



“Spawning a Generous Spirit”
Scripture – 2 Corinthians 8:1-7, 9:6-8
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones and three members:
Charles Babcock, Sandy King and Brock Jobe
Sunday, October 27, 2019

When did the Christian Church conduct its first stewardship campaign? Eavesdropping on the Corinthian congregation’s discussion of a letter from the Apostle Paul, we discover that nearly 2,000 years ago Paul was leading a fundraising effort to support Christians in Jerusalem who were living in poverty.

How ironic it was for Paul to seek funds on behalf of the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem because it was the Jerusalem church that had given Paul so much grief when he insisted that the church swing wide its doors to Gentiles.

Yet, while Paul was traversing Asia Minor spreading the gospel to non-Jews, a crisis struck Jerusalem. Many suffered extreme economic hardship and were living on the edge. Rather than saying, “It serves you right for treating me so rudely,” Paul launched a special offering among Gentile Christians to help the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul’s strategy was to appeal to their pride. He told them he was flabbergasted by the generosity of the Christians to the north in Macedonia. Despite the fact that the Macedonians were also undergoing grueling times with limited resources, they had begged Paul to allow them to contribute. Amazed that they would plead for the privilege of giving, Paul was set back on his heels when the Macedonians handed over their offering. They not only gave, they gave far more than anyone could have expected. In doing so, they experienced the joy that comes from giving sacrificially.

It is not unlike the joy that parents feel when they sacrifice for their children. A single mom takes on a second job and denies things for herself, so that she can send her daughter to college. It is impossible to calculate that mother’s joy when her daughter walks across the stage and is awarded her diploma.

Returning to today’s reading, Paul has more to say to the Corinthians, and again he appeals to their pride. He says, “You excel in so much – you have a strong faith, you are knowledgeable and you are articulate. And because I care about you, I want you to also excel in something else – giving generously.”

Big-hearted giving not only makes us feel good, and not only makes a positive impact on the lives of others, but it also benefits our character.

Remember, our character is malleable. The habits we develop either further engrain our attributes or change them. We can become more detached or kinder. We can become more cynical or more hopeful. We can become more selfish or more generous.

Giving generously not only supports people beyond our walls who need our help; and not only enriches our own church family making possible worship, education and mission; giving generously also deepens our character so that we can continue to grow toward the person God wants us to become.

Testimony of Charles Babcock

Imagine a dinnertime conversation. "Hey, that pavement crack out on the street is getting bigger!" "Well, let's call the Township, or the County -- whoever does that." "Sure....let the government do it!"

Now let's go to a different place, in a different century. It's the late 1780s. We're in a room, on the second floor of a 24-year-old mansion called Montpelier, in rural Virginia. Instead of being at an altitude of about 100 feet, as we are now, we find ourselves at about 500 feet, in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. We're in the study of James Madison, then in his late thirties. Looking out the window, as Madison did, we see a vast plain, and behind it a forest extending as far as the eye can see: a most contemplative environment. On the bookshelves, we see an impressive collection -- Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Marcus Aurelius, Locke, Montesquieu, many others.

In that room, thinking about religion, Madison decided to propose to the new Congress that, amidst a world of state-supported religions, the new United States of America should create a revolution. He did it in sixteen words:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.

Sixteen words. Legal scholars call the first 10 words the establishment clause, and the final 6 words the free exercise clause -- part of what became the First Amendment, the law since 1791. State-supported religions were indeed the norm and had existed for centuries. Christianity was the government-mandated state religion as early as the late Roman empire, under the emperor Marcus Aurelius. More than twelve hundred years later, in 1534, King Henry VIII declared *himself* Supreme Head of the Anglican Church of England and *it* the government-supported state religion. Even in music, the great organist and choirmaster Johann Sebastian Bach, for most of his adult life, worked for the government, in several state-supported Lutheran churches, including Weimar and later Leipzig.

Well, so what? There are no government-supported state religions today, are there? There are.

Buddhism is the government-supported state religion in six nations today, from Bhutan to Thailand. Roman Catholicism is the official state religion in five nations, from Costa Rica through Vatican City, itself an independent nation. Anglicanism remains the state religion of England. Lutheranism is the government-supported religion in Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. Hinduism is the state-supported religion of Nepal. Islam is the official state-supported religion in no fewer than 26 middle Eastern countries, from Afghanistan to Yemen. Typical is Article 2 of the Constitution of Egypt: "Islam is the religion of the State." The Israeli government today financially supports several Orthodox Jewish parties.

So here at Westminster, let's just say, "Let the government do it!" Sorry. Not here. Not in America. Not in 1791, and not 228 years later. We're free to worship God, but we can't look to the government for financial support. So why do we gladly contribute to Westminster, this wonderful Presbyterian church? Because if *we* don't....who will?

Testimony of Sandy King

9/11....1982. The happiest day of my life, as I walked down this aisle to marry my best friend! No one referred to it as 9/11 back then. It was simply September 11th -- a perfect end-of-summer day for a wedding. Nineteen years later, as our country faced the inexplicable terror of the World Trade Center attacks, we were again in the

sanctuary at Westminster, weeping, singing, praying for our country, and our colleagues, acquaintances and strangers who lost their lives on that day of horror.

Westminster, and the people who call it their church home, are there for me at the best of times, and at the worst of times. When Fletcher and I were married by Fred Mathias, you were there to help me get ready in the Ruth Christie Room. When our daughters were baptized by Jon Walton, you were there to congratulate and calm anxious parents! Members of the choir, when Hillary and I joined you seven years ago, you welcomed us with open arms and made us part of the Paul Fleckenstein Fan Club. When I came to this congregation five years ago with an idea for the Helping Hands glove and mitten project to aid the homeless, you cheered me on...and rose to the challenge, collecting close to 1000 pairs of gloves this past January alone! You have encouraged, bolstered, trusted and loved Fletcher, Hillary, Whitney and me, and I couldn't be more grateful.

Conversely, when times have been tough, you have been there as well. When Fred and Cleta Mathias lost their lives in an unthinkable crime, we gathered here in this sanctuary with their family to mourn. When my family members were diagnosed with cancer and going through treatment, you gave me (and them) hugs and words of encouragement. When my brother went through a very difficult time last year, you helped me be the best caregiver I could be. You surrounded me with positive reinforcement, and Jill and Greg...you kindly went to visit him during his time in the hospital and nursing home. During these times you, Westminster, fed me, you nurtured me, you wept with me. You remembered me in your thoughts and your prayers. How lucky am I?

This church has been the location of so many special events in my life, and the lives of my family members: it is the place where my parents were married, where I was baptized, where my grandmother was memorialized, where Fletcher and I were married, where our daughters were baptized, and where our older daughter will be married next September.

But...as you all know...Westminster is not just a place. It is a community of loving souls.

Testimony of Brock Jobe

I have a confession. I am a huge fan of the TV show *Call the Midwife*. Just curious. How many of you have watched the show? For those of you who haven't seen it, here's a quick summary. *Call the Midwife* follows the lives of a handful of nurses assigned to an Anglican convent in a poor section of East London during the late 1950s. We watch these women grapple with problems of every sort. Yes, they deliver babies—and there is nothing more joyful than that. But most importantly, they bring hope and love to struggling families.

A particular passage in a Christmas episode a few years back has stuck with me. Near the end of the show, after children dressed as angels have flapped their wings at the end of a holiday pageant, the narrator offers these words:

“There are always angels everywhere. Perhaps we only think to look for them at Christmas, when their wings can be seen, when their halos glow with light, but they are always there ... there in the quiet corners, there in the shadows, there in their ordinary clothes, and they are beautiful. Make room for the angels, for they will catch you unawares, and fill your heart in ways you never could imagine.”

As I think about Westminster and why I pledge, those words from *Call the Midwife* resonate, for we too have angels everywhere. They are among us, their hearts are filled with love, commitment, and service. They fill this sanctuary, and I am awed by their devotion and faith.

As most of you know, my wife Barbara has dedicated many years to this church. I, on the other hand, am a late bloomer. After I retired from Winterthur, Denison Hatch asked me to join the Property Committee. About the same time, Barbara and I helped to raise money for the Capital Campaign. These duties opened my eyes to all

that Westminster does: Family Promise, Urban Promise, Camp Promise, AA, NA, Friendship House, Sojourner's Place, Emmanuel Dining Room, Eastside Charter School, Hanover Food Closet, Stephen Ministry—the list goes on and on. Our facilities are a beacon, a brilliant light of welcome for so many groups that seek to serve others. Likewise, our dynamic staff offers us meaningful messages every week. We benefit from spiritual guidance that both steadies and uplifts our lives. And our youth have access to Christian experiences that they will never forget.

Our devotion to do what is right, to do what is good, carries with it an obligation. We must raise the funds to sustain our work. Our potential as a congregation is limited only by our resources—by our time, talent, and treasure. At Westminster many give in all three areas. But don't be like me and wait twenty years before playing an active role. Pledge today, volunteer today, and commit yourself to help others.

Many Sundays I serve as a greeter, standing outside the 13th Street door. I LOVE the assignment! Everyone enters this sacred space with a smile on their face. They look as though they're coming home. And then I realize that they are—they are coming home and I'm welcoming angels—there they are, “there in the quiet corners, there in the shadows, there in their ordinary clothes, and they are beautiful. Make room for the angels, for they will catch you unawares, and fill your heart in ways you never could imagine.”

Concluding remarks by Gregory Knox Jones

Thanksgiving is a month away, and that means that very soon the phone lines will start lighting up at the Butterball Turkey Talk-Line! For more than 30 years, experts have been answering the predictable and the peculiar questions posed by more than 100,000 callers. The typical questions include “How many pounds of turkey should I buy? How long should I thaw my turkey? How do I know when it's done?” The experts respond with tried and true answers to insure that your holiday meal will be a glorious success.

But, putting aside the sound advice, the experts must also grapple with the zany questions that come their way. For instance, there was the trucker who phoned to find out if he could cook his turkey on the engine of his truck on his long drive home. He was curious about how fast he would have to go to get the engine hot enough. Then, there was the distressed caller who was asking for help in rescuing her tiny dog. This miniature canine had climbed into the cavity of the turkey and could not get out. She had tried shaking the turkey vigorously, but the dog wouldn't pop out! However, my favorite is the one when a woman called the talk-line and said she had a turkey that had been in her freezer for 20 years and wanted to know if it was still safe to eat. The expert answering the call said that if the freezer had been kept at zero degrees and had never defrosted, it would be safe to eat. But, she added that the bird would not be very tasty and she suggested she not eat it. The caller replied, “That's what I thought. I'll give it to the church.”¹

Sadly, that's how some people think of their gifts to the church. “We will give the church our excess, our leftovers, whatever is remaining at the end of the month.” But God is not asking for our leftovers and that approach will never develop a generous spirit. Rather, God wants us to be inspired by the example of those Christians in Macedonia who had so little, yet gave so much. They did not give what they calculated they could afford, but gave what would bring them joy, and would spawn a generous spirit.

May we be bold enough to follow their lead.

NOTE

1. Agnes W. Norfleet, “Where We Are Sure to See God,” November 23, 2014.