

“Preaching to the Choir”
Romans 12:3-8
Music Sunday (5th Sunday of Easter)

May 7, 2023
Westminster, Greenville
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As I begin the sermon this morning—it’s really more of a homily, a shorter-than-usual sermon—I hope you do not misunderstand the title.

On this Music Sunday, the title of the sermon is “Preaching to the Choir.”

And by using that title today, I do not mean to imply that what I’m about to say is only for the choir, and the rest of you are free to look at your phones or take a brief nap, whatever.

I use that title because it’s a figure of speech.

When you’re preaching to the choir, it means you’re preaching to those who already agree with you. And I think you will all agree with me when I make the following three points on this Music Sunday.

Point number one: The choirs—our adult choirs, youth choir, children’s choirs...they are among the best and most talented choirs that you will find in any church in our denomination.

Can I get an “Amen” to that?

Second point: These wonderful members of Westminster are able to do what they do through a tremendous amount of hard work on their part, through the excellent leadership of our entire music staff and volunteers. And those of us who are not in the choirs are extraordinarily grateful for the beauty and the meaning that they provide to our worship Sunday after Sunday.

Can I get an “Amen” to that?

Third point: What our choirs and music leaders do in worship is not only a product of their hard work and commitment and dedication. It is also, at its most fundamental level, a gift. The musical abilities that they possess are God's gift to them, and our choirs are God's gift to this congregation.

Can I get an "Amen" to that?

Now it's that third point that I want to focus on...
The point about gifts.

In our text for today, Paul writes;
"We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us..."

The most common interpretation of this passage is that everyone in this room has a gift—choir members for singing, givers in generosity, teachers for teaching, Session members for leading...these are gifts that God wants all of us to share and nurture and grow.

That's a faithful reading of the text.
Nothing wrong with that interpretation of the text.
It places the emphasis on the end of the text...on how we use our gifts.

I want us to think about the beginning.
What happens when we receive a gift.

"For by the grace given to me..."—that's how Paul begins.

You see, what Paul believed is that before we are helpful givers of our gifts, you and I are helpless receivers of gifts.

Utterly in need of one another.
Completely dependent on God's grace.

Do you know what it's like to be a receiver?

To be given something, something you did not ask for, something you did not work for, something you did not deserve...
something that just came to you?

It can be a mixed experience, right?

Sometimes it's an embarrassing experience.

For example, during the pandemic, when we could only worship online, through our recorded services...I noticed something about myself that I did not know was true.

It happened the first time I watched a baptism that was included in the recorded service. At one point, the video was shot from one of our cameras up above...and I saw that on top of my head there was a BALD SPOT that I did not know was there!

I knew I was losing my hair...but didn't realize that spot had GROWN so much until I saw it on camera. Of course, it's just something I received from my genes—what side does it come from?

Mother's side? Both sides?

I don't know...

I do know this.

There's something in all of us that RESISTS being receivers.

It feels so much better to be a giver.

To do like so many of you did yesterday, participating in Hands on Greenville with our church, helping other people, getting to know our neighbors, loving our neighbors...it gives us a sense of pride, and also a sense of control.

Nothing bad about any of that, it's what we're supposed to do.
But it's much harder, I think, to see oneself as a receiver.
As someone without control.

Have you ever had one of those moments in life?
When you received something, and you did not want it, and it was
completely out of your control?

Many of you know that our younger son was diagnosed with
leukemia when he was 17 months old. I am forever grateful that it was a
curable kind of cancer, but I'll never forget that night in November of
2010, when my wife and I knew something was wrong, didn't know
what was going on, and we were in the e.r. at the children's hospital in
Dallas where we received the diagnosis...

Ugh. What do we do?
A completely helpless feeling.

And yet at that moment, during that night—
receiving took on another dimension as well.

You see, the first priority for the medical team was to give him
blood. So I have this vivid memory of looking at those bags of blood,
which were putting red blood cells and platelets back into our son's
body, literally saving his life.

I remember thinking that I will never get a chance to thank the
person, or the people, who gave that blood that provided the first step in
saving the life of our child.

I will spend the rest of my days being in debt to those strangers.
Having received a gift from those strangers.
And whenever I give blood, I am grateful for those strangers
who showed me how important receiving a gift can be.

Do you know what it's like to be a receiver?
That's what we're talking about this morning.
It's not just an embarrassing thing or helpless thing.
Sometimes, it's a life-giving thing.

That's what the Apostle Paul wants us to see today.

“For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you...”

Paul sees himself not as a self-made person.
He sees of himself as God's person.
A receiver of God's grace before he is anything else.
And he wants us to do the same.

So let's do that right now.

There are plenty of examples of God's grace in this room at this very moment.

That pew that you're sitting in today...did you build it?
Show of hands, how many of you built the pew you're sitting in today?

Or how about...

- The teachers who taught your children during Sunday School or It's Elementary this year.
- The adult sponsors who took joy in getting to know your teenager at youth fellowship this year.
- The WestConnect group that created new bonds of friendship that you were searching for this year.

Who is responsible for all that?

For the faith that grew in your child or in your teenager or in you?

Or...when you were going through a terribly difficult time in your life, and members of this church reached out to you...

did you plan their visits, did you order their cards,

did you create their words of comfort?

Or did you simply receive them?

Did God send those members of this church to you?

Going back to the pandemic, I have a vivid memory of what it was like when we came back to worship together, but it was not safe yet for us to sing. I can't begin to tell you how much I missed singing hymns when we had no hymns.

And singing is NOT my gift.

Most days, I can't match pitch to save my life.

But I saw then, more clearly than I had ever seen before how much of my faith is moved and shaped by the musical gifts in this room today.

Do you know what it's like to be a receiver?

According to Paul, it means "we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another."

It means we have gifts to share with one another in here, and with God's world out there.

But even before that, it means something more fundamental and just as important.

It means we spend our entire lives...living in the red.
In debt to one another and in debt to the grace of God.

Can I get an Amen to that?

(Amen.)