

“Grateful and Growing”
2 Corinthians 8:1-7; Luke 17:11-19
21st Sunday after Pentecost

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Westminster, Greenville
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In the movie *Big Fish*, which came out almost 20 years ago now, the protagonist Edward Bloom is tired of his old man’s stories. His father likes to exaggerate when he tells stories, to take a little liberty with the truth and make a better story out of it.

In fact, one particular story has gotten under Edward’s skin so much that he’s stopped talking to his father—
and that’s the story of the day that Edward was born.

Edward’s dad claims that on the day Edward was born, he finally caught the fish known as The Beast.

This fish was very ELUSIVE—
some said it was a ghost,
others a dinosaur.

But on the day Edward was born, Edward’s father had an idea.
He used his gold wedding ring as bait!
The fish liked the gold, the fish grabbed the gold,
the CHASE WAS ON...
and finally, after a protracted struggle,
the fish was his!

His father had caught THE BEAST!

It was his father’s way of saying how special the day of Edward’s birth was for him.

But Edward can’t hear that as an adult.
Edward wants the truth.

And years go by,
 and Edward's father is dying,
 and they still aren't talking to one another.

Finally, the doctor who delivered Edward asks him:
 "Your father ever tell you about the day you were born?"

"Yeah, a thousand times. He caught an uncatchable fish."
 "Not that," says the doctor. "The real story."

"Your mother came in...her neighbor drove her, on account of
 your father was away on business in Wichita.

You were born a week early, no complications.
 Your father was sorry not to be there."

And Edward realizes that the real story is something of a
 disappointment...after all, which of those two stories is true?

Well, the one about being born a week early—that's certainly a
 true story...but it's missing something, right?

It's missing the love that his father felt for Edward.
 It's missing the delight that he took in the birth of his child.
 What it's missing...is gratitude.

That's what Edward's father was trying to tell his son with the
 made-up story about the fish. He was trying to tell Edward how
 GRATEFUL he was that his son was born.

I believe we all have that kind of story.
 I don't mean a made-up story about catching a BIG FISH.

I mean...we all have a gratitude story.

That's what I want you to think about today.

What is your gratitude story?

I ask the question because we're two weeks away from Commitment Sunday, the day when we make our pledges to Westminster for 2023. And the theme of our stewardship campaign for this year is what?

“Grateful and Growing.”

So what's your gratitude story?

What are you so thankful for,
that you would go to any lengths to express it,
and how do you show your gratitude,
every day that you're alive?

Let me pause right here and acknowledge that there are times when gratitude can be a **HARD SELL**. And not just when the Yankees get swept by the Astros in the ALCS!

As Henri Nouwen once wrote:

Gratitude is not a simple emotion or an obvious attitude. It is a difficult discipline to constantly reclaim my whole past as the...way in which God has led me to this moment and is sending me into the future.

It is hard precisely because it challenges me to face the painful moments – experiences of rejection and abandonment...loss and failure – and gradually

to discover in them the pruning hands of God purifying my heart for deeper love, stronger hope, and broader faith.¹

The CHALLENGE of gratitude is why I love our second scripture passage this morning.

It's a passage in which Paul shares a GRATITUDE STORY.
A story about the churches of Macedonia.

Paul is writing to the church in Corinth, and he's asking the Corinthians to contribute generously to the collection that's being taken for the church in Jerusalem.

And Paul holds up the churches in Macedonia as an example.
Here's what he says about them.

Paul writes that “during a severe ordeal of affliction,” they “gave beyond their means,” and he describes how the Macedonian churches, in “their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed” with “a wealth of generosity.”

In other words, the churches in Macedonia are a grateful people.
Even though they're going through hard times...
They are grateful for what God in Christ has done for them.

They want to show it.
They're eager to show it.
And nothing—
not their afflictions, not their poverty,
nothing will get in the way of those Macedonian Christians
showing their gratitude to God.

¹ Henri Nouwen, *Spiritual Formation: Following the Movements of the Spirit*, New York: HarperOne, 2010.

But we don't have to travel to churches in ancient Macedonia to find people like that. Our church is FULL of people like that.

We've been hearing gratitude stories in our Minutes for Stewardship throughout the fall, right?

Gratitude for what Westminster has meant to the speakers, why they have felt so connected to our church through the years. And we've read gratitude stories in the splendid Harbinger covers that have graced our bulletin each week.

All of which, I'm hoping, has prompted a similar question for you.

What are you grateful for around here?
What has Westminster meant to you?

While you're considering your answer, let me share some of what I'm grateful for around here.

I'm grateful for the excellent staff and splendid lay leadership, with which I get a chance to work every day.

I'm grateful for those who have come before us, the saints of Westminster who founded this church and grounded this church and planted seeds of 75 years of faith and hope and love in this church.

And I'm grateful for you.
I'm grateful for this congregation's generosity and hospitality.

The OPEN MINDS and OPEN HEARTS with which you welcome everyone every week. The ways you give your time, with hands-on mission work, loving our neighbors in Greenville and beyond.

Over the past 10 years, our congregation has consistently given more money than we've expended each year, which has put us on solid financial footing.

Over the past 10 years, this congregation's Witness & Service giving—ie, our mission giving—has been, as a percentage of our income and expenditures, near the top of the entire denomination.

Over the past 10 years, our congregation has grown and grown:
In 2012, we were close to 1600 members.
Now, we're at about 2000 members.

In essence, that's like adding another 400-member congregation to our church in the past decade. In a day and time when so many churches are declining, I hope we all are grateful for that growth.

By the way, in case you haven't figured it out yet, this is our fall STEWARDSHIP sermon. A sermon about gratitude...and a sermon about growth.

God is doing something exciting at Westminster!
One of the ways that's evident is in our growth.

So let me be as plain as I can be.

In order to meet the needs of our growing church, in order to sustain the growth, we need to plan for it. We need to think intentionally and strategically about it. We need to fund it. As I've mentioned before this fall, one priority is to add more administrative staff to our team.

This is the main reason why the Session approved an 8.7% increase in our operating budget for the coming year. So that we can

staff for future growth. So that we have the necessary infrastructure IN HERE to support what God wants to do with our church OUT THERE.

If you've never given or pledged to our church, we need you this year.

If you've always pledged the same amount, consider increasing your pledge this year.

Every pledge is an act of generosity, and every pledge matters more than you may know.

You see, I think the primary source of generosity is not a bank account or wise investments or a stewardship sermon from your pastor.

It's gratitude.

Generosity flows directly out of gratitude.

After he was confined to a wheelchair because of spinal cancer, the late writer Reynolds Price described his new life, with an inability to walk, not just as something he tolerated, not just something he learned to live with...

He described it as a better life,
a life for which he was extraordinarily thankful.

“As I survived the...frustration of so many new forms of powerlessness, I partly learned to sit and attend, to watch and taste whatever or whomever seemed likely or needy, far more closely than I had in five decades.”²

In other words, he became more generous with his attention, more generous with his time. Where did this generosity come from?

² Reynolds Price, *A Whole New Life*, New York: Atheneum, 1994.

It came from a newfound sense of gratitude.

“Even my handwriting looks very little like the script of the man I was in June of ’84. Cranky as it is, it’s taller, more legible, with more air and stride. It comes down the arm of a grateful man.”³

Reynolds Price had a gratitude story.

Sometime later today, or later this week, I hope you’ll think about your gratitude story. What do I mean by gratitude story? This is what I mean:

What has God done in your life, what has God given you that surprised you, that took your breath away, some gift you know you never could have given yourself?

Do you have a gratitude story?

I suspect you do.

All of us do.

Back when I was 3 years old, my parents moved from Minnesota to Michigan. They had not been attending church during the first couple years after I was born. But they had both grown up going to church, and shortly after they moved to Michigan, they decided to try the Presbyterian congregation down the road from our apartment.

After worship that Sunday, they were back home with me.

They heard a knock on the apartment door.

It was the minister of that church.

³ Ibid.

He was making house calls on a Sunday afternoon, visiting people who had visited his church that morning. My parents welcomed him, they talked for a while, and he left.

Because of that visit that the Rev. Ron Byars made on that Sunday afternoon, my parents became connected to that church, joined that church, and are still there to this day.

Of course, I doubt very seriously that the Rev. Ron Byars was paying much attention to the snot-nosed 3-year-old who was in the apartment that day...but because of Ron Byars' visit, I was baptized in that church, and later confirmed in that church, and later still, ordained in that church.

I was taught the Christian faith in that church.

I still remember some of my Sunday School teachers...Mrs. Morrow, and Mrs. McCullum...I even remember Mrs. Becker.

Mrs. Becker was my 7th grade Sunday School teacher. It wasn't until years later that I figured out she was something of a biblical literalist, more fundamentalist in her beliefs than most other members of that congregation. In fact, she eventually left that church to find one that was more to her liking, but when I was in 7th grade, she was still there.

And what I remember is how EXCITED she got about the Bible.

And how she made us memorize the books of the Bible.

And how she promised us a prize if we could recite the books of the Bible.

Do you know what this is?

It's a very old address book.

An address book with phone numbers of my childhood friends in it...

Do you know where I received it?

From Mrs. Becker, in 7th grade, when I recited the books of the Bible one Sunday morning.

So why do I still have this?

This shabby and tattered address book that's 40 years old?

You know why I still have it.

It reminds me of the church in which I grew up, which reminds me of the gift of faith that was given to me in that church. A faith that was set in motion the day that Ron Byars knocked on my parents' apartment door on a Sunday afternoon almost 50 years ago.

And I am forever grateful—not just that Ron Byars did that.
I'm forever grateful that God did that.

The hand of God at work, when none of us knew that the hand of God was at work.

Has that ever happened to you?

You couldn't see the hand of God at work, but later—

upon reflection—

you knew God's hand was at work in your life...

all you could do was give thanks for it.

I know we ended the sermon series on the vision of Westminster last week, but I'd like to add an epilogue to the series.

May I do that?

Add an epilogue?

Do you remember the pillars that we spoke about throughout the sermon series this fall?

Hospitality, generosity, justice, imagination, and joy...good.

There was one more that I didn't put on that list.

But it could have been on that list.

You know what it is?

Gratitude.

I am standing before a grateful congregation.

We each have a gratitude story because of the generosity that God has shown us in Jesus Christ.

And our job—

not just during stewardship season,

but in every season—

even the difficult seasons of our lives—

our job is to be the grateful and the generous people

whom God created us to be.

Amen.