

BREAKING GROUND
THE TOWER COMPLEX

Texts on Sunday, March 3, 2013

Genesis 11: 1-9; Luke 4: 1-2, 5-8

When we looked at Jesus' first temptation two Sundays ago, we saw this. He was hungry beyond any words for it, and he felt tempted to turn a stone into bread. Yet he said *No, not by bread alone*, and stayed hungry. Into that emptiness which he did not fill with satisfactions or wishful thinking, God came. Into that emptiness, God comes, we said, for in Jesus' temptation is a word to you about your endless desires.

Now, let us bring a like clarity to the second temptation. Jesus was nameless and powerless in a resourceless wasteland. If ever there was an invisible man, an invisible woman, who for forty days, or forty years or four hundred years dwelled in powerlessness, scattered in a desert of disregard, that soul can receive a visit from this word today, for Jesus had nothing. Then he saw that everything was available to him—all the world's wealth, all its authority, all its glory—if, said the Tempter, you will but bend your knee and bow to me. Yet Jesus said *No, you shall worship the Lord your God and serve God alone*, and he remained with the powerless. Into that condition of powerlessness, which the world despises; into that dispossession, which Jesus did not abandon, God came. God comes, we must say, for this temptation can be a word to us about our endless struggle for powers and towers.

According to the ancient myth of Babel, humankind is prone to build powers and towers. We want to get up there. Why? Because we are afraid we will be nameless and scattered, says the story, we set about building towers to establish ourselves against our insecurity. More, says the story, the very strategy we employ to make a name for ourselves becomes the structure most hateful to God, who scatters us in the imagination of our hearts, so that we might come to ourselves, and see who we are, and who we must become.

To help us see our own tower complex, play with the possibility that Jesus might have accepted the devil's offer. Up to this point in Luke's story, we have been told that Jesus was a thoughtful person with a special relationship to God. Wouldn't it be great to have a governor like that ruling the world? Why not say Yes to this giant job offer? Think how wonderful, to have a smart, effective, good-hearted guy at the head of everything. Even third-graders would know the Nazarene's name now—Pharaoh, Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Jesus the Giant, Genghis Khan, Napoleon . . . What a hall of fame! And so what if there's a little bent knee to the Tempter! They all do it.

But in exchange for such renown, there would now be in all the Western world no knowledge, except in deep Judaism, “that power belongs to God; and that to you, O LORD, belongs steadfast love.” (Psalm 62.11) There would be no *Jesus Christ* and no Christianity; just history and empire and tower struggles. Here is the point. By saying *No* to towers and powers, Jesus met his destiny. The temptation was the moral lever by which he decided, or accepted, to rise to who he was and who he was to become. In saying *No!* to towers and powers, humiliation and rejection and crucifixion all followed like rain to the rivers—but so too, his exaltation. Although we in the West who have built great towers and powers cannot prove from history that we ever once said *No!* to the devil’s offers, and served God alone, nevertheless, Jesus’ immense *No!* to towering power has caught in our ear like a tune we cannot get out of our head. Jesus has become our destiny.

Of course it is true that millions of human creatures, church-going and not, stomp on toward victory in their power struggles, crushing the hands and heads and hearts of those beneath them, heedless of Jesus’ giant *No!* But you are here to hear again today your destiny: Not power, not authority, as the world gives—but steadfast love and mercy, at whatever cost. Not towers, not controls, not security, not insurance, not boards and committees and fear and approvals and disapprovals as the world demands, but, first, in the words of Jesus to his disciples, “Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not worship.’” (Matt. 9.13) If you can’t get Jesus’ giant *No!* out of your head, then you’re a Christian, regardless what your religion is. When Jesus said *No*, he broke ground for a kingdom come with no powers and no towers, such as the world gives. Will you let him break your ground? Now? This is the moment of decision. Temptation is always like this. It’s not bad—actually, it’s good. Temptation—before you give in—presents the possibility for a new decision for your destiny. Without it, you would not come to yourself. So temptation—if you do not fall for it—is the first moment of your salvation.

Will you let go of the controls to serve God? What on earth can that mean inside the tower of the church? First, it means, Tell the truth. Many years ago, a group of us in a Bible study were going deeper into the guts of Jesus’ call to not save our life but to lose it for his sake. I asked them to think about Jeffery Wigand, the cigarette executive who went before a Congressional committee to unfold the sordid facts behind the towering greed that had led seven presidents of seven companies to lie to Congress, flat out, that they knew nothing of the addictive and cancer-causing characteristics of their product. For telling the truth, once wealthy Wigand lost his giant job, then his marriage and his lovely home. Reflecting on his fate, one of the members of our Bible study said, “I feel I could give my life for Jesus, but I don’t think

I could give up my house.” How stunning. How brave of her, really, to reveal in shocking simplicity how complex our towers are. In an essay called *The Power of the Powerless*, the late Vaclav Havel of The Czech Republic wrote, “The willingness [of people in the Soviet bloc] to surrender higher values when faced with the trivializing temptations of modern civilization [is] a kind of warning to the West, revealing its own latent tendencies.” (p. 38)

What of our power and tower complexes? Have you ever been in a church meeting where the tension is high, where you can almost smell the anxiety and the fear? That’s the tower complex. Have you ever heard someone—perhaps yourself—speak ugly words about another, assuming and then assigning evil motives for their behavior? That’s the tower complex. Have you ever watched the flame of a new idea dwindle and gutter, unprotected by the discipline of thought, and finally sputter out, and nothing happens because no one holds attention for an idea like a candle in the wind? That’s the tower complex. Here we see, quoting Havel again, “the classic impotence of traditional democratic organizations, formed more on mistrust than mutual confidence, more on collective irresponsibility than on responsibility.” (p. 93) Have you ever noticed new members falling away, unconnected to the body, because all forms of power are shut up tight in the towering structure and bureaucracy of a well-protected institution? Do we wonder why the numbers do not grow? It’s the tower complex.

How do we unbuild this? How do we affirm Jesus’ *No!* after so many years of complex power? I offer you two thoughts. The first appears to be structural, the second spiritual; but the first cannot work without the second.

On structure. You can stop doing what you are doing, yes, even while following the bylaws. The bylaws do not tell you to deal with matters before you as if they are all problems to be disposed of. The bylaws do not want meetings tense and anxious; that’s extra-curricular, from the tower complex. The bylaws do not even tell you to meet monthly; rather, regularly. What if the commissions all at once all pulled back? No more monthly management, but bi-monthly, or even quarterly, reflections on all that has been done, and all that can be done? What would happen? Your task groups and sub-committees would spring to life. People not elected to office would be needed—not for committee work, but for plain work, good work. The doors and the windows of the church would fly open—fresh air, fresh thought, fresh action. Ought not every committee in the body of Christ be committed first to function as a small group who aim not for duty, but for beauty, for care, for love—to help disciples with the disciplines of thought and action in community? Vaclav Havel again: “There must be structures that are open, dynamic, and small—[where] human ties like personal trust and personal

responsibility [can] work. There must be structures that in principle place no limits on the genesis of different structures.” (p. 93) You must try new practices. You invent them. Get out of the tower complex before the Lord comes back to see the city and the tower which we mortals built, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the earth, and fall like hard seed on unbroken ground.

On Spirit. You will not be able to transform the structure unless you are being transformed by the renewing of your mind. (Romans 12.2) Do you trust the promise of eternal life? Do you have life without end but in God? Are you, with the apostle Paul, “convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord?” (Romans 8:38) Do you? There is a way to test the boldness of your trust. When you feel hurt, do you hurt back? When others behave badly, do your emotions fly up like fire to burn them so they won’t hurt you? Or do you live like one sure that she cannot be harmed, that she is “safe and secure from all alarms?” Or is that just a song we sing? Be serious now. Truth matters; nothing else.

Here is a spiritual law. First, a word. What I am about to say has no bearing on those subjected to malevolent violence, domestic, criminal, or foreign. This spiritual law has rather to do with the ordinary mechanisms of fear in human relations. It is this. To the degree you and I feel harmed by others, we are to Christ an impregnable tower of self-defense; Christ has not yet fully entered in. When someone hurts us or fails us, to the degree we cannot find prayer room to be concerned to find out what is motivating their action, we are not yet disciples. We are still standing at the edge of the crowd, wondering what this strange man who gave up the world wants with us.

In Christ you can release the tower complex, and with it all the controls and the fears which the tower requires: the sweat, the anxiety, the anger, the mechanisms, the hierarchy, the bureaucracy. God can transform all that. This is what trusting to life eternal means: many fouls, but no harm, for you are alive, always and ever-present. God goes with you. Now, you do not have to be good at this to be a disciple. A disciple is not good, but keenly desiring “to be like Jesus in-a my heart.” A disciple is fascinated to learn and to practice what it is to live from the gift of Christ within, able to stop being “an emotional domino,” (Ed Friedman’s term) ready to take responsibility for your emotional being and your destiny, blaming no one, not even the situation. This is not complex. It is life, real life. It is power, the way God gives it.