

## WHY WESTMINSTER?

Galatians 4:12-20

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on the Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time, World Communion Sunday, October 7, 2018, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. This is the second of five sermons this Fall focused on “Why” questions related to the church: “Why Church?”; “Why Westminster?”; “Why Join?” “Why Give?” “Why Tithe”?*

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*Friends, I beg you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You have done me no wrong. You know that it was because of a physical infirmity that I first announced the gospel to you; though my condition put you to the test, you did not scorn or despise me, but welcomed me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus. What has become of the goodwill you felt? For I testify that, had it been possible, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me. Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth? They make much of you, but for no good purpose; they want to exclude you, so that you may make much of them. It is good to be made much of for a good purpose at all times, and not only when I am present with you. My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, I wish I were present with you now and could change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.*

Two weeks ago, I began a series of sermons aimed at answering fundamental questions about our life together.

The questions are:

- Why Church?
- Why Westminster?
- Why Join?
- Why Give?
- Why Tithe?

In addressing the first question, I said that the “why” of church is *community*, but not simply the community we find among others of similar interest or disposition, but the community in which our worship, service, learning and relationships lead us to *develop* or *grow* in our Christian faith. The “why” of church is *community* which draws us *closer to God*.

Today, I want to ask: “Why Westminster?” On this World Communion Sunday in which we break bread and share wine with churches of different denominations across the world, what is it that Westminster particularly embodies that leads us to be a genuine part of the answer to the question “Why Church?”

I want to frame the question around a Biblical passage that has stayed with me since I first encountered it in seminary.

Some of you may recall that I wrote my Master of Divinity thesis in the late 1970s on Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian and pastor who participated in one of the assassination plots against Hitler and who was executed for that participation a few days prior to Hitler’s suicide. While imprisoned, Bonhoeffer wrote letters to his nephew and ministerial student Eberhard Bethge that would have a significant impact on theology when they were published a few years after his death under the title *Letters and Papers from Prison*. The letters cover topics broader than Bonhoeffer’s heroic stance against the radical evil of the Holocaust.

In one passage, Bonhoeffer advises his nephew what to look for when he goes to preach at a congregation for the first time.

If you have to preach in the near future [Bonhoeffer writes]...I should confine myself to a few simple but vital thoughts. One has to live for sometime in a community to understand *how Christ is "formed" in it...*<sup>1</sup>

Bonhoeffer then references Galatians 4:19, which is embedded in our reading today. In that passage the Apostle Paul is writing the congregation at Galatia, which he had founded but then departed to establish another church. It is a congregation who in his absence has begun to doubt the faith and teaching on which he had lead them to be formed.

My little children [Paul writes], for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth *until Christ is formed in you*, I wish I were present with you now...for I am perplexed about you.

Every "you" in this passage is plural: as in "you all," "you collectively," "you as a community," "you as a congregation." Paul is writing to the congregation *as a whole*: "I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you."

When we take Bonhoeffer and Paul together, we realize that Christian faith is more than simply an individual's relationship with God. We realize that every Christian community – every denomination, every congregation, every small group – has a *particular* way in which Christ is *present* to it as a *community* and *shapes* and *forms* its common life. Giving birth to such formation is as painful as childbirth, as Paul, even as a male, acknowledges; giving re-birth is even more painful. It is to lessen this pain that leads Bonhoeffer to advise his student to try to *discern* the *form Christ takes in a congregation* in which he is about to preach.

With that in mind, we can now ask: What are the *distinctive* but by no means *unique* ways by which *Christ is formed at Westminster?*

## I.

To be sure there are many ways Christ is formed in our congregation:

- Christ is formed through our *mission*, in which as individuals and as a community, we reach out to the DC area, to Appalachia, to the Spirit Lake Reservation in North Dakota, and to children, youth, and adults in Moi's Bridge Kenya.
- Christ is formed at Westminster through our *relationships* with one another, in which many of us find with one or two people in this congregation friendship that is broad, deep, caring, sustaining, even life-altering.
- Christ is formed at Westminster through our *care* for one another in times of need.
- Christ is formed at Westminster through the genuine growth we are experiencing in our *youth* and *children's* ministries.
- Christ is formed at Westminster through our *learning* – intellectual, experiential, spiritual – at all ages.

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters & Papers From Prison: The Enlarged Edition*, edited by Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc. 1953), 359.

In all these ways Christ is formed at Westminster; but there are two ways deeply embedded in who we are as a congregation that particularly mark our congregation. It is these two ways to which I want to turn.

(a)

The first is the traditional way we worship.

We describe our worship as “traditional” – and I like to add “but not stuffy” – with sermon, pipe organ, choral music, and formal liturgy. Many who join Westminster say that when they first walk in here on a Sunday morning, “It feels like the church from home.”

This traditional form of worship we maintain centers, broadly speaking around *preaching* and *music*.

I have sometimes shared with you what a sheer joy it is for me to preach from this pulpit, because you listen so well and engage so substantively. Beneath that compliment, I want to praise you for your high expectations and for the willingness of your officers and leaders to provide a large staff and active laity to where the person in my position can actually read and study and think and write and keep up with events in the world and keep up with events in your lives to where I and my predecessors in this pulpit can devote our most significant time and energy to the sermon, and where associate pastors who preach less frequently can learn the art and you can hear more than one voice from the pulpit.

I have been preaching most Sundays for over thirty five years. I can tell you that I still spend 15 to 20 hours a week – all told – on the sermon and worship service. It still follows the old rule in homiletics of “an hour in the study for every minute in the pulpit.” I can also tell you that when any minister is distracted by too many administrative responsibilities or by unhealthiness in the congregation, the sermon often becomes another task to check off the list at the end of the week – and it shows and it shows and it shows. I want to praise you as a congregation for the commitment you have made to support the twenty minutes of the sermon with twenty hours of free, focused and quality time that precedes it. A big part of that support is the strong *financial giving* and committed *lay leadership* and *involvement* you provide.

“How shall they hear without a preacher?” asks Paul. “Faith comes through hearing,”<sup>2</sup> he adds. At Westminster, you provide an atmosphere for preaching. Christ is *formed* through the preaching of the Word.

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In addition, the music ministry in this church has always been central to our life, our faith, our worship, and has historically been a major way through which Christ is formed at Westminster.

Each of our four directors of music has brought sustained gifts and different emphases within the genres of sacred music they know best. Each has placed a significant mark on the music at Westminster. The two with whom I have shared worship planning have worked hard to select music that fits with the sermon and bears witness to the Biblical text around which the service is designed.

I am having a ball working with Ben Hutchens, our “almost-not-new-anymore” director. Like you, I experience the energy, imagination, intelligence and love that flow from the different genres of music we are offering and from the tremendous number of people who are participating with voice or instrument or both. Music is a great growth area for our church; and again, it your willingness to support the church financially, to leave parts of

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<sup>2</sup> See Romans 10:14-17, especially the King James Version.

your estate to it, and to participate in it that makes our music what it is. Christ is *formed* at Westminster through music we lift to the Lord.

## II.

If traditional worship is one major way Christ is formed at Westminster, a second, perhaps more nuanced way is the way we extend welcome.

If you are a person who is considering faith, trying to figure out faith, returning to faith, wrestling with doubts about your faith, or if you are growing and serving and learning in your faith in a heightened way, our congregation is committed to having a place for you.

- There are people who have joined this church after five, ten, fifteen years of visiting.
- There are people who have grown up in this church and are still a part of our community when they are going through a period of doubt.
- There are people who are still part of our community even in those periods in which God seems to have taken a leave of absence from their lives.
- There are people who are part of our community even when something isn't clicking any longer with them and Westminster, when they have had an unpleasant experience, found themselves mad, hurt, disappointed.
- And there are people who are part of our community who are deeply prayerful, knowledgeable, committed, and courageous in living out their faith in this world.

It is not so much that Christ is formed at Westminster because of where any *one* or *group* of us *is* in our faith at any particular time, as if we can monitor our faith with a "fit-bit"; rather, it is that Christ is *formed* in the *welcome* that we as a community *as a whole* offer to one another and to newcomers no matter where we and they are in faith.

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A significant part of our welcome is a tradition that is longstanding in the culture of our congregation of welcoming people of a variety of social views and political persuasions.

- We welcome Democrats and Republicans, socialists and libertarians, liberals and conservatives, moderates and independents.
- We welcome the political and the apolitical, the moral and perhaps even the amoral.
- We welcome you when you turn to us for an hour of sanctuary from the political strife so raw and omnipresent in our politics and city, and we welcome you when you take on a heightened form of activism for a cause you believe helps bring our world closer to the will and reign of God.
- We welcome you when you struggle with differences in social and political issues within your own heart and within your friendships, marriages, families, neighborhoods, schools, and professional relationships.

On this particular weekend, our welcome does not cease.

- We welcome you if you spent yesterday afternoon on the steps of the Capitol or Supreme Court, or last night at a victory party.
- We welcome you if you sat at home, quietly saddened by the course of our nation, or quietly confirmed in the vote you made in the 2016 Presidential election.
- We welcome you if this past two weeks has brought back painful memories of violation you yourself have experienced, or memories marked by worry, guilt, or relief over violations you may have committed.

At the same time, as part our welcome, the leaders of our church – clergy and lay – typically refrain from attempting to prescribe where you should come down on specific issues in our nation. Yet know that when you are actively involved in seeking to influence our nation to come closer to what you believe embodies the will God and our national ideals, we celebrate when your faith plays a part in your commitment and action.

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Last Sunday, I included in my prayer this sentence: “*I give you thanks that ...there are truths and forms with respect to which people of good character and principles may differ.*”

That phrase comes from one of the founding documents of American Presbyterianism, the “Historic Principles of Church Order,” adopted by the Synod of Philadelphia in 1788 and still included in our denomination’s constitution.<sup>3</sup>

- I believe that one of the distinct ways Christ is formed in us as a congregation is when we relate to one another across the deeply held social and political divides in our nation.
- I believe Christ is formed in us when we search for, find, understand, respect and even foster “the good character and principles” that lie *within* and *behind* nearly every political position, even when those positions coincide, as nearly all positions do, with *interests* of the one making the argument.
- I believe Christ is formed within us when we are able to see and acknowledge the reality that people on the opposite side of issues from us are in most *instances* people of “good character.”

There are  
Truths and forms with respect to which  
People of good character and principles  
May differ.

To be one congregation in our nation, in our local community, that in our ministry of Christian formation aspires to live by and pass on this creed is as worthy a reason for our existence as any.

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> “Historic Principles of Church Order,” *The Book of Order of the Presbyterian Church USA* .