route to happiness is the accumulation of wealth. The most important figure in our public life is the GDP, the gross domestic product. We compare ourselves to other nations by this figure. Each presidency is judged largely by what happens to the GDP.

Our advertising industry teaches us that the more we can consume the happier we will be. There was a television commercial from many years ago that is burned into my mind. An elegant couple pulls up to a mansion in a posh sports car. They get out, he is dressed in a tux, she has a designer dress and her hair is perfectly coiffed. They walk up to the door and are greeted by their host. They hand over a bottle of wine and we hear the words, "To the good life."

The message is clear. The good life means enjoying all the pleasures the world has to offer. If you own the right house, nice cars, beautiful clothes and eat gourmet food you will be satisfied and you will have a meaningful life.

And we believe it. And the gargoyles laugh.

Yet the truth remains that money does not provide a firm foundation for life. In the legend of Faust, he is tempted by the devil and succumbs. Faust is able to experience and savor everything money could buy. He had every delightful experience that this world can offer. Yet what was the result, he became bored. He could not be satisfied.

The tabloids in our nation daily chronicle the stories of the rich and famous. The questions of which Kardashians are marrying what celebrities this week and what couple will divorce are covered in every issue. I believe the best way to understand all the serial relationships is boredom. These people have so much and experienced so much they are just plain bored with life.

I believe that the greatest epidemic in America is not Opioids but rather boredom. As a people we enjoy luxuries that people from a hundred years ago could only dream about. Yet we still lack something.

Still we continue to buy into the message. We continue to struggle and work hard believing if we just had a little more we will be satisfied. Yet the gargoyles are laughing because they know that wealth does not lead to ultimate satisfaction. One of the oldest truths is that you cannot take it with you. When the ancient rulers of Egypt were buried much of their wealth was buried with them. It was believed that the wealth would be needed when the Pharaoh passed over to the land of the dead.

Yet when the tomb of King Tut was uncovered last century the gold remained though the Pharaoh was long gone.

Think for a moment how we human beings try to build Towers of Babel to create a sense of security. All through human history people have believed that some overwhelming military victory could solve the problems of security and bring permanent peace.

World War II ended on the Battleship Missouri. During the ceremony of surrender, Douglas MacArthur spoke these words:

It is my earnest hope and indeed the hope of all mankind that from this solemn occasion a better world shall emerge out of the blood and carnage of the past- a world founded upon faith and understanding- a world dedicated to the dignity of man and the fulfillment of his most cherished wish for freedom, tolerance and justice.

When we look back over the last eighty years it is clear these words represented a futile hope. World War II gave way to Korea, Vietnam, the Cold War, Iraq and Afghanistan. We now are entering a time of competition with China. There will never come one great military victory that sets all things right. The strong towers that human beings build for security all, at some point, tumble to the ground. Every nation, every empire and every civilization have their day in the sun and then decays.

The reason the gargoyles laugh is not because glory, money, power and security are bad. In their proper roles these are human goods, but they are not ultimate. These are the things that Jesus said would rust and moths will consume and thieves will steal away. They are our own Towers of Babel built with inferior materials.

In our New Testament Lesson we are reminded that we often build our lives on sand. The things on which we human beings place so much importance all will fall. Our own Towers of Babel shall be washed away in time.

What then is lasting?

What are those things of God, which do not fade?

What are those things which will last for eternity?

St. Paul teaches us that there is one thing which does not end and that is love. The love of God cannot be destroyed. Therefore you and I are to build our lives on God's love. We are to struggle to become the loving people that God is calling us to be. The solid building material of life is love. Thus the important question in our lives is, are we growing in our love for God and for each other?

The purpose of life is to grow in our ability to love. When we begin to forgive others when they hurt us, when we sacrifice on behalf of a needy person, when we care for those less fortunate than ourselves- we grow in love.

These actions not only help others but they shape who we are becoming. I believe that our actions are important in part for the effect on our souls. We must forgive others because it makes us forgiving people. We must give to the church and to other charities partly because it will help to make us generous people.

C.S. Lewis wrote in a book that being a Christian is like the fairy tale in which a man was forced to wear a mask, which made him better looking than he actually was. He had to wear the mask for years. When he finally was allowed to take it off he found that his face had grown to fit the mask. He was now truly handsome.

The mask that we try to wear is Jesus Christ himself. You and I are to aspire to become more and more like Jesus every day. We are to seek his love so that we can love others as he loves us.

Friends it is only love that will last. Time makes a mockery of fame and power. Death separates us from riches, but nothing can separate us from the love of God.

May we join the gargoyles in laughing not only at the foibles of others but also at our own. May God help us never to take ourselves too seriously. Rather may we focus on allowing God to shape our very being into the image of Christ.

There is an old Yiddish saying "Man plans and God laughs." You and I cannot build lives of meaning apart from God. In our personal lives this means learning to give up thinking that our long-term plans can bring meaning. Instead our goal should be to ask, "What does God require from me?"

I believe this passage encourages us to break life down to very small pieces. We are to wake up each day seeking to be faithful that day. Mike is going to sing a song that reminds us to take each day as it comes. It includes these words:

**One day at a time sweet Jesus
That's all I'm asking of You
Just give me the strength
To do every day what I have to do
Yesterday's gone sweet Jesus
And tomorrow may never be mine
Lord help me today, show me the way
One day at a time.**

We do not build our lives alone. Day by day we are to rely on God's presence and guidance to help us build lives of meaning, hope and significance.