

January 15, 2012

RINGMASTER

We are the second week into a sermon series called “The Greatest Show on Earth”, reflecting on the story of God and humanity through the metaphor of the circus. Last week we began by considering the great day when the circus comes to town. And how at the very beginning of it all ... the Big Top goes up. The stakes are driven, the poles lifted and the great canvas is hoisted up to create the great tent under which the circus is performed. The great dome under which the world of the circus carries out its life. And we talked about the great dome that hovers above us – the dome of the firmament, the heavens. We look above us and see the blue sky, the white clouds, the dark night, the twinkling stars and planets. We peer into the telescope and see spectacular dimensions of the universe. The galaxies and constellations and solar systems that dance and swirl about the cosmos. And while we would never dream that the canvas tent of the circus somehow got here by accident ... that there wasn't some intelligent person behind it all – so we give ourselves permission to imagine that the cosmic tent that drapes over us was put here by a person. That this just didn't kind of just happen. The heavens declare the glory of God!

Now once you enter the Big Top ... once you take your place at the circus under the great tent what next appears before you – is the Ringmaster. The Ringmaster of the circus. The Ringmaster is the master of ceremonies. He's the one who welcomes you to the greatest show on earth. "Ladies and gentlemen, boy and girls, children of all ages ... welcome to the Greatest Show on Earth!" It is the Ringmaster who pulls our attention to the center of the ring ... **the things** you most want to see. Back at the beginnings of the circus there were no spotlights to tell people what they should pay attention to ... they depended on the Ringmaster to point them to where they should look. "Please direct," the ringmaster would say, "please direct your attention to the ring at my right – and see the flying trapeze, the lion tamer, the dancing elephants, the human cannonball, the clown fire drill." It was the Ringmaster who helped you to see the incredible acts of the Greatest Show on Earth. And not just see them ... but to remind you that these acts you were about to see were the "most amazing, most spectacular, most dangerous, most incredible" acts you would ever see.

And it was also the Ringmaster who was responsible for making sure that the acts of the circus came together and worked in synchronicity with each other. He was responsible for the timing, for the entrances and the exits. He was the one responsible to fill in the time when the show was not working as planned ... when an act was not ready. When the elephants were not cooperating. When the clowns were still in wardrobe getting their makeup. It was the Ringmaster who held it all together.

The show always needs someone to hold it together. It becomes less of a show when it is not held together. If it's all just chaos ... if it's all a series of bad timing, late entrances and early exits, if there is not a voice that transitions one act from another, if there is not someone who can hold it all together and direct you to the most amazing acts in the center ring – well then it ceases to be the Greatest Show on Earth. The circus needs a Ringmaster. The show needs someone to hold it all together.

Science says the same thing.

You know science talks a lot about how the universe is held together. That the stars and the planets and the moons and black holes and the galaxies and solar systems are all held together. The universe is not chaos. There are forces that hold it together. Physicists call them the Fundamental Interactions: Electromagnetism, Strong Interaction, Weak Interaction and Gravitation. As much as we can determine today those are the four forces in our universe that hold the universe together. The one we most know about is gravity. Gravity holds us together. It keeps us fastened to the earth. It holds our feet to the ground. It tethers the moon to the earth, the planets to the sun, the stars to the Milky Way. It's more complicated than that, of course,

but this vast mind of mine is not able to explain it to you. Already I speak of things I have no business speaking of.

But that is one of the amazing things about this world – is that it is held together. We are not spinning out of control. The earth remains on its axis. The globe spins at the same rate. It takes us 365 days (366 this year) to revolve around the sun. The creator has put into place physical laws that cannot be broken. You can't walk off a cliff and not expect to fall. The world is held together. A ringmaster is in control.

It is one of the glories of the world that we in our busyness are liable to forget. Given the helter skelter of our lives and our preoccupation with all the little things that make us worry and anxious – we often fail to see and give thanks for the fact that earth is not hurtling out of its orbit. The stars are not falling from the skies. The planets are not colliding into each other. There is an order ... there is a ringmaster holding the show together.

Not that all the acts work perfectly. The truth is while the world is held together by this person, this creator, this master of ceremonies ... not everything works perfectly. Bad things happen. People miss their cues. Tragedies occur. Innocent people suffer. Good people get

hurt. The rain falls on the just and the unjust. Life can feel sometimes like it is spinning out of control.

You've been there, you know. Life hasn't always gone perfectly, has it? You've lost your job. Your marriage is on the rocks. Your body is not cooperating. Your child is not obeying. Your dreams are not coming true. And you feel like life is spinning out of control.

Our friend Job understands. Life couldn't seem anymore chaotic and random and maybe even sadistic – than when Job's world gets turned upside down. Loss of family, loss of home, loss of health. Loss of comfort even from his wife. And for thirty plus chapters Job and his friends try to make sense of it all. But it doesn't make sense. They can't figure out what the Ringmaster is up to. Until finally at the end of the story – God meets Job in the whirlwind. And with a series of rhetorical questions explains to Job in no uncertain terms – that there are things in this world that only the Creator can understand. Life is filled with mystery that for us will often make no sense. And yet there is still a Creator who holds it together.

Somehow, somehow God holds us together even when the world seems to be falling apart.

And while in the scientific world physicists can name the four fundamental forces that hold the stars and the planets together – it is not until the New Testament that you and I are given a glimpse into the ways that God holds us together. God, the great and ultimate Ringmaster.

“All things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose.” How can this be?, we ask. And Paul quickly explains – because “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.”

All things are held together, writes the apostle, all things work together ... because there is a force in this world from which we can never be separated – the love of God. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. The love of the Ringmaster. Neither death nor life ... neither rulers or powers, neither things present or to come – nothing in all of creation – can pull us away from the gravitational pull of the love of God. God holds each of us together through the gift of his love. And we are held together by the love of God we have for each other. No matter

how good the act, no matter how bad the act ... we are held together in God and by God and through our love for each other.

Thornton Wilder in his great novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* writes about a terrible bridge collapse in Peru and the loss of five people who so happened to be on the bridge when it collapsed. And the one who is writing the story goes in search of the stories of the five people and what was it that led them to be on the bridge? And he discovers that each of them was either on the way to or from someone they had loved. Love was what bound them ... and as Wilder explains, love is what binds them to those who remember them. He ends the story by saying: “All those impulses of love return to the love that made them ... There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning.”

And hasn't that been the case for you – that what holds you together is the knowledge that you are loved. What holds you close to the important people in your life – your family and your friends – is the love you have for them and the love they have for you. That what holds you in relationship to the world around you ... is whatever love you can muster for the world. That even what holds you to the people who have gone before you is the love you have for them. Doesn't it make sense then that when they asked Jesus about the most important commandment – when they came to the Ringmaster and said, “What truly holds the world

together?” He said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, will all your soul and with all your strength – and – you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” This is the gravity that keeps the planets and the stars and the mothers and the fathers and the brothers and the sisters and the friends and neighbors together – the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Years ago I got a call from a dear friend who was very sick in the hospital. The days were coming to a close for him and he was far too young to die. The pain of his illness was very intense and he was not making any sense of it. “I feel God has left me,” he said. “I feel like I’ve been let go. Where is this God who loves me?” I asked him who was there with him. He told me that his wife of 40 years was there. His daughter and her husband and their two children were there. His son from college was there. I said, “Tom, why are they there?” He said, “What do you mean?” I said, “Why are they there?” He said, “Because they’re my family.” I said, “No. They are there because they love you. They are there because you love them. Is there anything more real than the love you have for those people? And isn’t it possible that in that love God is holding you together? That nothing ... nothing ... not even this stinking disease will separate you from that love ... the love of God in Christ Jesus?” After a long moment of silence ... Tom said, “I need to put the phone down Steve, because I need right now to be held.”

It's the love of God that holds us together.

You see there was no way for the story of Jesus to end ... than with one last great act of love. The lamb of God slain for the sins of the world. It is the only thing that can hold the world together. "In him," writes the apostle, "all things hold together."

"For 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."

