

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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SCRIPTURE: Genesis 11:4, Jonah 4:11

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SERMON: “Strength – And Danger - in Numbers”

(Acknowledgment to Tim Keller for his insight into these passages)

Genesis 11:4 Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.

Jeremiah 29:7 “...seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.

Jonah 4:11 But Ninevah has more than one hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?

Revelation 22:1 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city.

Good morning everyone! Our Sermon Series is called **Ancient Words, Ever True**. We're taking the month of July and looking at ancient stumbling blocks that have been tripping people up through the ages. And of course we are looking to the ancient words of Scripture for the answers to these problems.

I don't know about you, but I get all over Franklin County. I'm here, just outside of Waynesboro every day, but I get to Chambersburg a lot...and Greencastle and Shippensburg pretty often as well. And one thing I keep noticing as I drive around is the growth.

Just when you think that they can't possibly build another hotel up there off of Walker Road, another one springs up. And I just saw in the paper the other week that another one is in the works, this little gravel parking lot behind Ruby Tuesdays up there on 30. It better be tall because it sure can't be wide.

And there are houses going up and businesses coming in – I see that a Wendy's is being built across from the Hospital.

I got me wondering what the **population of Franklin County** really is..and I went online and found that it's **over 150,000**. And then I thought about the population figure given for the great city of Ninevah.

Remember what it was? **Over 120,000.**

[\(Jonah 4:11](#) But Ninevah has more than one hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?)

I don't know how much over, but while we would not consider ourselves city folk, the population of this area rivals the population of some of the ancient cities.

And so that got me looking into God's Word to see what is said about cities, and Sharon/Kathy/Karen just read some of those verses for us. It appears that **when you bring a large number of people together, there are certain advantages and opportunities that come with it. At the same time, there is also the potential for conflict.**

And so this morning I'd like to talk about Franklin County, this area in which we live. I'd like for us to consider a few of the **many opportunities** that come about by living in a populated area such as ours.

At the same time I'd like to talk about the **potential for conflict**. You bring 2 people together and the potential for conflict exists. You bring 150,000 people together and the potential for conflict goes through the roof.

Our kids are competing for a spot on the team or for a scholarship or just for the back seat of the bus. We are competing against each other for jobs. To get the most "likes" on Facebook. To get that last door buster on Black Friday...or to get that perfect parking spot.

This morning's message is titled "**Strength – and Danger - In Numbers**" and here's the main point: **We can accomplish much for God's Kingdom here in Franklin County if we embrace the opportunities that our numbers afford us.**

150,000 people living in the same area provides the opportunity for us to **Unleash Our Potential**...the opportunity to **Provide for the Weak**...and the opportunity for **Spiritual Searching**.

Our Scripture passages are short and scattered throughout God's Word, but let's see what God wants to teach us about living in an area with this number of people.

First, because of how many people are living here in Franklin County, we have the opportunity to...

1. THE OPPORTUNITY TO UNLEASH OUR POTENTIAL

Let's go back and take a look at Genesis 11 where the people on the plain of Shinar get together and say, "Let's do this... **let's build** a city that has the biggest tower that has ever been built..."

[\(Genesis 11:4](#) Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.)

Now, we'll come to see that their reason for doing this is all wrong, but it is a great undertaking and an example of human potential being unleashed. Because to build a city, and not just

that, but a city with this great big tower is going to take many people with many different skill-sets working together.

God is so incredibly creative, and because we have been made in His image, **we have this capacity to create as well.** From childhood we are building and drawing and painting. And while we can do some pretty creative things on our own, do you know when our creative juices really get flowing? When a lot of people join forces and come together.

How about this auditorium that we're sitting in? You talk about unleashing human potential. Somebody had to design this room...and then we needed those who could construct it. We needed people to paint it and lay carpet and furnish it.

People came together, met together, planned together, and spurred each other on.

How about decorating for Vacation Bible School, preparing the food for the Church Picnic, sitting on the Church Board...people coming together and bouncing ideas off of each other, everybody bringing their own insight and skills to the table, looking to achieve the best outcome. There is strength in numbers.

But how about when the numbers are even greater? I think about some of the creative things that I see taking place throughout Franklin County and think about how these things provide the opportunity for people to use – unleash - their talent to accomplish great things.

The building of the parkette in downtown Waynesboro where there used to be an abandoned building; the waterpark that just opened up in Chambersburg...the Farmer's Market up near the square in Chambersburg...the planning for Old Homeweek in Greencastle.

Do you realize how many people came or come together for these projects or events? And the different skills that it takes?

The annual Chambersburg Project took place just last week. Many youth and some adults from Five Forks and other churches going out into the community, and doing things they could never hope to do on their own.

Businesses coming together...athletic teams coming together...marching bands...Relay for Life... these and so many more providing opportunities to unleash the potential that lies within each of us.

So what's the problem? As I said before, when you bring a lot of people together, **the potential for conflict is always present.** How does it happen?

Think about what was motivating the people of Shinar to build a city and a tower. It was to make a name for themselves.

And this is what leads to conflict. Because **within each of us there is this desire to make a name for ourselves.** At the workplace...on our athletic teams and in any organization...and yes, here in the church. And it's easy to overlook it in ourselves, but when we see it in others, well, we don't like that a little bit.

We've seen people be manipulative or conniving or slick in order to get ahead of others...to be seen, praised, selected, promoted. We see it.

It was God's design for people to come together so that our potential could be unleashed for good. But sin has marred it. We'll talk about how we should respond before we close, but let's take a look at a second opportunity we have here in Franklin County:

The opportunity to...

2. THE OPPORTUNITY TO PROVIDE FOR THE WEAK

In the Old Testament when you come across the word city, what it means in the Hebrew is **"An Enclosed Place."**

This means that it was a place where the people could be safe. The people on the plain of Shinar said let's build a city in order to make a name for ourselves and also **so we won't be scattered.**

[\(Genesis 11:4](#) Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.)

You see to be scattered meant that you would be vulnerable. And so people who were scattered or people who were weak could and would come to these cities, these enclosed places in order to be safe.

The first cities that God told the people to build were called **Cities of Refuge**. And they were called this because if you were accused of something, you would need a place to go where the law of the jungle was not in force.

And so there would be these cities of refuge where people could flee to and your case could be heard. It was a merciful place for people without power.

I think that Jesus would like for Franklin County to be a place of refuge for people without power. Here at Five Forks we bring our resources together and run a Food Pantry and a Clothes Closet. Many people joining together to help those in need.

As a church we bring our resources together to help people in financial difficulty. Remember I said one of the primary purposes of the tithe is to connect God’s people to the poor? I believe this is happening here. And by doing so, we are able to provide help for the weak. Our church is able to be a place of refuge to some degree.

But we don’t want it to be limited just to this church...wouldn’t we like to have the area in which we live be a place of refuge for those who are powerless?

I was born and raised here, just as many of you were. I am accepted here, comfortable here, surrounded by family and friends here.

I sometimes wonder what it must be like to have moved into Franklin County from another area or from another country. Because our daughter Olivia was born in Guatemala, there is a part of my heart that is with those who have come here from Central America. I’d like to think that my heart would be with them regardless, but I know I’m broken and can be pretty self-absorbed...and so I need Jesus to help me recognize the powerless among us.

I do know that Franklin County has a growing Hispanic population...and I would think that there has to be some fear and uncertainty on the part of those moving into this area. Without the advantage of living here all their lives like I have.

And so we are afforded the opportunity to have this area be a place of refuge for those who are powerless.

But at the same time, **you and I know of the potential conflict. “Why do they come here...and why are there so many of them.”**

I've heard on more than one occasion and perhaps you have as well, that this area in which you and I live is a hard area to break in to...to be welcomed and accepted. I don't like hearing that, but if it's true, I'd like to play a part in changing that narrative. I think that as a church we can do it.

Whenever people ask me what it's like to be a pastor here, I tell them it's great. I say it's a good church, and by that I mean there are good people here. Very down to earth. Very encouraging. We make only a small percentage of Franklin County, but I think we can play a part in making this county a place of refuge for the powerless.

I am determined to look at those who appear powerless – regardless of ethnicity - and look them in the eye and may they see in my face warmth and acceptance.

I know that it's easy to be cynical and guarded...I've been there and can easily go back there...but I'm looking to Jesus to help me overcome my brokenness and do my part in changing the narrative.

And I'm grateful for the way that some of you have already unleashed your potential to help make Franklin County a place of refuge for the powerless. A few years ago Heather Martin was instrumental in getting us involved with Convoy of Home, where we had the opportunity to serve many in the borough of Chambersburg. Last year Greg Stains headed up a team from Five Forks that participated in an outreach event called Project Big Love.

It can happen on a church level, it can happen on a county-wide level...but it will never happen unless it first happens on an individual level. And so we look to Jesus who helps us do things that don't come easy for us.

Let's look at this third opportunity we have here in Franklin County...

3. THE OPPORTUNITY FOR SPIRITUAL SEARCHING

Let's go back one more time to **Genesis 11** and look at that tower that the people intend to build.

(Genesis 11:4 Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.)

They wanted to build a city in order to make a name for themselves. Also so they wouldn't be scattered and thus vulnerable.

What about the building of this tower, what's behind this?

I have read that in ancient cities, the tallest structures in the city were the temples. Temples of the gods that the people of the city would worship. And so maybe there was some spiritual aspect to this tower the people intended to build.

Whether or not that is true, what is true is that it would be to the cities that people would come to worship their gods. Populated areas have always been the center of spiritual searching.

For instance, **150 years ago the tallest buildings as you would look upon the skyline of a city or a town would have been churches.** Cathedrals in cities, right? And here in Waynesboro the steeple on the Trinity church...or the steeple there on the Presbyterian church on Main Street...they tower over the buildings around them.

Even as you come out of Waynesboro, the steeple on top of this church is quite visible from a distance once you reach a certain point on 316. Every Friday I bring my dad out to the church

to help fold the bulletins, and when he sees the steeple in the distance he always says, “Well, we’re getting close.”

Why is there a church here at this location? Because over 50 years ago there were enough people in this area who had a spiritual bent, a spiritual hunger that made it viable to build. And as the population of Franklin County has grown, so has this church even as other churches are built throughout this county to help meet the spiritual needs of this many people.

The churches here in Franklin County provide all kinds opportunities for people who have a spiritual hunger to come and ask questions and dialogue back and forth. I hope that we are known as a church where people can come and ask questions - even hard questions – and know that they will be heard and that dialogue can take place.

But again, **the potential for conflict exists.** For several reasons.

First...hungering for things that cannot satisfy.

What cities have you been to lately? Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, NYC? Don’t you marvel at **the skyline** as you drive into the city...and then in the midst of the city you stand and look up in awe of these immense skyscrapers?

Earlier I mentioned that 150 years ago the buildings that would make up the skyline of the city were the churches. The cathedrals. But not so anymore. You might say that the tallest buildings today are built to the gods of our culture...the temples of money and the temples of power.

Now, here in Franklin County, there are no skyscrapers, are there? But if – instead of a spiritual hunger we are driven by a hunger for money or power... there is bound to be conflict because there is only so much money and so much power to go around. And it won’t satisfy even if we somehow get what we were striving for. We’ll just hunger for more.

Second, the potential for conflict exists because **we don't always handle questions well**.

It's easy to get defensive...it's easy to go on the offensive and push too hard...it's easy to insist that our view of this debatable issue or that debatable issue is the correct one....and if we do, then conflict could easily ensue.

So let me just **summarize** where we've been. We're living in Franklin County whose population rivals some of the cities we read about in the Scriptures. When 150,000 people come together, there are **opportunities...to come together and accomplish great things...to provide help for the weak...and to help each other on our spiritual journey**.

At the same time, when a large number of people come together, there is **the potential for conflict...making a name for ourselves...a stiff arm to the weak and powerless...a dogmatic approach** – insisting my view is right – as we search for answers on our spiritual journey.

And so let's close with some **application**. I'd like to make two suggestions...

First, begin by answering this question:

Jonah or Jesus?

Jonah was told to go and to preach to the great city of Nineveh, perhaps the greatest city in the world. He went into the city and preached and ministered...but he did not love the people.

Jonah 3:10-4:1 When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion on them and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened. But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry.

You see, Jonah didn't like the Ninevites because they were not like him. There is something within us, something broken, that causes us to be uncomfortable with people who are different than us...who don't look like us. And thus we have conflict.

To Jonah, the Ninevites were a pagan nation, foreigners. He didn't think that his God was their God too. And he couldn't have been more wrong.

But God comes to Jonah and says, "Look at Ninevah..."

Jonah 4:11b ...a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left...should I not be concerned about that great city?

And the word concerned means "to weep." God is weeping for the people of Ninevah. Jesus wept for the people of Jerusalem.

As you look around Franklin County and see people of different ethnicities...are you more apt to be a Jonah – thinking that our God is not their God...or are you more likely to be like Jesus – with concern in your heart because when it comes to Jesus, they may not know their right hand from their left. In other words, they do not know the gospel.

The gospel is that none of us – regardless of ethnicity or material wealth or anything – are worthy of God's approval and acceptance. Our approval, our acceptance is based on Jesus...on who He is and what He has done.

First point of application: Jonah or Jesus? May we have within us the desire to see all people as Jesus sees them. And he loves those who have come into Franklin County every bit as much as He loves those who were born and raised here.

Second point of application...

Look for ways to help Franklin County be a place of peace and prosperity.

Remember what Sharon/Kathy/Karen read from Jeremiah 29?

It's an amazing passage. Here you have the Israelites, and they've been carried off into exile in this strange and terrible land called Babylon. What does God say to them?

Jeremiah 29:7 “...seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.

We may not feel like exiles...but we are. How does that song go? “All I know is I’m not home yet, this is not where I belong.” Right? We are the foreigners, living in a land that is not our home. But we’ve been taken in by God.

And in doing so, He tells us to settle down here – for now – and be an asset to this place that is our temporary home. Build homes and have children.

As we live in our neighborhoods and work at our jobs...attend our schools and churches...go to farmer’s markets and the like...do what we can to help each other live peaceably. Step up and give wise counsel when there is conflict in your neighborhood home or at work... wherever you find yourself.

Many people agitate situations where conflict exists, you know this. That shouldn’t be us.

We should do what we can to help the people of this area prosper. Karen, Olivia and I routinely pray for the families who own businesses in this area...that they would prosper, whether they are followers of Jesus or not.

Can you be intentional about seeking peace and prosperity for the people of Franklin County?

Before we close, let me just encourage you to not overlook the fact that one day – **as followers of Jesus – we will be city dwellers**, living in the Holy City of the New Jerusalem.

In Revelation 22, as John is describing this incredible vision he’s been given, and he talks about the river of the water of life...

Revelation 22:1 ...clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city.

And you and I can be there.

But it will never be due to us unleashing our potential or helping the weak or giving sound answers for those who have a spiritual hunger. All of those things are good, very good...but we have the assurance of living in the Holy City because Jesus came to us...a people not knowing our right hand from our left....and died for us.

Remember what I said was the main point of this morning's message? That...

We can accomplish much for God's Kingdom here in Franklin County if we embrace the opportunities that our numbers afford us.

As we do... let us keep our eyes on Him whose throne is in the Holy City...with the assurance that one day in the not too distant future, we will be joining Him there.