

**WHY GIVE?
Proverbs 3:1-12**

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on November 3, 2019, the Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time,
at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia, as part of a fall sermon series entitled
“Why...?”*

*My child, do not forget my teaching,
but let your heart keep my commandments;
for length of days and years of life
and abundant welfare they will give you.*

*Do not let loyalty and faithfulness forsake you;
bind them round your neck,
write them on the tablet of your heart.
So you will find favour and good repute
in the sight of God and of people.*

*Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
and do not rely on your own insight.
In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.
Do not be wise in your own eyes;
fear the Lord, and turn away from evil.
It will be a healing for your flesh
and a refreshment for your body.*

*Honour the Lord with your substance
and with the first fruits of all your produce;
then your barns will be filled with plenty,
and your vats will be bursting with wine.*

*My child, do not despise the Lord's discipline
or be weary of his reproof,
for the Lord reproves the one he loves,
as a father the son in whom he delights.*

Since nearly everyone in our city has a Nats story, I will add mine to the mix.

On Wednesday morning we had an incredibly upbeat Old Testament class, both because it began about nine hours after the Nats had come back and won Game Six in Houston and because we were eleven hours away from the opening pitch to Game Seven. The upbeat-ness disappeared for a while as we worked our way through the Book of Judges, one of the most challenging books of the Old Testament, one in which the people of God engage in violence against the Canaanites and in which God sometimes commands and choreographs such violence. But around 11:00 a.m. we turned to the Book of Ruth, and between the beauty

of that story and excitement about the Nats we had recovered our upbeat-ness when it came time for the closing prayer at 11:30.

Now I don't normally pray for a specific teams to win in sports, but this was *my* team in *my* sport in *my* city, so for the closing prayer I blurted out: "Lord, we pray that the Nats will prevail tonight, but that it will be less violent than what we have read in Joshua and Judges." I didn't even close with the requisite, "...but not our will, by Thy will be done." I just said: "Amen."

I didn't really intend the prayer to sway the outcome of the game, but maybe it did.

What has been amazing about the Nats this year has been their *attitude*, signified by the slogan on their T shirts "Stay in the fight," and by their midseason adoption of the nursery rhyme and song about a family of sharks who stay together, hunt, run away from killer whales, and end at home, "safe at last." Apart from the sheer talent on the team, which at times has seemed miraculous, it is their *attitude* that has led them to do what no other team in history has done: win four World Series games in the opponent's park to capture the title. The sheer joy this team has brought to our deeply divided city has made the tension of every pitch and the sleep deprivation of every fan worth it. Perhaps we have caught – through the Nats – a glimpse of what unity can look like.

I.

Today we are hear the last of seven sermons on "Why" questions concerning the church. In previous weeks, we have asked:

- Why Worship?
- Why Learn?
- Why Mission?
- Why Community?
- Why Organized Religion?
- Why Involvement?

We conclude with perhaps the most personal question of all: "Why Giving?" Why give a substantial portion of the income coming into our household to support the work and ministry of the church. "Why give?"

To answer this question, I have turned to the third chapter of the Old Testament Book of Proverbs, a book whose first several chapters feature a wise sage teaching a young person – in this instance father to son – to prepare the young person to leave home and live independently. The parent seeks to impart wisdom – "the moral experience and trained intelligence of genuinely religious [people]"¹ -- concerning such human and religious virtues as loyalty, faithfulness to God, trust, and humility.

When we get to verse nine, the sage says:

Honor the Lord with your *substance*
And with the first fruits of *all* your *produce*...

¹ R. B. Y. Scott *The Way of Wisdom in the Old Testament* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc. 1971), 5.

A scholar of Proverbs I particularly admire, Christine Roy Yoder, writes:

This is the only *command* in Proverbs to *participate* in religious practices.

She then adds:

The community dedicated [the] “first fruits” [of its labor and harvest] to God in *thanksgiving* and then used them to support the priesthood, widows, orphans, and aliens. The father is enjoining the son to participate in this communal [religious] event.²

Translated from the Old Testament to our day, this shows that an important reason we give to the church is to support – indeed to enable – *all* that the church does.

As I indicated to you in my letter asking you to make a pledge to Westminster for 2020, in the years I have been your Pastor, I have never been more excited or energized about what we are doing.

- The four-pastor staffing model toward which we have been working for four years is here, and though still fresh and new, it is enabling us to increase what we are doing in nearly *every* aspect of the church’s ministry.
- New people are becoming aware of and involved in the two major mission projects of which we are the founders and primary sponsors:
 - The support of Joe Obermeyer – a graduate of the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary – now in his seventh year – working *full time* in programming for children, youth, and social support out of a small Presbyterian Church among the 5000 residents of the Spirit Lake Indian Reservation in North Dakota, whose land encompasses as much territory as all of Fairfax County
 - The United Orphanage and Academy in Kenya, which in partnership with Reverend Stephen Chege in that nation, we formed in 2000 an orphanage with six infant girls whose parents had AIDS, and which has since grown into a large orphanage and school through the eighth grade, to which at least one of our orphans has returned to teach.

There are other signs of life and energy as well.

- By asking groups with which he was associated in the church, newly elected elder Curt Powell was able to secure the massive amounts of cookies he needs each month when he ventures into a maximum-security prison in Virginia to lead worship and develop Christian community through the Kairos Prison Ministry.

² Christine Roy Yoder *Proverbs* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 40. Yoder provides extensive citing of Old Testament verses to support virtually each category of beneficiary and each practice, including Daniel 11:38, Isaiah 43:23, Numbers 15:17-21; Deuteronomy 18:4, II Chronicles 31:5, Nehemiah 10:37, Exodus 23:15c-16, 19, Leviticus 23:9-14, Deuteronomy 26:1-11, Deuteronomy 18:4, Deuteronomy 26:12, Nehemiah 10:35-39.

- Because of having a fourth pastor, my ability to add an Old Testament class on Wednesday morning to the New Testament class on Sunday afternoon has increased enrollment from 50 to 80; and draws more and more people from other faith traditions and from the community.
- Our music program continues to grow and spread its joy *beyond* our worship services to community events in DC and Alexandria as well as to our own pre-school on a weekly basis.
- *More* youth are signing up for summer mission trips, and they are signing up *earlier*.
- Over twenty families with children have bonded together to have dinner several times a year to create special community among those charged with the crucial responsibility of rearing children.
- Our Scout Troop schedules most of its large meetings in our parking lot or “back forty” because they have *outgrown* Fellowship Hall.
- And the number of people drawn to *join* Westminster appears on the uptick this fall.

Much of this is due to the pragmatic decision each of you has made and continues to make to share a substantial portion of the financial resources that come into your household – what Proverbs calls your “first fruits,” “wealth,” “substance” – with the work of Westminster Presbyterian Church.

“Why Giving?” Because giving enables the church to do all that it can do.

II.

But there is an interesting translation issue in this verse. Robert Alter, of the University of California, one of the great scholars of the Hebrew Bible, translates this verse not:

Honor the Lord *with* your wealth
And with the fruit of your labor

But rather:

Honor the Lord *more than* your wealth
And *more than* the fruit of your labor.³

Alter sees in this text more than a *pragmatic* decision to support the work of the community (in our case the church) because of what *the church does*, but rather a *stance*, a *frame of mind*, an *inclination of the heart* to honor God *more than* we honor our *wealth* or the *work* or *inheritance* that produces it.

Alter’s focus ties back to places in the passage that speak of the *heart*:

Let your *heart* keep my commandments...

³ Robert Alter *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 204.

Write them on the *tablet of your heart*.

Trust in the Lord with all your *heart*.

Yoder writes:

To write on the heart is to make an indelible mark on the *center* of one's being, to etch the instruction in the *innermost part* of one's self.

Giving to the church can be *more than* a pragmatic decision to support the church's work. It can be part of a *challenged, inspired, aspirational* heart. Our giving reflects the *center* of our being...our *hearts*.

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As many of you know, both my wife Maggie and I lost our last living parents within the past twelve months – our mothers.

When her mother died last Thanksgiving, she left Maggie several thousand dollars, an amount she had told her; and when we received it we promptly put it in an investment account to use as a gift to one of the several Presbyterian institutions her mother and father had attended or in which they had worked during the course of his ministry as a Presbyterian pastor.

When my mother died over Memorial Day, I did not know what she would leave my brother and me, and while we are still involved in settling her estate, it is *more than* what I expected but once Maggie and I sat down with our financial planner, *less than* what it at first seemed to be.

But these two events have led us to begin the process of re-doing our own financial planning and updating our estate planning and wills. We are not through yet.

Now we were both more than tithers – giving ten per cent of our income to the church – long before we married thirteen years ago. We both know that as we plan our estates and write our wills, we will provide something we deem appropriate to our respective children, but a significant share will support the work of the Presbyterian Church in some form.

It is simply written on the tablets of our hearts. It is *who* we are. It is who *all* of us can be.

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I hope that the Nats didn't win because God answered my prayer; for if so, if we go another 95 years without a championship there will be far too many crises of faith for clergy of that day to handle.

I think the Nats won because of their attitude.

What is written in our *hearts* takes us a long way home, "safe at last."

Amen.