



“Blessed to be a Blessing”
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson and three members:
Janet Steinwedel, Craig Stabler, and Carrie Saathoff
Sunday, October 22, 2017

God is in the habit of calling.

This is the first of *many* ‘call stories’ in Scripture. And it stands out because it is so, well, vague. So open-ended. The Lord instructs Abram and Sarai to pack up their lives, to leave everything they love, and to set out for a distant land. But — beyond that — there is no objective. No task to be accomplished. No action plan laid out ... This is not like Moses, whom God sends to Pharaoh *specifically* to bring the Israelites out of Egypt and into a land flowing with milk and honey (Exodus 3). Or the prophet Jeremiah, who is called to speak the words that God puts in his mouth (Jeremiah 1). Or the disciples, whom Christ summons, saying: Follow me, and I will make you fish for people (Matthew 4).

The call of Abram and Sarai is different. They are simply sent, with a promise that will sustain them on their journey and a command to guide their way: “Go,” the Lord says, “and I will bless you ... so that you will be a blessing.”

I will bless you, so that you will be a blessing.

God does not give Abram and Sarai a specific goal to achieve. But their mission is no less important. God claims this couple for a life of blessing, and calls them to bear this blessing to the world. Through Abram and Sarai, *all* the families of the earth will experience the wholeness that God intended in calling the world into being.

And this is our calling as well. For we are members of the community that began with Abram and Sarai’s faithful response. Generations later, God still claims and calls *each* of us with that same promise: I will bless you, so that you will be blessing.

Living as a blessing may seem both a vague and never-ending call, just as overwhelming for us as it must have been for our ancestors. We know we are called to work for the well-being of all — for justice, for human dignity. Some of us live out our calling actively engaged in ministries of blessing, giving of time, talent and treasure. Some of us are still sorting out the pulls on our own hearts, discerning how our gifts intersect with the world’s great need. And there is grace in this variety of responses, for it means we can all follow the faithful footsteps of Abram or Sarai, each in our own way and in our own time.

But in our quest to taste God’s blessing for ourselves, and to share this blessing with others, we have found our way to Westminster Presbyterian Church. For some of us, this community has been the starting point on our

journeys of faith. For others, it's the place we've chosen to pitch our tents and dwell on holy ground. And — as we open ourselves to the Spirit of God moving in and through this community — many of us have heard the voice that claims and calls. We've encountered the Holy One in worship, through opportunities to grow in faith, and in service within and beyond these walls.

And so we encourage one another, sharing our stories and sharing the blessings that have found us ...

~ Janet Steinwedel Testimony ~

You may have been exposed to “The Prelude” at some point in your education...the magnum opus of William Wordsworth, printed circa 1850. It was written and edited over years. In one favorite section I feel resonance with his complete happiness as he states:

*Ah dear friends but to the brim my heart was full
I made no vows but vows were then made for me
bond unknown to me was given
that I should be else sinning greatly
a dedicated spirit
and on I walk in blessedness, which even yet remains.*

It is easy to walk into this church and feel blessed...first it is just a beautiful place. The gray sparkling stone, the buffed woods and the richly colored stained glass windows are just a few of the things we notice quite immediately.

But then, beyond the stately pulpit, the pristine sanctuary, the crosses, pictures and flowers...there are the people...the wonderful people – the ones that run this place, keep it beautiful and are committed to it and to us day in and day out. And even as I come in with my own personal concerns everyone is friendly, helping me meet my needs of the moment. I don't feel like an imposition, I feel like I belong. I have friends here, real friends who add meaning to my life.

For nearly 20 years I've been walking in these doors. Steve and I were early in our marriage and looking for a church we could both feel at home in. He was a little more of a seeker and, as I look back on it, I was just opening to the broader possibilities of my spiritual journey. How were we to know of vows, bonds and the dedication we'd feel to this place?

We settled in here because of the things most of us likely enjoy about Westminster. But we've stayed because we never felt we had to give up a piece of ourselves to belong.

My work is as an Executive Coach and leadership consultant. Learning, leadership and organizational development are my areas of specialty. I've always been curious about people and how we get along in our worlds. I have been able to contribute to Westminster most from these skill sets: assisting with the Discernment team, as an Elder, with Christian Education, teaming with Steve to provide Poetry, Dreams and Reflections workshops, expanding my horizons with the Israel-Palestine trip, working with the staff to process former Assoc. Pastor, Chad Miller's death and presenting to the Stephen Ministers on the Wounded-Healer archetype, to name a few.

I must confess that Greg asked me to give one of these lay sermons last year and I declined. I know, imagine saying no to Greg? Well he gave me grace in the short run but as you can see he's persistent. In my defense last year I was beginning the writing of my second book...it was just published last week, so no more excuses. It is about the Wounded Healer archetype which is the idea of the necessity of both the understanding of being wounded, the inner work we have to do to manage these hurts, fears and disappointments and the capacity of the

healer – the one who brings solace, care and companionship. Without experience in both aspects we are not very useful in our work with others. My focus has been on bringing this idea to Executive Coaches. We don't think of executives as wounded, but we're all wounded in some way.

The point is that I got to try out and work with these concepts right here at church. These are holy issues. We don't tend to talk about spiritual things in the workplace. But we can. I have found a way to do it through the work of Swiss psychologist, Carl Jung.

Jung provided us an understanding of “Individuation” or, how we fulfill our unique destiny, noting that the first half of life is about establishing ourselves – getting an education, a job, having children, buying a house, and achieving all the things that enable us to meet our expectations for ourselves...and quite often society's expectations for us.

Once we feel established, Jung said, it was then, if we were inclined to pay attention, to become conscious, that we entered the 2nd half of life – the meaning-making phase. In this phase it is not so much about what we need, but what brings feelings of fulfillment. We get there by entertaining all of the emotions and experiences that come our way.

Steve's collaboration between the Community for Integrative Learning and the church bringing speakers like Phillip Newell, Marcus Borg, Eben Alexander, Matthew Fox, etc., have all helped me grow emotionally and spiritually — helped us grow with this community.

Poet, Rainer Maria Rilke writes:

*I want to unfold
I don't want to stay folded anywhere,
because where I am folded, there I am a lie.
And I want my grasp of things
true before you. I want to describe myself
like a painting that I looked at closely for a long time.*

I have been unfolding at Westminster, and I thank you for this opportunity to describe myself to some degree.

I am grateful for being able to find blessedness, to learn how to pray, to navigate into my second half of life in a safe and kind container...here at Westminster...with you.

~ Craig Stabler Testimony ~

The Tigers of Clemson University are the reigning national champions of college football. Like many schools, Clemson has some great traditions. One of them centers on a large stone that was retrieved from Death Valley in California by a fan and presented to then coach Frank Howard back in the 1960's. Today, Howard's Rock sits in the east end zone of the stadium at the top of a hill. On game day, the players rub the rock, then run down the hill onto the field as the band plays and the whole stadium erupts.

So why am I talking about an old rock and a football team? For me, Westminster is like Howard's Rock. It's a central place in my life where I can come each week, catch my breath, see some friends and hear a message that reminds me of what's most important in life – counting my blessings, sharing them with others and being encouraged to live my life the way that Jesus would want me to live. Howard's Rock gives each player a familiar focus before the game. I've spoken to several of you at home gatherings recently and I believe Westminster provides a similar focus in your lives as well. One new member became unexpectedly hospitalized 3 days after

joining the church and Sudie went to visit him at Paoli Hospital on her way home. That visit confirmed to him and his wife that they had made the right choice in joining our Westminster church family. Others have told of the lives of their kids being changed by a youth mission trip to Guatemala. There are many other examples, but I'm being held to a strict word count today!

Now there are other parallels between Clemson's football team and Westminster. The tradition that includes Howard's Rock was labeled the most exciting 25 seconds in college football by former announcer Brent Musberger. For me passing the peace each week is the most exciting 25 seconds at Westminster!

I see some similarities between Clemson's coach Dabo Swinney and Greg. From the beginning when he took over as head coach 9 years ago, Dabo has worked to build a family atmosphere for the football program. He focuses on developing his players to be change agents, urging them to use the special skills and the platform they have as athletes to help others. One of his former players, Deshaun Watson is quarterback for the Houston Texans. Deshaun grew up in poverty and benefited from the help of others when his family received a home via Habitat for Humanity. Recently, Deshaun donated his first paycheck in the NFL to 3 stadium workers in Houston who had lost everything in the floods. I believe Greg and our staff have helped build a wonderful church family at Westminster and are urging us to be change agents as well, whether it's teaching church school, mentoring inner city youth, or building our personal relationship with the Lord by giving to our annual Stewardship Campaign.

In closing, I'll leave you with one more thought. One of coach Swinney's key phrases is being "All In". He wants everyone on the team to be fully immersed in the goals of the team, supporting each other and loving each other. My wife Melissa and I were married here, had our two children, Rick and Lauren, baptized and confirmed here, and we've been involved in numerous positions and activities here over more than 30 years. We're "All In" for Westminster and I'd invite you to be also!

~ Carrie Saathoff Testimony ~

"The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." John Chapter 3 verse 8. This is a passage that Greg highlighted in a recent sermon this summer, and it really spoke to me.

In the eight years that I have been a member here at Westminster, I have felt this wind of the Holy Spirit on many occasions. My husband Shawn and I revel as we watch the Holy Spirit swirl around our children, Baden and Evelyn, when they play their cellos in the Christmas Eve service and participate in the musicals. When we pack the Christmas Boxes and fill the Backpacks. When the kids look forward to coming back to church on Sunday nights for the 180° youth program – where they have fellowship with their friends and play manhunt in every square inch of this magnificent building.

I felt the Holy Spirit at work when I agreed to serve on the search committee to find a new Associate Pastor. It was a long two years, and had its ups and downs for sure – but it was an extremely rewarding experience that taught me so much about Westminster, strengthened my church friendships and, of course, brought us Sudie!

Then, on what I was expecting to be just an ordinary Sunday morning, this wind of the Holy Spirit showed up again ... *the wind blows wherever it pleases.*

That morning, it blew behind my back, pushing me down the hallway after church, and into Community Hall, somehow urging me over to a table where this woman I had never met before was selling water filters for Guatemala. Before I knew what had come over me, I had written a check for \$100 to buy a filter and committed to going on the next trip. (That woman of course, was Cathy Higgins.) Even though this all felt totally right, I must admit, I did lay awake in bed the night before leaving for Guatemala that first time thinking "What on earth

am I doing? I have two young children at home – is this really necessary?” Obviously, the Holy Spirit seemed to think so.

Fast forward a few years and this “light breeze” of the Holy Spirit has somehow turned into more of a tornado – sucking me into a Guatemalan vortex of projects, PowerPoint presentations, fundraising initiatives, wonderful friendships, and, of course, more trips.

Last year, the Holy Spirit showed up with hurricane force winds – as Cathy and I non-chalantly said to each other “Hey, let’s take the high schoolers to Guatemala!” Again, I found myself laying in bed the night before our departure thinking “What on earth are we doing?” But by this time, even though I was still a little apprehensive, I had begun to learn to have faith in this Holy Spirit. To go with the flow and trust the process – because it all seems to work out just fine. And boy did it – that youth trip was beyond what any of us could have ever imagined.

Now, I understand that the Holy Spirit works in all of our lives, at different times and in different places. It does not always happen right here at church. However, I am convinced that this wind does blow a bit stronger within these walls and within this church family. And being part of such a strong church community gives us the insight to notice the breeze, the courage to respond to it, the tools to work with it, and the support of other people to just go with it....I hope you have felt a wind in this placeI know I have.

~ Concluding Remarks by Sudie Niesen Thompson ~

As the testimonies of Janet and Craig and Carrie demonstrate, many of us have found blessing in this place. This community centers us and nurtures us and shapes us as disciples. It challenges us to live out the teachings of Christ in our daily lives, and encourages us to respond to the mysterious stirrings of the Spirit.

Some of us call Westminster home because the fellowship sustains us, and the community lifts us up when the burdens of life become too much to bear. Some of us return week after week because this sanctuary is the place we find comfort and peace in the midst of a stressful, even chaotic world. Perhaps this place has formed and transformed you, and you trust it will do the same for your children. Or it has inspired you to take risks for the sake of the Gospel, and led you to deeper expressions of faith. Perhaps Westminster means so much to you because you have experienced the fullness of God’s love and grace, made known right here in this — the body of Christ.

We have found blessing in this place. And, now, we are called to share this blessing with others ... to participate in God’s vision of well-being for all creation.

This is what it means to be heirs of the promise. Like Abram and Sarai before us, we respond to God’s call with faith, with hope, and with gratitude. We respond by giving generously of our time, our talent, and our treasure, so that this community of faith may continue to be a blessing to others ... a gentle and constant tide of God’s love rippling out from this corner through our neighborhood, our city, and reaching far into God’s world.

God calls each of us, just as God called our ancestors of the faith: “Go,” says the Lord, “and I will bless you ... so that you will be a blessing.”

I ask you, how will you bear God’s blessing to the world?