

ICARUS AND THE TOWER OF BABEL

Genesis 11: 1-9; Philippians 2: 5-11; Mark 9: 33-35

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Union Church of Cupertino

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“Do I dare?... Do I dare disturb the universe?
I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
and I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat and snicker,
...in short, I (am) afraid.”

These lines are from T. S. Eliot’s poem, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” and I chose them because they contain a question that arises in every faith tradition: “What about ambition?”

Do I dare? Do I dare disturb the universe?

Some accept ambition as a proper celebration of the gifts that God has given. Others reject it as a child of pride, an affront to the limits that God has established for each human life.

Do I dare? Do I dare disturb the universe?

The ancient Greeks revered a story about Daedalus and his son, Icarus. Daedalus was a skilled craftsman who was employed by King Minos to design the first labyrinth. The labyrinth was intended as a prison for the Minotaur, but Daedalus fell out of favor and was placed there himself, together with his son. The only way out was up and Daedalus, always the artisan, took reeds and feathers and wax to hold them together. He fashioned wings for himself and his son. And the father warned Icarus: “Do not fly too close to the sun!” The boy was hardly listening. What he saw was the chance to soar. How high could he fly? How close could he come to the sun? Too high! Too close! The wax melted. The wings fell apart. And the boy plummeted to his death in the sea. Pieter Breugel painted a picture titled “The Fall of Icarus” in the mid 1500's that showed average people going about their business, tilling the soil, transporting goods on the waters, and down in the right foreground, unnoticed by the workers is one leg still visible... one leg of that silly, ambitious boy as he plummets into the sea. The message that most Greeks got from this mythological story was: “Know your limits! Don’t try to fly too high.”

The ancients as described in the book of Genesis, had grown tired of being a nomadic people. They learned the art of making bricks and soon settled to build their homes. Soon, too, they were building tall monuments to their own skill. “Come let us make a name for ourselves and scratch the skirts of God in heaven.” Pieter Breugel also painted a picture of this story. He called it “The Building of the Tower of Babel.” But it’s not just a tall story. In the area of the middle-east that used to be the Babylonian Empire, archeologists have unearthed the remains of 25 tall towers. ‘Ziggurats’ they have called them. Three thousand square feet at their base, they once rose in 7 tiers to 231' in the air. The ‘Ziggurat’ was a remarkable achievement, but, according to Genesis, God was seriously displeased and took steps to limit such human ambition.

Isaiah wrote in his second chapter:

The Lord of hosts has a day
against all that is proud and lofty....
Against every high tower....
The Lord alone will be exalted,
in that day. 2:11-18

Do we dare? Do we dare disturb God and the universe?

In the Christian tradition Jesus is frequently portrayed as one who has set aside all ambition. It was said of him by Paul:

He emptied himself and took the form of a servant. - Philippians 2:7

When Jesus overheard his disciples arguing among themselves as to who was the greatest he said: "Stifle!" (or something to that effect) "The greatest will be the last, the least, the one who washes the feet of the others." - Mark 9: 33-35.

There is not much in these scriptures to support ambition. Do we dare?

Martin Luther, commenting upon those who might be most easily excused for being ambitious for Christ's sake, once said: "The ambitious minister is a pestilence to the church."

What about ambition? Is it the valid use of gifts God has given? Is it the deed that goes before the fall?

The answer, I believe, lies in that hymn to circumstance found in the 3rd Chapter of Ecclesiastes:

For everything there is a season and a time for every matter
under heaven. A time to plant and a time to pluck up what
has been planted. (A time to puff up and a time to hold back.)

And the reason I go into all of this is that I believe now is a time for Union Church and each of her members to be ambitious - to get out their wings - to go for a soar.

The Danish theologian, Soren Kierkegaard, once said that much of what poses as humility is, in fact, fear. It was also Soren Kierkegaard who coined the phrase "leap of faith." He believed that some things can never be wholly believed until we live as if they were true. If we think God has blessed Union Church of Cupertino with a great candidate for senior minister and that the church is positioned for a leap, let's start living as if the leap has begun! That's ambition.

We are in a moment in which bold is good. We have called a new minister. We have done so without equivocation - there was not a single dissenting vote. Now is the time to act as if this church were going somewhere.

And ambition, in season, is scriptural:

If I take the wings of the morning and fly to the uttermost parts of the sea. God's hand shall hold me. God's right hand shall clasp me fast. (Psalm 139: 9,10)

God's love does not melt.

Do we dare? Do we dare disturb the universe? You betcha!
Now is the season for an ambitious faith.

I believe ambition holds three tasks for us right now:

#1) It is a time to brag. Evangelism has never been a strong point among middle-of-the-road Christians. We are not good at sharing our faith. But we can boast about what has happened. We can call those who have lost their enthusiasm and share some of our own. We can be in touch with those who have been truant from worship and say "Get back here! The future is huge! We can speak over the fence to our neighbor, "We've hired a new minister and he's a keeper." We have heard again and again that the primary reason people try out a church is that they were invited. Right now there are good things happening here. For everything there is a season and it's open season for bragging at Union Church.

#2) Now is a time to get out the polish, to shine the silver, say to ourselves, "Let's start looking good." Last week, at staff meeting, I think I started Bunchie, Susan and Laurie by saying it was time for us each to clean out our church closets. Let us begin as we mean to continue. Classy operations never underestimate the power of polish.

Francis of Assisi never visited local churches without bringing along a broom. He knew that a clean church dared to be ambitious. A dirty church would wollow in itself. Ambition is signposted by the way things look. We shall clean out the closets, spruce up the grounds, finish that great work in the Fireside Room, admire a new Music Room floor.... We will begin to look as we mean to continue...now is a great season for spit and polish.

#3) And now is a time to prepare ourselves. If you need a moment to rest, take July to do it. - I won't mind - I'm 65 and I understand the need for rest. But then, in Biblical terms, gird up your loins, get ready for action. The minister you have just hired has a reputation for working his congregations hard. Soon, there will be an ambitious program laid out before the church. Soon, there will be an ambitious budget proposed to this church. Soon, program and budget will be resulting in ambitious mission for this church. That's the way competent, new ministers are, and if ambition is to be used to God's advantage we will all need to join in the leap, to sign on for the soaring.

Do we dare? Do we dare disturb the universe?

You bet!. It is a season to be ambitious. It is a time for Union Church to lift off.... And in this season, there's no such thing as getting too close to the sun.