

## A STEWARDSHIP BENEDICTION

*A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost, October 24, 2021, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

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### **Hebrews 13:20-21**

*Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

### **II Timothy 1:3-7**

*I am grateful to God—whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did—when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy. I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you. For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.*

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**Prayer:** *Breathe on me, Breath of God, fill me with life anew, that I may love what Thou dost love, and do what Thou wouldst do. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.*

### I.

A few weeks ago, Brian Jones, our Stewardship Chair, wrote Jessica Thurnes, a member of our office staff, to get some statistics on how many people are joining our worship service through our livestreaming technology.

Jessica wrote back with the numbers:

*“Since March of 2020, our services have been watched in 49 states and 22 countries. An average of 125 households have tuned in each week.”*

Jessica then added:

*“Know anyone in Nevada who wants to give us a try?”*

My mind immediately started racing:

- What could we do to get one of our members to go to Nevada and tune into our worship service so we would have reached all fifty states?
- Could we offer an all-expense paid trip to the first person to turn their pledge card in this year?
- To the person who increased their pledge the most.
- To the first new member to make a pledge.

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I knew my ideas were in jest, mainly because of what Presbyterians believe about *giving* to the church, about that which goes under the rubric *stewardship*.

- We don't resort to gimmicks.
- We don't do fund raising events.
- We don't do "galas" or "fairs" or "bazaars," though we allow youth groups to do so in order that they may have a way of supporting their mission trips.

All these methods of fund raising we leave for more secular organizations. As individual members of a Presbyterian Church, we focus on giving a significant *portion* of our income to support the life of the church as both an act of *spiritual commitment* and an act of *gratitude* to God.

You will soon be receiving pledge packets through the postal service; and weekly communications via email will also begin. We ask you to pledge for 2022 by November 14, or pledge earlier online if you like. We will say "thank you" for your gift, but we won't be offering a free trip to Vegas.

## II.

I am now in my eighteenth year at Westminster, and I want to say – again – how grateful I am to you as individuals and as a congregation for many things, among them, the quality of our stewardship. Many of us – myself included – *tithe* or *exceed a tithe* of ten percent of our income. I know because you have told me you do.

- Many of us give 4%, 6%, 8%.
- Many have disciplined ourselves to raise our giving not just, say 1% a year, but to raise our giving by *1% of our income* each year until we reach a tithe.
- And many of us give because we see the work of our church for nearly all ages -- through Christian Formation and worship and music and congregational life and pastoral care – and through our mission work in Northern Virginia, Appalachia, North Dakota and the Rift Valley of Kenya.
- Many of us continue to give – or have increased our giving – because we see the way we have adjusted to COVID – through livestreaming our services, through contacting of our members and households, through providing adult, children, and youth events online and outdoors.
- Many of us give because when we ran a surplus at the end of 2020, we distributed \$82,000 in extra COVID relief to help people in Alexandria avoid eviction, to help people in Arlington with rental assistance, to help students on the Spirit Lake Reservation in North Dakota with food, utilities, and medical assistance, and to provide two of our gleanng partners in Virginia with funds for the food insecure. One of these agencies will be providing our Minute for Mission at 11:00 a.m. today.
- Many of us give because we trust the care with which WPC leaders invest and manage the church's resources, to the point that this year we are replacing our boilers and roof for a combined total of over \$500,000, paying from a capital reserve fund we have developed over the past decade.
- And even as we have supported the work of the church – in its changed and changing form – over three hundred of us have contributed over \$300,000 to a "special needs trust" set up for Reverend Whitney Fauntleroy, our Associate Pastor for Youth and Young Adults who went on disability this time last year.

When the unknown writer of the Letter to the Hebrews closes his epistle, he blesses his readers with a benediction:

*Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

Along these lines, I want to bless you with a stewardship benediction: May the God of peace continue to make you complete in everything good so that we may do God's will. I believe God is "working among us that which is pleasing in [God's] sight." I believe that in the odd and sad dislocation we have all experienced, and that through the tragedy we have known in our time and in our lives, God is still working among us, "through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever." It is a privilege to lead a congregation with this attitude and commitment and level of action. This stewardship blessing is in order.

### III.

Notice the verb construction this blessing contains: "*May the God of peace...make you complete.*" This is "subjunctive mood," a mood that expresses a wish or a hope, even a prayer. The prayer in this blessing is for the *ongoing activity* of God. "May the God of peace...make you complete."

While no church or individual Christian is ever "complete" in this life, we have had a unique form of *incompleteness* since March of 2020.

- We still rarely see our faces, so we guess at laughter or tears, and make the best to read one another's eyes.
- We still guard our physical touch with others, often limiting ourselves to touching elbows or bumping fists rather than shaking hands or extending hugs.
- The peace we pass among ourselves is verbal rather than tactile.

In 2018, my mother-in-law passed away at age 98. Her major health issues were diminished mobility and the assorted aches and pains that come with 98 years of life on the same frame. But the older she got, she more she missed human touch. She would sometimes say: "Whenever I go to the doctor, they hardly examine me anymore. They just ask questions. They never touch me."

No matter our age or stage of life, we all yearn for touch – physical touch, healthy touch, warm and affirming touch, consoling touch. We are an embodied people. We have an embodied faith. We worship a God who is called Emmanuel, "God with us." When God was "incarnate," in the flesh, as Jesus Christ he touched lepers, put his fingers over their eyes the blind to restore their sight, shared food and wine with his disciples and allowed one disciple to place his head at his breast. Jesus Christ was God incarnate, God "in the flesh." Ours is an embodied faith. A faith of touch. The waters of baptism. The bread and wine of communion.

We are slowly returning to the embodied presence of others. Someone at the early service last week told me it was good to see me "in three dimensions instead of just two." News on the numbers goes up and down, but words from the vaccine fronts is once again encouraging, especially for children.

- I am hopeful by Christmas that we have enough children vaccinated that most parents can attend in person and welcome the Christ who is "God with us."

- I am hopeful that by Easter we will once again fill this Sanctuary with people celebrating the resurrection of the *body*.
- I am hopeful that as we get healthier and stronger in this country, we will share more vaccines with nations of the world where the vaccine rates remain miniscule.

#### IV.

Our Christian Formation committee chose a theme verse for this year....anticipating that this would be a year of *rekindling* of life in all its constricted areas, but also a year of *rekindling* of personal faith and of *rekindling* the life of the church.

“Rekindle the gift of God that is within you,” Paul wrote Timothy from prison. “Rekindle.” That is what we all are so determinedly seeking to do this year:

- Rekindle learning
- Rekindle service
- Rekindle singing
- Rekindle communion
- Rekindle the arts
- Rekindle family
- Rekindle work
- Rekindle our life at church
- Rekindle greeting
- Rekindle children’s sermons.

“Rekindle the gift of God that is within you,” Paul writes.

But then notice what Paul adds: “*through the laying on of...hands.*”

- The firmness of a handshake
- The warmth of a hand to the shoulder
- The comfort of a hug.

“Rekindle the gift of God that is within you *through the laying on of ...hands.*”

Ours is an incarnate faith in an incarnate God. As we give the *concrete expression* of our faith through a *financial pledge*, I urge you also to *rekindle* the gift of God that is within you through finding way for *the laying on of hands*. Through touch. Through presence. Through being physically *with* one another, with those you love.

- “*Born of the Virgin Mary*”
- “*Suffered under Pontius Pilate*”
- “*The resurrection of the body.*”

*Rekindle* the gift of God that is within you through the *laying on of hands*.

Amen.