



“Greatness”

Scripture – Mark 10:35-45

Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones and three members:

Tom Hogue, Josh Cox, and Mary Lu Pamm

Sunday, October 21, 2018

What will make you great? That is the question in today’s Scripture reading, and the disciples believe they know the answer. Even though most of them had received no formal education, all of them understood hierarchies and positions of honor. They knew how their culture defined greatness and they had their minds set on attaining it.

Two of the disciples, James and John, march up to Jesus and blurt out, “Teacher, we have something we want you to do for us.”

Jesus replies, “What is it?” And we can picture the other ten disciples leaning in closely to hear what they are about to ask Jesus.

James and John say, “Arrange it so that we will be awarded the highest places of honor in your glory – one of us at your right, the other at your left.”

The other disciples erupt in a cacophony of complaints. There may have been bitter words, finger-pointing, and harsh accusations. No doubt they rattled off examples of why these two brothers should not be awarded the prized positions: “Remember when James refused to forgive me?” “What about the time John was disrespectful to that widow?”

The other ten started barking out all of the reasons that disqualified James and John from the places of honor. They were captives to that dangerous mindset that from time to time whispers in *our* ears: To elevate yourself, you need to knock others down a few notches.

Then, after presenting their case for the demotion of James and John, each one began to lay out the argument why he should garner one of the choice seats. But Jesus was having none of it. He squelches their quibbling. Not only does he deny James and John the preferred seats, he calls on his followers to make a complete shift in their thinking. That is what this text is really about – shifting our mindset; rethinking what makes life rich.

Jesus says, “Whoever wishes to become great must become a servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”

This text encapsulates a primary teaching of Jesus. He wants us to relinquish the kind of thinking that leads to elbowing others aside to seize favored status. He urges his followers to discover that the path to a beautiful life is

not found in plucking the prized position, but in giving ourselves for the well-being of others and the health of the world.

We give ourselves to our families when we support and care for their emotional and financial needs. We give ourselves to friends when we weep with them during times of sorrow and celebrate with them in times of joy. We give ourselves to the world when we respect the humanity of each person, speak the truth in love, right the wrongs we encounter, and work for the common good.

We do this on our own and we do this together as the Body of Christ.

God binds us together in the church so that we can learn how to serve one another and how to serve the needs of our wounded world.

~ Tom Hogue Testimony ~

When I was asked to make some comments about what Westminster Church means to me, many thoughts and emotions went through my mind. However, I have condensed them into three areas that are the crux of these many thoughts—**Family, Faith, and Commitment.**

As for **family**, like I'm sure is the case with some of you, our family roots run deep in this church. For starters, my wife, Carol, essentially grew up here. Her parents were very active in many areas including senior high Sunday school teachers, involvement in many of the circle groups, and in the wonderful Christmas bazaar. Closer to home, the Rev Fred Mathias married Carol and me 45 years ago in a wonderful garden wedding. Our two children were baptized in this sanctuary and they attended Sunday school here. Anne Ledbetter married our daughter and son-in-law in Vermont 8 years ago. These many family connections are a key part of the meaning of this church to me.

There is **another smaller family** unit within this broader church family that has great meaning—that would be the choir. It is one thing to be involved in singing very moving music each Sunday, music that deepens my own faith, but to be a part of this wonderfully caring and kind group of people is something I feel blessed to be part of. In short, my faith journey would not be the same without my choir involvement.

As for **faith**, the quality of preaching here at Westminster has been a strong legacy for many years. We've come to expect it—to rely on it, and to embrace the teachings inherent in these sermons. Like many, I'm a faith journey work-in-progress and listening to inspiring messages that put Christian teachings both in historical context as well as contemporary relevancy is very important to me and serves to move my faith journey forward. Knowing that Greg, Sudie, Jill and many other friends care for us—care during times of sorrow, in times of personal challenge, and a community that both cheers and celebrates with us during times of joy is beyond description. I am very grateful.

And... **commitment**, Carol and I are proud of the many mission-related activities, resources, and community outreach and building programs supported by this church. Through my personal involvement over the years in activities such as Habitat for Humanity, involvement in many youth groups, serving meals at Saturday breakfast and at Emmanuel Dining Room, and mentoring Wilmington elementary students in Camp Promise, I do indeed see and feel God's love emanate from this church.

Speaking of Camp Promise, last semester on my first day of mentoring, I was partnered with a very bright, energetic 6 year-old boy named Tyron. Tyron is a second grader at Urban Promise School in Wilmington. He is part of elementary students that meet here at our church each weekday after school. He is an excellent reader, good at math, and while helping with questions from time to time, much of my mentoring was offering positive

reinforcement and encouragement. While getting to know one another, we discovered that each of us likes to cook. So the next week during snack time, Tyron asked me, “Mr. Tom, do you like chicken soup”. Yes, I like chicken soup. “When you go to the store what is the first thing you buy when you want to make chicken soup?” I said I usually by a chicken. “What other ingredients are in this soup he says?” Well, I use carrots, celery, onion, chicken stock. “How do you mix them together and cook them?” So I explained that process. The next week Tyron asked me, “Mr. Tom, do you like chocolate chip cookies?” Well as a matter of fact I like them very much, they are one of my favorites. He said he makes chocolate chip cookies with his mom. “What are the ingredients in your chocolate chip cookies and how do you make them?” So I explained that process. Then it was how to make birthday cakes, fried chicken, and on and on. What a wonderful personal connection I had with Tyron, a result of Westminster’s commitment to supporting organizations like Camp Promise.

It is Westminster’s collective commitment, our collective resources, resources of every type, that allows this church to reach out to help so many in need in Wilmington and well beyond.

Family, faith, and commitment—this is Westminster Church to me!

~ Josh Cox Testimony ~

Westminster has always been a second home to me. I grew up in this church, and what makes it so important is its community. Ever since I was born I’ve had a huge network of love and support. A network of people with different skills, knowledge, and passions who all helped shape me into the person I am today. Some of my closest friendships started here in this church, from Sunday school to youth group, and now I have the privilege of helping lead a new generation through the very same thing. I always feel very connected when I’m at Westminster. This congregation really is more like a family. Without this church I think it’s safe to say my life would not be as full.

Another part of Westminster that I love is the mission work. From serving pancake breakfasts to partnering with youth groups in Guatemala, Westminster’s service work is amazing. From the time I was old enough to participate, serving others through Westminster has been a very rewarding experience, and it really helps a lot of people. Most recently as a youth leader I went to Guatemala with a group of our kids.

Some of you have heard me speak about my experience there but for those of you who haven’t, I will shortly tell it again. Throughout my life I have struggled with my faith, seeing friends and family experience hardship and loss the likes of which good people don’t deserve. About a month before we were to depart for Guatemala, I witnessed a brutal act of gun violence, which resulted in the death of a police officer. My struggling faith became shattered faith.

A few days into the trip, I was talking with one of our guides. He told me about his hard experiences in his life, many of which were difficult to hear, and I told him of mine, and we spoke for the better part of an hour, just baring both our lives on the table. I told him of my shattered faith and anger and somehow he reassured me, this man I’d known for a couple days, reassured me that God doesn’t allow these things to happen, but instead feels your pain and is with you always and unconditionally. After this conversation ended I felt an overwhelming amount of emotion and it dawned on me that I was experiencing God for the first time. That trip itself made me a better person and it wouldn’t have been possible without Westminster. The incredible people of this church consistently see and bring out the best in me and everyone around them, and that’s why this community and its mission work are the two things I love most about Westminster.

~ Mary Lu Pamm Testimony ~

Good Morning, I’m Mary Lu Currin Pamm and I’m a WPC lifer!

I was baptized, confirmed and married right here in this Sanctuary. I was also honored to have our 2 sons Baptized here, with my father as their presenting Elder, and humbled to have now laid both my parents to rest in the Memorial Garden.

When Greg asked me to speak this morning I'll admit I was a little overwhelmed. To gather my thoughts about what Westminster means to me seemed monumental, much less boil it down to 500 words or less!

Westminster means Community.

A community that has allowed me and my family to feel loved, supported and needed. **Loved** during times of stress, grief and celebration. **Supported** when learning new skills as a volunteer and when spreading my wings now, and in the past. And **Needed** when stepping up to volunteer, when helping a newcomer find their way or when giving a much-needed hug and **Needed** to help fund a new building or project, or in providing financial support for the ongoing Church budget.

Westminster means Mission.

Our Church's mission is all around us. **Mission** to educate our young people about the bible, and how to be good Christians. Our **Mission** to serve those in need and help overcome injustice in our local community and around the world. **Mission** to educate and stimulate all ages and stages of life, and our **Mission** of hospitality, to each other and our neighbors, opening our hearts and doors wide.

Westminster means Sanctuary.

I love that we have such a gorgeous Church Sanctuary! But it's so much more than that, it's a place to reflect in silence, to gaze on magnificent stained-glass windows, to listen to thought provoking sermons and great music, to see old friends and meet new ones, and to bask in the evidence that we are loved.

Westminster is a place of Celebration and Community, Family and Learning, Caring and Acceptance, Powerful Silence and Joyful Noise, that I have and will always cherish.

Concluding remarks by Gregory Knox Jones

Many thanks to Tom, Josh, and Mary Lu for reminding us that our spiritual home is an incredible blessing. It is a blessing to each of us and it is a blessing to children who are at risk of failing school and falling in with the wrong crowd. Westminster is a blessing to homeless families and people who are hungry. Our church is a blessing to people in Guatemala who need clean water and medical clinics and micro-loans. Our church is a blessing to people who need a ride to their doctor and a compassionate ear. Our church is a blessing to us and to many others, but our vital ministries do not continue to pump life-blood into our world without the financial support of each of us.

We are in the midst of our stewardship season when each of us is called to make a decision about how much of our wealth we will contribute to the church. Tom, Josh, and Mary Lu have shared some of the reasons why Westminster is important to them – how it has grounded them, how it has shaped them, and how it has provided opportunities for them to share God's love with others. No doubt it triggered your own thoughts on why Westminster is vital to you.

Today's passage reminds us of a core teaching of Jesus. He says that the path to a beautiful life runs through giving – giving ourselves to God and giving ourselves for the good of others. A key piece of our giving is setting aside a portion of our financial resources to the church.

We give because it is a tangible way of expressing our gratitude for the gift of life. Have you ever counted how many breaths you take in a minute? Most of us take between 12 and 18 breaths a minute if we are sitting calmly in the pew during the sermon. This does not take into account those who fall asleep. Nor does it take into account the times I say something that makes you mad and your breathing intensifies!

To take a modest average, let's say we take 15 breaths a minute. Multiple times 60 minutes, and we take 900 breaths an hour. Multiply times 24 hours and we take 21,600 breaths a day. Have you ever paused to remember that each of those breaths is a gift from God? We give to express our gratitude to God for the very gift of life.

We also give because the church is in the business of transforming lives. The church lifts the lowly, stands by the forgotten, reminds us of the values that will lead to a better world, and helps each of us become the person God wants us to become.

Finally, we support the church financially because it can save us from losing our souls. Everyday there are voices tempting us to believe that happiness and wholeness are just a purchase away. We know that is nonsense, but that seductive voice is so persistent that sometimes we fall for it. The church reminds us that joy and fulfillment and peace and hope are not found in material objects, but in a life grounded and shaped by God's Spirit.

Why not take time to recognize and enumerate your blessings by creating a gratitude list? Then, decide what you will pledge to Westminster for 2019.

A rich life does not result from accumulating, but from giving generously.