

Series: “‘Valuable’ Wisdom for a Church on the ‘Move’”

Sermon: “Scarcity”

Text: *Philippians* (Introduction)

RGGJR/FBCCS/9-6-20

- I will be in a different text than I expected to talk about today. May I quickly explain to you how I arrived here? Let’s do some Bible Study thinking to come to that explanation.
- In ramping up for a return to our study in *Genesis*, I have been considering what I call the beautiful “fractals” of God’s consistent truth, from *Genesis* to *Revelation*.
- Context—*context*—and then finally the whole canonical **CONTEXT**—the whole Bible—is a primary exegetical key—interpretive tool—for us to understand the truth God has revealed in His Word.
- It does all fit together because it is God’s consistent revelation and His perfect explanation of reality. He knows what he is talking about all through the story of creation, humanity, sin, redemption and eternal glory. God gets it right as he records it for us.
- I was reviewing these beautiful patterns set out in *Genesis* that then appear through the BIG context of all of Scripture in their beautiful, fractal-like way. One pattern I hadn’t thought of before was apparent. It was a pattern related to how human beings sometimes relate to one another in relationships—especially close relationships—family relationships—brother to brother relationships.
- I am now convinced this pattern is not simply coincidence. IT derives from human nature tainted by sin. All of us have that in common so all of us are potential candidates from repeating this pattern.
- The pattern begins very early in *Genesis* as one of the basic stories of the establishment of the human race. Cain and Abel are the first brothers of humanity. Cain murders his brother Abel. The pattern begins.

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- There will be a pattern of conflict between brothers—sometimes those who are technically just as close as brothers—in the human race.
- We will not simply war with aliens who are strangers from other lands. We will not just experience conflict with unknown people for whom we have no feelings and no relationship. We will live through varying degrees of disagreement with those who are close to us—*brothers*—those we love and expect should love us.
- Abraham has his Lot—not a technically his nephew but—for all the descriptions of the narrative more like a brother.
- Isaac has his Laban. Jacob his Esau. Joseph his brothers. I could point to other, less prominent, Old Testament examples but they are many.
- *“Wow, Raleigh! You have discovered something no one else has ever noticed before. People in close relationships have disagreements—sometimes even devastating disagreements.”*
- Yeah! OK. This is not a new discovery. However, I believe it is a reminder of something important that we sometimes neglect.
- Let me give you the context of the context of the context on into the New Testament that made me stop and think about this.
- I was having a conversation with a fellow elder about something someone had done in FBC—something that I disagreed with. This other elder asked me something like, *“So, what are we supposed to do when we disagree?”*
- Thankfully, in self-control, I held back my immediate answer that welled up inside me. It was, *“We are supposed to do what I think is right—my preferences!”* I know that’s not true but sometimes it is still my immediate response to disagreement.

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- I was already looking at the big—whole Bible—context of disagreement between brothers in returning to Genesis. In the New Testament, I found other examples of this pattern.
- You could point to any number of disagreements between the brothers that were Jesus disciples, but I found two other examples especially enlightening and intriguing.
- The first was when two men loving each other on God’s mission together—as close as brothers could ever be—split up over evaluating a fellow minister. That would be Paul and Barnabas parting ways over their disagreement about John Mark. The first and #1 missional team of the NT church split in disagreement.
- Even more crucial for this morning was that disagreement that so many commentators treat as nothing more than a toss-away line from Paul in the letter he wrote to the *Philippians*.
- It’s in *Philippians* 4:2. My NIV separates 4:1 and 4:2 in an odd way that adds the first verse of chapter four to the end of chapter three and then begins chapter four with verse 2 instead. Why? Well, it is likely they sensed that 4:1 was connected with what preceded in thought and 4:2 began a new idea with an embarrassing callout of two leading women in the church in Philippi. If not leading, they were at least well known.
- **4:2 I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord.”**
- Paul takes pains and the NIV translation reflects it to address each woman exactly the same. One name has to come first but he repeats the verb “plead” twice in the same way to emphasize he is not favoring Euodia over Syntyche or vice versa.
- Paul’s plea is the same word and the same strength inherent in that word as when he pleads with the Romans to “...by the mercies of

God to present themselves as living sacrifices.” In other words, the word is a strong plea for something Paul sees as important.

- When you read the plea in the context of the context, you also see that this is important not just for the relationship of Euodia and Syntyche—that they might be friends. It is important—I would suggest critical to the whole church in Philippi.
- I think I am on solid ground suggesting this disagreement and its proper resolution was “critical” because I don’t think Paul puts throw away lines in his letters. I don’t think Paul would name--two disagreeing sisters this time not brothers—publically unless it was critical.
- In fact, I have a difficult time keeping myself from concluding that this letter to the Philippians was written *mainly* to deal with this disagreement between sisters that threatened the mission of the Philippian church. I suspect the theology and the practical wisdom were written with this relational war always on Paul’s mind.
- I would not yet swear I am right because I know how I am concluding Paul thought about churches much like me. He may not have done so. Much my thinking about churches, through the years I have pastored, is touched by relationships and especially relationships that are broken.
- I would go so far as to say, when relationships are broken in a church and God cannot lead people to repentance, you might as well add that to the failed churches in *Revelation*. At best, their potential candlestick broadcasting the light of the Gospel will be worth nothing.
- At worst, it will be as confusing as the fake, non-Jesus light put out by the Corinthian church. Paul suggested that this was so detrimental to the mission God just took some of them home to shut

them up and keep them from confusing people as to what the church was really about.

- So, my brilliant insight is that brothers fight. Sometimes brothers and sisters fight even in the church. People in close relationship, as we are supposed to be in a church, have disagreements. Sometimes those disagreements are critical impediments to the mission of God through that church.
- *You already were aware of that?* Look, I know you were if you have been around churches much at all. However, I said we sometimes forget something that makes a reminder of this truth so important to you and me.
- We forget what Jesus told us would be one of the most powerful tools for the mission he has given us. Sometimes we forget how much of the New Testament is given over to dealing with this important matter usually in the failure to live it out.
- As the Lord was commissioning his men for the ongoing mission when he would not be bodily present with them on earth, he said, ***"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."***
- I suppose he could have said go start a new religion in my name. God build big buildings and call them my house. Go gather hordes of people to celebrate me in ceremonies each week at 10:30 or 11 AM. Go take over politics. Go be the moral dictates for the world. He could have said so many things at that time but he said, ***"Love one another."***
- We certainly like how that sounds. Who could argue against it? But I fear we sometimes forget just how central it is to the whole of Context, context, CONTEXT.

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- When Cain killed his brother Abel, the archetype of the pattern was set. Sin will make brothers disagree, fight and even kill each other.
- Therefore, one vivid pointer to the pattern of redemption that God would also set was that brothers would—by God’s redemptive power—love one another as Jesus commanded his disciples millennia later in a beautiful “fractilian” form.
- It is this pattern of redemption showing vividly in the reconciliation of brothers—of those who are close to each other in relationship—that absolutely oozes from every part of the letter to the *Philippians*. This is why I think Euodia and Syntyche were never far from the apostle’s thoughts as he penned it.
- It was not because he felt bad the women couldn’t get along or they made others feel uncomfortable. If that were the case, we humans know how to sweep relational things “under the rug” so we can all *feel* better.
- No, it was because Jesus had continued the pattern of full-blown redemptive love in reconciling such matters as sisters with a broken relationship in the church.
- *Philippians* teaches it is **not** the *appearance* of getting along in a church that matters at all—not one bit! What matters is loving each other as Jesus did just as Jesus said it would.
- That is why I arrived here with you in *Philippians*, once again, for the next weeks, Lord willing. I know we have together studied this letter before. Eric Smith, not long ago, walked us elders through it verse by verse. Why *Philippians* again? For me, the pattern fits. It fits so well I feel I cannot neglect it for such a time as we are in as a church.
- In the months ahead, like never before in my 18 years in FBC, I feel like we cannot simply just keep doing church without thinking deeply about what that means.

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- I don't even think I am simply to preach a sermon just because we always have a sermon on Sundays and chapter 2 of a certain book comes after chapter 3.
- I am NOT AT ALL saying everything that has come before as FBC 1.0 2.0 2.1 and all the rest has been wrong—***again, NOT AT ALL!***
- What I am saying is that these times we are in this day are different times than anything before in so many ways.
- If we are asleep, in any way as FBC on God's mission, these times are a “***shaking awake***” by the hand of God himself. These times are the carbon monoxide and fire alarms both going off all at once at the same time in the middle of the night. I tested some of our alarms a few days ago. They can wake you up!
- These times are like the times in which Paul said to the Ephesian Church: ***Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.***”
- The opportunities for the mission of God, and for us as FBC on that mission, are as bold and as crazy and as exciting as they have ever been in my entire lifetime in church. But at 65 years old sometimes I might nod off for a nap and God has to, as it were, wake me from the dead of my sleep. Some of you are as old and as sleepy as me
- Let me explain more specifically, what I mean by this. Why I am speaking these crazy words.
- I was listening to a podcast by a Seminary president a few weeks ago. He was discussing dealing with education during the Covid pandemic. The president quoted something he had heard but had forgotten where he had heard it. I have now forgotten the seminary president's name. This means somebody, somewhere, sometime said something I am about to say. Here it is...
- ***“Scarcity leads to clarity, priority and creativity.”***

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- By “scarcity,” he was speaking poetically of the shortage of his ability to produce theological education as he had in the past—the going away of something he and his students were used to having in easy abundance.
- What are really buried in that word “scarcity” are the ideas of forced *change* and even *sacrifice* of something we are used to.
- One could thus say, “*Being forced to change or to sacrifice what we are used to and comfortable with brings clarity priority and creativity.*”
- Being the grump I am I mentally pointed out as he said it, being forced to change and sacrifice seems also able to produce *fear*, *anger* and *conflict*.
- When Paul wrote the letter we have in Scripture to the Philippian church, we will find they were facing “scarcity, change even sacrifice. What might result? Perhaps they would find wonderful clarity about their mission. Maybe these circumstances would help them set wise priorities. These tougher times could be the catalyst for creative thinking on the mission they shared with Paul.
- Or—Or—Or! these circumstances could produce fear, anger and conflict. Maybe that conflict was already showing in the relationship of two visible women in the church.
- Last Tuesday, the agent who is working with the real estate deal to sell FBC’s property, came to an elders’ meeting to talk to us. This was unusual. He told us that the buyer still wants to go through with the deal but has run into some unforeseen issues that will require more work with the city for permits. This likely will delay things a few more months and cost some money.

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- He asked us, “are you willing to give them some help and except the delay until now what looks like December before the contract is consummated?”
- Because of some of his answers to questions, my pride was saying walk away. Raleigh, I said to myself as he was pitching the sale to us once again—Raleigh—this is the answer to that *ambiguity*, that *ambivalence* and all those other ambi’s you are feeling these days about the unknowns of FBC’s future—about what will FBC 3.0 be like?
- I thought... we don’t have to sell. We use this facility for so many Kingdom Partnerships already. There will be more Partners along the way right here at 5590 N Nevada. We can keep on using it for God’s glory as FBC. God will provide as he has provided for all these years for us to use this facility on his mission. Tell the agent, no thank you, and walk away. It would be so much easier and more comfortable for you—for most of us—at this point in the life of FBC.
- Of course, the decision was not mine alone to make. We decided to sleep on it and told the agent we would let him know if we were still in the deal or not by 5 PM on Wednesday last week.
- That night, I marinated in the letter to the Philippians and that thought: “Scarcity—that is change and even sacrifice—bring clarity, priority and creativity.” I told God so far I have none of those from these new circumstances in which we live except for one clear idea that won’t go away.
- Again, it is not a condemnation from God at all about the past. It is rather wisdom for the future. That one idea is “**Wake up FBC!**”
- To continue the metaphor, some people don’t like to be shaken awake from sleep. Some people will not like this message.

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- My call to “**scarcity**,” understood again as a scarcity of comfort and control brought on by change and sacrifice for the FBC of the future will not produce in them clarity, priority and creativity but rather fear, anger and conflict.
- Here is the bow to wrap up this introductory package. Brothers will disagree--even fight. It is the pattern produced in all humans by sin.
- God’s redemptive pattern is reconciliation and real love his way among brothers. It is the best testimony we have for the world to see something real.
- In the middle of a pandemic that has changed the way many people live, we are also changing the way FBC is FBC by selling what we are used to.
- In the midst of all this ambiguity we are facing about what we think of as our “normal” lives in general, we also think God has given us the opportunity—the choice--to trust him even more in the ambiguity of becoming FBC 3.0. catalyzed by the changes we will make. In some ways that will be a very different church than we are used to and we are comfortable with.
- The whole program, all the activity of selling and planning and designing will be a waste—more than a waste—actually a detriment to the mission of God we are on if we forget what we often forget.
- It is never ever just about some appearance of church. It is about loving one another as Christ loved us.
- Brothers have disagreements. Sisters have disagreements. Paul tells the Philippians that if those are allowed to continue, the mission of a church is wasted.
- So, what will we do when we disagree? Not if, but when? What will our chosen “scarcity” produce? Clarity, priority and creativity for the mission? Or, fear, anger and conflict? What will make the difference?