



“Sow Bountifully – Reap Bountifully”
Scripture – 2 Corinthians 8:1-11 and 9:6-8
Sunday, October 27, 2024

Introduction by Gregory Knox Jones

A colleague shares a newspaper article from a few years ago that focused on entrepreneurs and their secrets to success. It featured a variety of people from a mix of businesses. Here are some of their nuggets of advice: be passionate about your goals, build a wide network, learn from your mistakes, ask for advice from smart people. However, the one that caught the eyes of many came from a ten-year-old girl. She was the number one seller of Girl Scout cookies in the entire country. She sold thousands of boxes of cookies. When asked about her secret for success, she said, “I look them right in the eye and make them feel guilty!”¹

In today’s reading from 2nd Corinthians, the Apostle Paul is not looking the Corinthian Christians in the eye because he is hundreds of miles away. Therefore, he writes a letter that is intended to *inspire* while also making them feel a bit *guilty*.

He was writing sometime around the year 55. The church in Jerusalem was suffering a one/two punch of persecution and famine. Paul began to encourage other churches to collect an offering and send it to the beleaguered Christians in Jerusalem.

It was ironic that Paul would become the leader of a fundraising effort to support the Christians in Jerusalem. They had given Paul a heavy dose of grief for insisting that the way of Jesus be opened to Gentiles without requiring them to follow certain Jewish practices.

However, Paul seemed to set aside his personal feelings. Despite being persona non grata, he dedicated himself to raising funds to relieve their suffering.

In his appeal to the Christians in Corinth, Paul pointed to Christians in Macedonia who had stunned him with their generosity. The Macedonians were undergoing grueling times themselves. Resources were limited and many were struggling to make ends meet. Paul was aware of that, so he did not ask them to contribute to the offering. However, the Macedonians pleaded with Paul to allow them the privilege of helping the Christians in Jerusalem. It surely rocked Paul back on his heels when the Macedonians

handed over their offering. Paul reported that they not only gave, but they gave more than anyone could have expected. In doing so, they experienced that unique joy that comes from giving sacrificially.

It's like the joy 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 the depth of joy in the mother's heart when her daughter confidently strides across the stage and is awarded her diploma.

Returning to our passage, Paul says to the Corinthians, "As you excel in everything – in faith, in speech, in knowledge, and in utmost eagerness – so I want you to excel also in this: giving generously."

At Westminster, we are in the midst of our own season of stewardship, when all of us are called upon to give generously so that we can continue to be a robust community of faith that provides spiritual nurture for our members and touches the lives of people beyond our walls.

What does Westminster mean to you? Is our church family worthy of your support? Three of our members will share their thoughts.

Testimony of Daniel Malzhan

Good morning, Westminster!

As the dread of COVID thankfully showed signs of abating in the first four months of 2022, I set out to conduct my search for a new faith home after having departed my non-denominational church of 13 years. From the seven churches which made my initial "hit list," my due diligence effort eventually brought me to a destination where Sunday worship could begin anew. The audition process was interesting, but the competition for the best choice was truly never in doubt. Today, we've gathered in that very place of worship! Westminster, as I have come to find out in the past 2 ½ years, truly is a beloved and dynamic community. I officially became a Presbyterian last year, and I've become busily engaged in several serving opportunities and church causes. In doing so, I have marveled at the enlightening adult ed choices, the inspired music, the variety of compassionate ministries which we support, the theology and the many, right-on time and relatable sermons so wonderfully delivered by Greg, his team and guests pastors as well. And as you all know, there is so much more to the complete Westminster experience, for this is truly a place that knows how to church! I am so grateful to belong & so grateful that I am home!

In this season, we're again enjoying the many options which our church calendar offers. One of those choices relates to pledging our financial allegiance. As we are asked to commit, we're reminded of the shared responsibilities and costs associated with our mission and our programming. As we consider that opportunity, I'd like to suggest that we expand the definition of "pledge" as being not one of only financial commitment. May we see our 'pledge' as a recommitment to our faith and to our trust in the Divine. May we see it also as a reminder to consider how much our engagement is needed and beneficial to those service zones which we are called to. While we look at serving within the framework of the Three T's – Time, Talent and Treasure, may we re-examine what we might each do within those areas. May we recognize that we are not spectators on our faith journey, but that we are called to get out of the bleachers onto the playing field of faith and life. May we pledge our resolve to live with focused intention and with purpose remembering that we truly are the hands and feet of Jesus.

Finally, I want to endorse the Vision 2030 project. There is momentum, yet there is much to do as we stay mindful of this key initiative. We're seeing a spiritual emergence and awakening taking shape in the world even as we know we are not immune from cultural and secular challenges. Each of us can leverage our faith by becoming ambassadors for this project and for the goal of growing church vitality at Westminster. I encourage you to join the movement. I encourage you to pray that the Spirit will draw us closer as we lean into transformative change. We are strong together but stronger by being deeply rooted in Christ. Through faith and discernment, may we discover new ways of fostering more vibrant experiences for us, for the next generation and for those who have yet to discover that Westminster will be their new church home too. Amen!

Testimony of Karen Asenavage Loptes

I have had a mosaic of religious and church experiences throughout my life...I was raised Catholic where the church was a few blocks away and I thought God lived in the overhang over the altar. Imagine my surprise when I was old enough to go to the balcony!

I came to know Jesus through Young Life. Knowing Jesus as my personal savior was the bedrock of belief upon which I stood as my mother dabbled in white witchcraft and met Jesus herself. Our family began a whirlwind of Catholicism, the Catholic Charismatic movement, living in the Jesus House, a community right off Kirkwood Highway. In college I learned and embraced Anabaptist beliefs at Christian colleges and moved to the Midwest to be part of a faith-based cult and then Vineyard churches. In the Middle East, we attended evangelical churches, a multicultural church, the Anglican church, a Catholic church, prayer groups, and a Filipino church. Back in the US we attended Calvary Chapel in Philadelphia another Vineyard in Connecticut and finally an inner-city Wilmington church plant where we were not the target population...they liked our cookies for special events but couldn't seem remember our names. We were looking. Until one night Arun came home and said he thought his YMCA spinning teacher Mark Shifflet...some of you may know him...was a Believer. Indeed, Mark was and he introduced us to Westminster, that big gray church on the corner that we probably would never have visited if someone hadn't invite us in.

I tell you all of that, so you understand how unusual it is that we belong to and call home a Presbyterian church, Westminster Presbyterian Church. And now I will tell you why...

I love that you welcomed us just for who we are not because of where we came from, whether we were the target population or made good food. But you did more...I love that you gave us mentors, Polly and Jim Carter, who came alongside us and checked in on us regularly. Besides Mark and Lori, they were a big part of why we stuck. Very quickly we met Cathy and Carrie and bonded over a Guatemala experience. I love that you helped us find a fit and a place to belong...Church in the World...We became members, Arun missed the whatever meeting it was to be *memberized* because he had a marathon race...really, but Greg understood, and held another meeting so he could become a member. I love that you were patient and kind. Arun applied for citizenship. It was a bit complicated, Greg and Camilla supported him and came to his very long citizenship event. I love that you stood by us...We are a multiethnic couple. I love that you never made us feel different. Arun was invited to be a deacon. I love that you trusted him.

I love that there are struggles in the church and that they don't irreparably divide. You wade in and discuss and figure it out in committees and Adult Education classes. I love that there is structure and you have strong leadership from Greg and his team, I love that I hear the word of God thoughtfully expounded but also that you have strong active volunteers. I love that, for us, like the Catholic churches we grew up in, WPC is local church...we live in the city and can walk here. I love that you are involved in the local community and the world. I love that when I needed some support, you provided it. And music...I love that you have music that is so beautiful it can make me cry. I am more of a worship team kind of girl, but when the music Tony and the choir produce resonates off these stone walls...My heart rejoices...

Throughout my life, somehow, I have been involved with the LGBTQ+ community in Christian colleges in the US, in the Middle East, and with our nieces and nephews and "adopted" children. I love that I can bring my whole self, my whole family, all that I believe and where everyone in my world would be loved and accepted.

We have been at WPC longer than any church we have ever attended. I love that you accepted, supported, and involved Arun and me with all our differences, varied and extreme church backgrounds, and that we can come, feel loved, feel like we belong, and that we can invite and bring absolutely anyone we know and love to Westminster. I love that they can be assured they will experience the same. This is why I love, that is why we love, all of you and Westminster Presbyterian church.

Testimony of John Gavenonis

In the Gospel According to Mark, Chapter 10, verses 13-16, the author writes: "People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.'"

One of my favorite parts of Westminster Presbyterian Church is our focus on children. We see this in many ways through our services, Christian education, and mission – from Time with the Children during service and our Sunday School classes and 180 Youth, to Vacation Bible School and special events like last week's Fall Festival, and, most importantly, those activities that help disadvantaged children in Wilmington and beyond, such as when we collect school supplies for backpacks, warm clothing in the winter, and especially when we gather Christmas gifts for children who otherwise might not receive them. These are among the many ways that we follow Jesus's direction to bring children to Him.

I'm sure there are many here this morning who will recognize the famous lyrics from Joni Mitchell's song Big Yellow Taxi, "Don't it always seem to go; That you don't know what you've got; Till it's gone." That's how I felt in March 2020. From my upbringing in the "merged-for-mission," Presbyterian-Methodist, Church of Christ Uniting outside Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania to my own children, John and James, here at Westminster, church and Sunday School were just a part of my life, of our lives. I didn't spend much time thinking about it. It just was. It was that constant. And that came to an abrupt end during the pandemic. And that's when I realized how much we lost.

The learning gap that students experienced during the pandemic is real. And it's real for Sunday School too. My boys, John and James, missed those important, formative, elementary age Sunday School years where students learn the great Bible stories and first learn about God's love. I can still remember my own

Sunday School days when my teacher, Joyce Shiplett, shared those important lessons with me. Needless to say, it's been a great joy for me in the past couple years as Sunday School has returned with energy.

For my family, each week Westminster provides an opportunity to step away from our day-to-day and focus on what really matters. An important part of that is our children's Christian education. Sunday School fills such an important role. From teaching Bible stories to our Christian values, it's a critical part of raising children to be good, caring, and loving people. That's one of the reasons why Sara and I love Westminster Presbyterian Church. That's one of the reasons why Sara and I support Westminster Presbyterian Church. And, I hope you'll join Sara and me in making a pledge for 2025 so that Westminster can continue its mission, God's mission, to bring children to God.

Conclusion by Gregory Knox Jones

Many of us have been a part of Westminster for so long that we forget how unique our community of faith is. We are an open and inclusive church that welcomes people regardless of race, religious background, sexual orientation, political viewpoint, or economic situation. We put a significant amount of time and energy into providing high quality worship through word and music that boosts the spiritual life of all who participate. We have numerous ways for members to boost their spiritual lives through classes and special programs. We provide exceptional opportunities for people to live their faith through numerous outreach ministries. We feed hungry men, women and children, we support housing for people who have no place to live, we provide supplies to schools that work with at-risk children, we give away beds, tables and chairs for people lacking the funds to furnish their home, we provide meeting space for people struggling with addiction, we nurture young people in the faith through classes, choirs, Vacation Bible School, youth group, and hands-on mission work that teaches them what it really means to fulfill Jesus' command to care for the least of these. We provide Stephen Ministers to people who are trekking a difficult stretch of life, we support transitional homes for men who are trying to pull their lives back together, we give scholarships so that low-income youths can fulfill their dream of a college education, we provide mission trips to Guatemala, we support families in war-torn Middle East countries with farm equipment, medical supplies, and clean water, we take concrete steps to care for God's creation, we strive to dismantle systemic racism, we work for peace and justice in our world, and so much more.

We actively share God's love with others and we change people's lives thanks to the financial support of our members. But make no mistake. Without our combined gifts, it all disappears like fine mist.

When the Apostle Paul wrote the Christians in Corinth, he encouraged, he inspired, and he prodded them with a touch of guilt. Then he stated a fundamental truth he hoped they would grasp. He said, "The one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, but the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully."

The Christians in Macedonia had little, yet they gave much. They did not give what they calculated was prudent, but contributed what would bring them joy and would create within them a generous spirit. May we be so bold as to follow their lead.

NOTES

1. Agnes W. Norfleet, "For Love," October 13, 2024.

Prayers of the People ~ Randall T. Clayton

Generous God, by your grace we are forgiven, enlivened, and find a pathway to real and lasting life. By your grace, you established your church, and through it offer hope and peace to a hurting world. As your grateful people, we ask that you might show us how to respond more fully, that you might move us to a more faithful use of our resources, and that we might continue to be a beacon of your love here in the city of Wilmington, throughout the state and across the world.

Gathered here by you this day, we pray for those among us and around us who are hurting physically, or emotionally or spiritually. Give them peace. We pray for those who are grieving—comfort them. We pray for all who feel lost, for those unsure of what to do next, for people facing tough decisions – show them a direction.

Over the next few days as our national elections draw closer, and many feel especially anxious about the outcome, give us an abiding hope, help us not to demonize those who have different opinions, and give us peace not conflict, unity and not division.

In the Middle East, in Ukraine, and in all the places where bombs reign and guns erupt, we pray for peace. Oh, God, how we pray for peace! As people in parts of North Carolina, Tennessee, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida continue to put lives and homes back together after hurricane and flood, we pray. For the amazing progress that has been made in rebuilding infrastructure in those places, in mending roofs, in restoring power, we give you thanks and praise, grateful for the gifts of government, nonprofits, and individuals who have helped many put their lives back together again.

We lift up to you those who travel in your name, asking for your traveling mercies as Carrie travels to Guatemala. We pray for the work of our mission partners there. We lift up to you as well, our mission partners in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and in the Middle East. We pray that through the work of these various ministries, health and hope, peace and joy, dignity and security for those people may grow. Likewise, we pray for our local mission partners as well. As they seek to provide food and housing, opportunities and possibilities, we ask that their work might be fruitful and life giving.

In a world which is so different than it was even a few years ago, we pray for this church we love. Show us anew how we might be a witness to your grace in a world in which fewer and fewer people find connections to local congregations. Show us how we might authentically be signs of your grace in this new day.

We ask this, remembering the prayer which Jesus taught saying, **“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.**