

WPC AND COMMITMENT

II Corinthians 9:1-15

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost, October 30, 2022, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

SCRIPTURE

II Corinthians 9:1-15

9 Now it is not necessary for me to write to you about the ministry to the saints, ²for I know your eagerness, which is the subject of my boasting about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia has been ready since last year; and your zeal has stirred up most of them. ³But I am sending the brothers in order that our boasting about you may not prove to have been empty in this case, so that you may be ready, as I said you would be; ⁴otherwise, if some Macedonians come with me and find that you are not ready, we would be humiliated—to say nothing of you—in this undertaking. ⁵So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you, and arrange in advance for this bountiful gift that you have promised, so that it may be ready as a voluntary gift and not as an extortion.

⁶The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.

⁹As it is written,

*‘He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor;
his righteousness endures for ever.’*

¹⁰He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; ¹²for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. ¹³Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, ¹⁴while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. ¹⁵Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

I told Ben in staff meeting that since we are celebrating Reformation Sunday today – and All Saints on our traditional Remembrance Sunday next week – he has given me the perfect lead-in to my final of three stewardship sermons this year.

The initial and most famous Protestant Reformer – Martin Luther – is often quoted as saying:

“There are three conversions necessary: the conversion of the heart, [the conversion of the] mind, and the [conversion of the] purse.”

Though it is now widely thought by scholars that Luther didn’t actually say these words,¹ the quote is nonetheless a great lead-in for a stewardship sermon in a Protestant Church. Sometimes our hearts can be

¹ See <https://liberlocorumcommunium.blogspot.com/2015/07/pseudo-luther-on-conversion-of-purse.html>.

“strangely warmed” (a phrase the Reformer from whom Methodism hails, John Wesley, did indeed say), our minds deeply engaged, and our hands unceasingly active, while, still, our purses remain “unconverted.”

One of the finest laypersons I have known in the church – in the first church I served, a man in his early forties filled a large classroom every Sunday morning with high school youth – drawing ninth through twelfth graders out of bed *at 9:30 a.m.!* – because he was a terrific Sunday School teacher, charismatic in the best sense of the word. But at stewardship time he told me: “I give my *time* to the church and *not* my money.” The purse not “converted,” the purse “sadly unwarmed.”

Thinking about the conversion of the purse led me to think of what other Protestant Reformers may have also said (or not said):

- For Quakers, the phrase might be: “the inner light of the purse”
- For many Baptists: “the purse ‘born again’”
- For Episcopalians: “the purse growing out of a compromise”
- For many African Americans: “the purse that’s got a witness”
- For Unitarians: “the free-thinking purse”
- And of course for Presbyterians: “the purse decent and in order”

Whether or not Luther said the phrase, it is a worthwhile phrase in the Christian lexicon, for the conversion of the purse simply must follow the conversion of the heart and mind for the commitment of Christian faith to approach fullness.

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Most in our congregation have come to know the conversion of the purse. You are the most generous and financially responsible people I have ever been around, and each of the three other congregations I have served *has been generous*. I know some of you well enough to know that what you give – either in high amounts or amounts that must represent a high percentage of your resources – continues to inspire me. At Westminster, I rarely hear people being tight for the sake of being tight, expressing distrust about the need for money to support all the church does, or being parsimonious when it comes to supporting this church. Leaders at Westminster church have historically committed energy and know-how to comprehensive planning of our annual church budgets, our reserve funds, our investments, the management and use of our endowment, and the appropriate but not lavish care of our facilities, about whose cleanliness and orderliness visitors and people from the community often remark. We near always operate under a balanced budget, and we do not engage in wishful thinking. We trust God with our church’s finances but we do not plan on God enacted miracles to rescue us at the end of a fiscal year. And in our congregation, so many of those who appear to have the highest incomes and so many who appear to have more typical incomes give and give and give, with what Paul calls “the cheerfulness” God loves.

When I speak about you as a congregation to other clergy around the country or the region, I know how Paul felt when he complimented the church at Corinth:

I know your eagerness [Paul writes], which is the subject of my boasting about you to the people of Macedonia...your zeal has stirred up most of them.

A week or so ago, a person in our congregation, who I think is on a fixed income, called me and said: “I have just come into some money...I want to give a portion to the church and invest the rest for my future. Can you give me the name of someone who can advise me? Can you tell me how I transfer some of it to the church?”

I know your eagerness, Westminster. I know your eagerness, which is the subject of my boasting about you.

II.

But if we are part of an eager congregation, how do we decide what to give?

The person who called me spoke of a tithe, and I think the caller knew that a “tithe” means “ten percent” of what the caller had received. While sometimes in church we speak of “tithes and offerings” as if they are interchangeable, the “tithe” comes out of Biblical days – beginning with the strange story of Melchizedek in Genesis² – and then mentioned at least over a hundred times throughout the Old and New Testaments, as people of faith brought the “first fruits” of their seasonal harvest as an offering to God – the first ten percent of the fruit of the land. A pure tithe is ten percent of our income, ten per cent off the top, the first fruits. It is a high standard to be sure, but as many have pointed out in stewardship sermons over the years, a standard that still leaves ninety percent for us to spend on the joys and responsibilities before us.

You have heard Madeline Ramsey say to Westminster groups to which she has been speaking, and you heard Alex Bryant say in a Minute for Stewardship two weeks ago that most people have to *build* to a tithe.

- Madeline said she and her late husband started at 3% of their income and increased the percentage every year or two until they reached 10%.
- Alex said he and Janie are still working on it – but he's a little younger than Madeline.
- The way I got to a tithe was like both of them: working on it, bit by bit, over time. I think I was 44 when I reached a tithe; and frankly, have never looked back.
- The percentage my wife Maggie and I give to Westminster is a bit above a tithe. We increased it to \$25,000 for 2023. We pledged online last night through the church's website. It was only two clicks to get to the simple pledge card and four or five lines to fill in or boxes to check after that.
- Even in years when our income goes down, as ours will in 2023 since she has retired from her pastoral position, the portion of our income remains the same while keeping us in the realm of our other responsibilities.
- It is all a part of tithing.

Paul tells the Corinthians:

⁷Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.

I didn't come to tithing “reluctantly or under compulsion.” Giving to the church is the most “cheerful giving” I do, no less so even now as it is an automatic withdrawal from my checking account. Throughout my life as a minister, I “always [have had] enough of everything,” which I assumed but wasn't certain was going to be the case when I entered the ministry. But like the Corinthians, I feel “enriched in every way,” and a big part of

² Genesis 14:17-24, referred to in Hebrews 7:1-10.

that is simply the blessing you have given me in calling me to serve you. One of the two or three greatest blessings of my life.

III.

Every stewardship campaign in the church tries to strike a balance between communicating the *church's needs* for financial support and the *members' need* to give a portion of our income to God: it is the church's need to *receive* and the member's need to *give*.

I hope we have struck that balance well this year:

- As you have doubtless heard, our Session has determined that we need to raise the compensation level of certain senior staff positions (the level below me) both to be fair and to move into the post-COVID world with the leaders we have, most of whom are relatively new to Westminster. The church needs a well-compensated and strong staff to lead us into the future and to keep our programs and our considerable mission work strong in Kenya, in North Dakota and Appalachia, and in our immediate urban area. *Westminster* needs each of us to give.
- But perhaps slightly more important is the need *each of us* have as Christians, as members or participants at Westminster, even as human beings, to give. Among the things that draw us to worship, to Christian Formation, to life together, to service is the need we have to give.
- Each of us has a need to give; and I am thankful to God for your “indescribable gifts.”

Amen.