

## STEWARDSHIP IN A TIME OF CORONAVIRUS

### 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on October 25, 2020, the Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. The church had had begun to invite 25 worshippers to attend per Sunday but otherwise was closed for the Coronavirus pandemic, and the service was livestreamed.*

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*We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints—and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you.*

*Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking. I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something—now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. As it is written, “The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.”*

#### I.

I continue to be grateful for the celebration you gave me this summer on the fortieth anniversary of my ordination to the ministry. Among the things that means is that I have been involved in exactly forty stewardship campaigns – that process each Fall in which the church asks each member to make a financial pledge for the upcoming year to support the work of the church. But none of these previous forty campaigns has had much in common – at least outwardly – with the one we are beginning today. This one is indeed “Stewardship in a Time of Coronavirus.”

- Even now that a few people are returning to the Sanctuary for worship, since March 15<sup>th</sup> – eight and a half months – the worship you have experienced *through* Westminster has not occurred for you *at* Westminster, but has occurred wherever you have set up your laptop, opened your phone, or gathered in front of your family screen.
- The dress code has probably become decidedly less formal, the coffee and donuts openly consumed rather than smuggled in beneath jacket flaps and in purses.
- The adult choir has not met in person, nor have we seen nor heard them in person; and the hymns have become solos, except for the families and individuals singing them at home.
- There has not been a child – let alone dozens of children – streaming forward to this chancel and lifting our hearts by their sheer presence.
- Unless you have attended one of our parking lot events for families and children or singles or confirmands or scouts, or unless I have run into you masked on the street or in the grocery store, I have not seen you in person for the past eight months.

- The list goes on and on, but I will stop reciting it, because it only makes me sad.

## II.

And yet during this same period the reach of Westminster has extended, considerably:

- I have received dozens of notes like one I received this week:

Hey, Larry, I just thought I would share a positive note about these times. With the changes in how we worship, my mother [in Alabama] participates in our worship and in my sister's worship in Charlotte. It's great we all have a closer connection with each other. I'm happy the livestreaming is a permanent part of our ministry.

- We normally have people from 20 to 30 states joining us each Sunday, and sometimes from overseas.
- We have somewhere between 1.5 and 3 times as many people joining us from their homes as typically join us in person.
- The classes I teach online are up about 25 per cent in enrollment; both Old Testament and New Testament each have people from 7-8 states enrolled; former members in St. Louis have a small group that joins; and a young adult who moved overseas several years ago is now able to participate from England – except for the classes she missed earlier this summer when she gave birth.

For people who live far away from the church, for people who are introverted or private, for people whose mobility is challenged, for people who may be the only member of the family who desire to attend, for people whose hearing or sight is difficult, for people who are traveling, the opportunity to see and hear how we worship at Westminster is radically increased *in* and to some extent *because of* this world we now inhabit.

Within a day or so after we had made the decision to shut-down, one of our elders, Vince Crisler, getting me set up with technology to work at home, sat on the couch in my basement and said: “We are not going to let this crisis go to waste. We are going to bring our church into the twenty first century in technology. Some of it you are not going to like, but it will strengthen our church in the long run.” He was right on both accounts. It is remarkable what he and Alex Bryant have enabled us to do. And I am grateful for their foresight and vision, and the sheer hours they and many others have devoted during this time.

## III.

When the Apostle Paul writes his second letter to the Corinthians, he describes to the Corinthians what the churches of Macedonia in a neighboring region are experiencing “during a severe ordeal of affliction.”

The affliction the Macedonians face likely involves persecution at the hands of the Gentiles of whom they are apart. Paul holds up their example of faith to urge the Corinthians to generosity:

We want you to know...about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia [he writes].

During a severe a severe ordeal of affliction,<sup>1</sup> their *abundant joy* and their *extreme poverty* have overflowed in a *wealth of generosity* on their part.

For as I can testify, they *voluntarily gave according to their means* and even *beyond their means*, begging us earnestly for the *privilege* of sharing in this ministry to the saints...

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<sup>1</sup> I Thessalonians 1:6, 2:14, and 3:3-4 speak of persecution, which is the likely nature of the “affliction” these churches face.

Just as Paul points to the Macedonians who have been generous during a time of affliction, I want to thank you for the generosity and commitment you have shown during this time of Coronavirus for our church and country.

- Your giving and financial support has remained strong, though we know that some of you have had to cut back or will have to cut back because of significant loss of income.
- During this time, I can only surmise that most of you have given – like the Macedonians – “according to your means” and that some have given “beyond your means.”
- Both are appropriate, welcome, and acts of grace.

Because of your commitment to the ministry of Westminster, we have been able to *keep* or *exceed* our commitment to others:

- We are keeping our commitment to funding all our mission projects – in Alexandria and Arlington, on the Spirit Lake Reservation in North Dakota, to the United Orphanage and Academy in Moi’s Bridge Kenya.
- In some instances, we have been able to re-direct some of our mission giving to focus even more heavily on pandemic relief locally.
- We have kept our commitment to all of our staff, most of whom have been continuing to work during this time. We have continued to pay those whose positions have not had responsibilities while the building was shut down – our two sextons and our childcare workers. The sextons returned to work in August; we look forward to the day when we will once again need our long-serving childcare workers.
- We have provided financial support to our preschool in its heroic effort to remain open (with reduced enrollment) by waiving the insurance and utility contributions they have historically made.
- And we still have ways in which volunteers are helping others in need – when that has been deemed safe.
- As you know through a terrific gift and through the use of reserves built up from congregational giving and cell phone revenue, we are able to equip the sanctuary to make livestreaming a permanent part of our ministry, work that will be occurring over the next couple of months.
- We are in the process of recruiting leaders and committee members for the “Therefore Project,” a commitment our Session has made to use the diversity of political views that so characterize our congregation to seek to make a difference in combatting the racism that has been such a significant part of our nation’s history remains such a significant part of our present.
- Because of the gracious generosity of the congregation, we have been able to keep the creative and committed staff, who have found new and innovative ways to reach children and their families, youth and their families, adults working or retired at home, and people of all ages with musical gifts, so that in nearly all areas members of our church are able to share their talents *virtually* and sometimes *in person*, all of which enhances our reach and ministry.
- I want to call out the efforts of the terrific committee of leaders and workers in the church – Return and Renewal – who have put hours into research and preparation of our building to make it as safe as humanly possible for twenty five people a week to join the ushers, worship leaders, and video crew to worship in person. In the two Sundays we have been open in this way, we have yet to have the full twenty-five. I want you to know that we want you to do what is right for your safety and that of the people for whom you are responsible. But if you feel safe, register and join us....and see if this is an appropriate way for you to be part of this community in this time of Coronavirus. Besides, if you attend, you will, like many others, get marvel at how large the new red fire station next door is turning out to be!

Last Sunday, we started playing the sounds of bells emanating from our bell tower from recordings our Buildings and Grounds Chair unearthed. We checked with the neighbors who were all supportive. As I stood in the Blomberg courtyard preparing for a baptism, I saw Sam Gunter, a child who lives across the street, perched in his lawn, waiting to hear the bells. He grinned when they burst forth into the atmosphere.

A daughter-in-law of one of the members in attendance who lives nearby texted her mother-in-law – who was still in the pews – to say what a wonderful sound the bells made.

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A few weeks ago I received a small gift and handwritten note from someone who has been active in one of our community ministries but whose church home is another congregation in town. She had returned to the building briefly to retrieve something. Her note read in part:

Being back in the building [was] a stark reminder of the welcome Westminster has always extended to me. When I left my husband twenty years ago, in a most ungrateful manner, I was tolerated for worship – barely – but no longer welcome in my “[church] home.”

Westminster has always been a living experience for me of the unflagging and unconditional love of God, and the ever-present movement of the Holy Spirit.

With much gratitude.

Notes from people worshipping with us from afar, bells ringing throughout the neighborhood, the memory of welcome walking into the empty building on a brief errand – these are reminders that even in a time of coronavirus, Westminster’s witness to the grace of God continues, through our presence and outreach. It calls to mind the first part of Psalm 46:

God is our refuge and strength,  
a very present help in trouble.  
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,  
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;  
though its waters roar and foam,  
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

The Lord of hosts is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our refuge  
[Even in a time of Coronavirus].

For eighty-years we have sought to embody that refuge; for eighty years more we shall as well.

#### IV.

In wistful moments I hope that there will come a clearly identifiable day – sometime in 2021 – when a vaccine will have been developed, approved, distributed, funded, and partaken by a sufficient number of people in the country that we can schedule a welcome back service in this Sanctuary to which we will all feel safe coming. It may be the longest worship service you ever attend but it will feel like the shortest.

- We will hear every choir sing, every bell ring, every stringed instrument play, every piano and organ key sound, timpani pound, and most of all every voice present lifted up and singing the most familiar and beloved hymns of our faith that we will choose that day to sing.
- We will transport every resident of the Goodwin Houses and the Fountains – whose denomination starts with a P – to this service.
- Every child will storm the chancel for the Children’s Sermon.
- Every youth will be in worship, sitting together or with their parents.

- I pray that every minister, including Whitney, will be in this chancel.
- We will recognize the people who have joined our church during this time of Coronavirus, the people who have presented their children for baptisms in the courtyard, the people who have worked so hard to get us livestreamed and to make our activities safe.
- I want not only to break bread and pour wine in your midst but to serve it, partake of it, see you partake of it.
- I want to turn around and see the chairs behind me filled – not just with voices with but bodies bedecked in beautiful blue robes which were brand new when they were last taken off and will still be new when they were donned again.
- Most of all, I want to preach where I can see your faces, your nods of recognitions, your “A-ha’s,” even your scowls or looks of puzzlement, and hear, most of all, your laughter.
- And I want to hug you going out and coming in – every last one of you.

That day may not come all at once. It may come bit by bit. It may not even come in 2021. But I hope and pray it comes “soon and very soon.” And I trust that in *God’s time* we will *pass through this time of Coronavirus* and that the day of our return will be a day of our renewal as well.

In the meantime, the presence and ministry of this congregation goes on, and will go on, and you will continue to be part of it, as you are called and able to do. I give thanks to God that you have answered God’s call to root your life of faith through Westminster.

The Lord of Hosts is with us;  
The God of Jacob is our Refuge.

Amen.