



**“What Does Westminster Mean to You?”**

**Scripture – 1 Peter 2:4-9**

**Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones and three members:**

**Jen Barrington, Don Furry, and Teresa Wemhoff**

**Sunday, October 18, 2015**

When I meet people out in the community and they discover that I serve Westminster, most people say, “Isn’t that the beautiful stone building on Pennsylvania Avenue?” I smile and nod because we have a stunning edifice that people recognize and remember. We are heirs of this magnificent mass of carefully laid stones that has served as a witness to the Christian faith for over one hundred years.

Yet, as impressive as our structure is, each one of us knows that what makes Westminster truly special is not our building. It is our people. YOU make Westminster a vibrant community of faith.

In today’s passage from the First Letter of Peter, the author plays with several Old Testament passages, weaving them together in a novel way. Borrowing a verse from the prophet Isaiah, he says, “I am laying a stone in Zion, a cornerstone chosen and precious.”

A cornerstone is the place to begin when constructing a building. It is the stone that has been selected because it is solid to its core and can support enormous weight. This sturdy stone is prepared by chiseling it into an exact 90 degree angle. Then, when the building project begins, the cornerstone is set in place by the master stone mason who is confident that it will serve as the foundation for a mighty structure.

In this morning’s scripture reading, Peter makes it clear that *our* cornerstone is Jesus Christ. He is our solid foundation. He supports us when skies turn menacing and storms batter us. He keeps us grounded when the vicissitudes of life confuse and disorient us. He strengthens us when life hurls stiff challenges our way. A cornerstone is essential for creating a solid structure. However, a cornerstone by itself is not a building. It is the foundation, but other stones must be laid upon this bedrock.

In our reading, we discover that we are called to be the living stones to be used in God’s construction project. We are to present ourselves for the creation of a vibrant spiritual house.

If we are the stones, what sort of stones are we? We have some young stones and some old stones. We have solid, time-tested stones and we have recently found stones. We have beautifully shaped stones that can be set almost anywhere within the structure and we have some differently shaped stones that require much more care in placement. We have seemingly impenetrable stones and we have very porous stones. We have large and small, round and flat. We have such a hodgepodge of stones that some might think we could never be used to create something solid and worthy. But, indeed, it is the variety of stones that give us such great potential for becoming

a magnificent spiritual house. Our cornerstone, Christ, anchors our foundation so that we can be cemented together as one body – one family. Rather than being individual stones lying scattered around on the ground and of little use, God bonds us together so that we can form a community of faith that is both beautiful and valuable.

What does Westminster mean to you? Three of our members will share their thoughts...

**~ Jen Barrington Testimonial ~**

It's hard to choose which pivotal time in my life to think about when I think about Westminster. This is my spiritual home. I have grown up here. I have traveled on international mission with this church. I have been married here. I have had my children baptized here. I have had the honor of serving here. I have been held when I cried. I have been prayed for. I have been blessed. Isn't that everything a family would do?

Growth, we want that for all our children. We want that for this church family. Westminster has taught me to grow in every aspect, from my relationship with God, to my relationship with my family. I have been challenged to learn in Bible study, on outings and serving in our community. If we want to know God better then how wonderful is it to have our hearts and minds expanded in the understanding of our own family?

Families want children to take flight. Westminster wants us to take God into the world. This church has offered me life changing experiences. I did not know that I would need to travel to the ends of the earth to know how well we are loved by God. Seeing survivors in a refugee camp in South Africa and learning how we can make a change in the world, from this far away, was inspiring. This church knows that we are all missionaries in our way, and truly believes we are the hearts and hands of God.

Westminster has modeled a healthy supportive family by the way we take care of each other. Serving communion, holding a hand, teaching a child, all of these have been provided to me by this family. One of the best pieces of advice I have heard here at Westminster is to outdo each other with kindness. I see that every time I come into this building. A smile, can I help you, and a welcome to the family.

Families rally when a member is down, be it in unemployment, illness, difficult relationship moments, a loved one gone in one way or another. Westminster has been the place that is always here and understands the pain and the loss; all this understanding without judgement. Westminster's trust in God has shown me that there is a plan bigger than I can comprehend. I have been taught that we are always held in the palm of God's hand.

A few weeks ago in worship I sat with several non-traditional families as they fawned over new babies, held hands and cared for each other. It was never more apparent to me than then, that Westminster is the kingdom of God here on earth. My spiritual family; where all people are welcome. Where all of us are cherished, challenged and changed. This family is a multicultural, multigenerational gem. I look around and I am so proud that my family is so diverse and so ready for the next new member and next new phase of life encouraging each of her children onward!

**~ Don Furry Testimonial ~**

The church has been a central part of my entire life. My father began taking me to Sunday school at an early age and we would often stay for church and sit in the first row of the balcony. Our demonstrative preacher would shake his index finger so vigorously I thought it would reach all the way to the balcony. After that fire and brimstone, it's a wonder I ever became a Presbyterian!

In 1991, I relocated to Wilmington as a single person and realized how important it was to find the right church to help me through a challenging mid-life transition. I met Ellie and we began visiting several Presbyterian churches. Westminster stood out as the friendliest church with great worship and music.

Anne Ledbetter immediately got us involved and we both have been active since. I served 14 years as a trustee, deacon and elder and chaired the Session's Finance Committee for four years. During those years of service, I developed many close friendships and saw firsthand the many hours of service and acts of compassion shown by you, the members of our congregation. Each year the budget was a challenge because there were so many great ministries that needed to be supported with limited income. At times it felt like we were trying to put 10 pounds of potatoes in a 5 pound sack. I can assure you that each year the dollars that are given are put to thoughtful and prayerful consideration. It would be nice to have a year when the supply exceeds demand!

When I was ready to retire from DuPont, I got a challenging job opportunity that involved extensive travel. I was concerned about impacting my church activities and, after much praying and deliberation, I took the job but made a personal commitment that a significant portion of the income would go to support the church. At the same time I would continue to seek ways of maintaining my church involvement. It worked. As a family we were able to maintain our gifts of time and talent while significantly increasing our financial support.

This church has been a major blessing and source of strength for Ellie and me. A few years ago I developed a very serious illness that lingered for over 14 months and included four operations and many months in rehab facilities. During the darkest hour, as I was being wheeled in for open heart surgery, I tried to lighten things up a bit and said to the nurse, "Well, I guess I'm in the Doctor's hands now" to which she quickly replied, "No, you're in God's hands!" She was spot on!

The outpouring of care and support from our staff and you the congregation was amazing. The calls to the hospital by the church staff and the numerous visits, cards and prayers from the congregation gave us the support to ride out the storm. Greg stopped by for each operation, Jill would visit often and offer the most comforting prayers, and each of my visits with Tom Stout would go much longer than planned and Randy stopped by while just being on the job for a few days. Greg gave a sermon about the power of prayer a few weeks ago. I can tell you that during the depths of my illness I was uplifted by your prayers. When Jill Getty brought me a prayer shawl shortly after my most challenging surgery, I wrapped it around me and it truly felt like being wrapped in the arms of God. I was blessed to have many highly skilled doctors providing my care, but the prayerful and loving support from this church was the "wind beneath our wings" during the recovery process. I decided to become a Stephen Minister so that I could use my experiences to help others.

So this church is our sanctuary! Each Sunday Ellie and I attend worship and are with our friends that share the same Christian values. We are inspired and uplifted in worship. We are truly blessed to be members of this community of faith. So if you asked what the church means to me my response is – everything!

**~ Teresa L. Wemhoff Testimonial ~**

I was pursuing the pastor...yes, it's true. I came to Westminster for the first time to see Chad Miller, the associate pastor for mission here from 2007 to 2009. Not exactly how I imagine most folks end up finding a church.

Yes, we did date, a pivotal relationship in my life that changed me forever. While we experienced excitement, laughter, and joy during this time, sadly, scars from both Chad's and my past also precipitated a devastating mental health crisis that hospitalized me for three weeks in 2008.

When Chad, and his brother, tragically drowned kayaking on the Brandywine River in 2009, I had not been to Westminster in about 9 months. Not knowing how the church perceived my relationship with Chad, I didn't know how I would be received here; I just knew I was very drawn to coming back.

Where I thought I might encounter animosity, I found an astonishing embrace of grace. That grace is a gift I've continued to experience. I received the loving care of a Stephen Minister when my dad was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in 2012. Greg Jones guided me and my husband Aaron as we prepared for our wedding celebrated here in October of 2013. Just two weeks later, my family felt the gentle, comforting presence of Jill Getty visiting my dad's bedside hours before he died.

So that's how I ended up at Westminster and now I'd like to tell you why I *choose* to stay. Let's face it; we all have plenty of opportunities to fill our Sunday morning schedule with commitments *other* than church.

I love that I don't have to check my brain at the door when I arrive and pick it up on the way out. I appreciate the space allowed for questions, uncertainty, and a varied, evolving understanding of our faith tradition.

I also think this congregation understands that many in our world have been hurt by "the church" as an institution and that we have to do better. We want our church community to stay vibrant for the next generation. We must find a way to keep church relevant and to make the love of God accessible to all people from all walks of life.

Last January, Aaron and I received a most amazing gift, the birth of our son Griffin. A friend of mine told me before he was born, "I had a hard time grasping how God loved people until I had a child." Holding Griffin in my arms I realize that I, too, am a beloved child of God.

Here at Westminster, we believe that all human beings are beloved children of God and we have a responsibility to find a way to share that truth not only with one another, but also, and perhaps more importantly, with every person we meet outside of here in our everyday lives.

So please, let's join together to shine the light of the radical, counter-intuitive, challenging love of God, taught to us through the life of Jesus Christ, to a world that desperately needs it.

### **~ Concluding Remarks by Dr. Jones ~**

In a rapidly changing world when some churches are becoming relics, you make Westminster relevant. While some congregations retreat into an exclusive enclave, you create an atmosphere that is open and welcoming. At a time when our society makes people feel insecure and question their purpose, you provide the security of a spiritual home where they can stretch and grow into the people God wants them to become.

As living stones, you create a warm and loving community of faith where we learn that each person is a precious child of God; where we help one another through the various transitions and surprises of life where we mature as human beings as God's Spirit works in us to make us compassionate and joyful, forgiving and hopeful.

As living stones, you design classes that discuss the impact of science on religious faith and what it means to be a follower of Jesus in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. You feed the poor, house the homeless, visit the ill, and comfort those who grieve. You encourage one another to take important steps to care for God's creation. You participate in groups that break down barriers between Christianity and other religions. You drive people to doctor's appointments and visit people who are lonely. You provide at-risk children with backpacks and a space for after-school tutoring. You give people in Guatemala water filters to improve their health. And while conflict rages in the Middle East, you bring together middle-schoolers and their parents who come from opposite sides of the divide, to make music and to build friendships which set groundwork for justice and peace.

What will you do to keep Westminster faithful, vibrant, and welcoming? What will you do to keep these vital ministries surging ahead?

God gives us a clear choice. We can remain idle in the pile of rocks that is off to the side of the construction site and never used. Or we can each choose to be a living stone that fortifies the house of God.

Give generously of your **energy** to something that will touch people's lives with God's love. Give generously of your **time** to nudge our world in a better direction. And give generous **financial support** so that we can be a dynamic community of faith that is truly a blessing to the world.