

“Going Beyond”
2 Corinthians 8:1-7
22nd Sunday after Pentecost

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Westminster, Greenville
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How many of you have seen the beautiful stewardship campaign banners this year?

One outside the sanctuary.
There’s one in the friendship court.

And did you catch what the word is on the banners?
The stewardship campaign theme?
Beyond, that’s right.
Going beyond.

What does it mean to go beyond?
To go beyond what someone expects you to do?
To go beyond what you’re used to doing?
Or to have someone else go beyond for you?

In their book *Practical Wisdom*, psychologist Barry Schwartz and political scientist Kenneth Sharpe tell a story about a hospital janitor named Luke.

In the hospital where Luke worked, there was a young man who’d gotten into a fight and was now in a coma. Each day, this young man’s father sat by his side, in silent vigil. He did it every day, over the course of six months.

One day, Luke came in and cleaned the young man’s room, as he always did. The young man’s father was NOT in the room at the time; he was out getting a smoke.

Later that day, Luke ran into the father in the hallway.
 The father snapped at Luke.
 He accused him of not cleaning his son's room.

If that happened to you, what would you do?
 Would you snap back at the father?
 Would you patiently explain that you had already cleaned the
 room, but the father was out at the time?

Luke took a different approach.
 As he told an interviewer later:

“I cleaned [the room again] so he could see me cleaning it...I can understand how he could be. It was like six months that his son was there. He'd been a little frustrated, and...I guess I could understand.”¹

You know what that is, right?
 That's going beyond.

Beyond what is expected of a person.
 Beyond what is required of a person.
 And it's something that any one of us can do.

It's what we hear about in our scripture from 2nd Corinthians this morning. Paul writes to the church in Corinth, holding up the churches of Macedonia as models of generosity.

Of those Macedonian churches, Paul says:

“...during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their

¹ Barry Schwartz and Kenneth Sharpe, *Practical Wisdom* (New York: Riverhead, 2010/11), as quoted in David Brooks, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life* (New York: Random House), 2019.

part...they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means....”

From the earliest days of the church, followers of Jesus have known what it means...to go beyond.

Now as I said a moment ago, our topic today is money.
What do Presbyterians believe about giving and sharing our money?

And we’ll get to that question.
Don’t forget about that question.

But before we answer that question, I’d like to explore a bit more with you what it means...to go beyond.

You see, Jesus was always asking his followers to go beyond.

Do you remember the time that Jesus told the rich man who wanted to be his follower:

Sell everything you own, give it to the poor, then come and follow me. He was asking him to go beyond...

Or maybe you remember the time that Jesus said:

“If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt.”

“Forgive not 7 times, but 70 times 7...”

“Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you...”

Jesus told his followers and his would be followers, if you're going to follow me, it means you GO BEYOND...

Now let me be the first to say that there's a part of me that doesn't LIKE that part of Jesus.

A part of me wants to draw a line and say:
I'm good right here, Jesus!
Stop telling me to go beyond!

When it comes to how I give my money, and how I spend my time, who I have energy to love....Jesus, there's only so much I can do. I don't need you pushing me, stretching me, challenging me to do more than I already do...

And as I was having that conversation in my head with Jesus this week, I noticed on my desk a Westminster stewardship pamphlet. It was a pamphlet that Leigh had found somewhere in the church when she was exploring some history about our church earlier this year.

I know you can't see it clearly.
It's from the year 1968.
And do you know what the theme was that year?

“Within, around, and BEYOND.”

Open up the pamphlet, and it says:
THE CHALLENGE OPENS TO YOU.

“Westminster's 1969 program will cost 22% more than was pledged last year.”

Now I don't know how that 1968 campaign turned out.
I do know this.

If it weren't for those saints of Westminster from 55 years ago, I would not be standing before you today...and you would not be sitting there in your pew today.

The reason that any of us are here today is that someone who came before us—decided to go beyond.

Have you ever seen someone go beyond before?

A few months ago, I was standing in line in the grocery store, waiting to pay for my groceries.

It was a Sunday afternoon.

Directly in front of me was an older gentleman.
My guess is that he was in his 70s.
He had on what looked to be church clothes.
Like he had come to the store to buy groceries right after leaving church.

Directly in front of him was a younger man.
My guess was he was in his 30s.
They were chatting a bit with each other, and I assumed that they were father and son, or maybe grandfather and grandson, hard to know for sure.

But I assumed that they were related.
They acted very friendly.
Well, it took a bit of time for the younger man to pay,
and I couldn't figure out what the hold up was.

I started getting a little impatient.
 Finally, that younger gentleman left the line and left the store.
 And the older man pulled out his wallet to pay for his groceries.

And the cashier told the older gentleman to put his wallet away.
 The young man who had just left—he had paid for that older gentleman's groceries.

And the older gentleman was surprised—stunned—it became very clear that he did NOT know that young man he had been talking to...and then this huge smile. And he announced to anyone within hearing distance, I guess Jesus has blessed me today!

Two strangers at the grocery story...and for whatever reason, one of them looked at the other...and decided to go beyond.

Do you know what it's like to WANT to go beyond?
 Not resisting it, like I was doing a couple minutes ago in this sermon, but WELCOMING THE OPPORTUNITY...

Not going beyond because you have to do it.
 But because it's a joy to do it.
 Because you can not think of being any other way of behaving in this world.

You see, Presbyterians believe that there's something in each of us that's WIRED to go beyond.

Why?
 Because each of us is created in the image of God.

And it is in the character and nature of God to do what?

To do the minimum required amount?
 To hold back, play it safe, be cautious in the face of fear?
 Is that what God is all about?
 No...

God always goes beyond—
 showering us with more love than we can fathom,
 overwhelming us with grace we never saw coming...

Going beyond is what you and I were created by God to do.

And it's the theme of this year's campaign:
 What's ONE THING you can do this year...to go beyond?

That is what we are asking every member of Westminster to consider doing for this stewardship campaign.

- If you've never given to Westminster before, maybe the one thing you can do is to make a pledge to our church. If every member who does not currently give to Westminster were to give \$75 each month, we would make our goal this year.
- Or if you've always pledged a particular amount or given a particular percentage to our church, maybe the one thing you can do to go beyond is to raise your pledge in a way that stretches you.

Our pledge goal for this year is \$275,000 more
 than what was pledged last year.

It's an 11% increase.
 And there are plenty of reasons that the Session has set that goal.

One reason is that this is what we need to accomplish our goals of connecting, serving, and growing in the ways that God is calling us to do.

So the Session unanimously said, we need to ask for what we need.

There are other reasons too.

- a) How many of you have noticed inflation in the world around us? Right. And that hasn't just affected grocery stores. It's affected the operating costs of Westminster.
- b) At the same time, during the past five years, our church has grown by 300 members, or 17%. And we need to staff not only that growth, but future growth.

At the same time, as a general rule of thumb, it takes about 3 new pledges to equal the amount of one pledge from someone who has recently died, or someone who was here for years and years and years and recently moved.

In addition to all that, generosity is one of our pillars, and our Session is committed to being generous with our neighbors in the world around us.

All these are good and faithful reasons for why we set the goal that we have. But from my point of view, the primary reason we are asking everyone to go beyond is quite simple.

The primary reason we are asking everyone to go beyond this year...is Jesus.

As Presbyterians, we believe that going beyond...leads us to Jesus.

A number of years ago, I heard the story of a woman named Vera.

Vera lived in Massachusetts, attended church there. She's a convert to the faith, didn't grow up in a Christian home. Vera is originally from Cambodia, and as one might imagine, her life in Cambodia was much different than her life in the U.S.

In Cambodia, Vera had a wonderful and loving husband.

But then came the days in the 1970s of the "killing fields" and the Khmer Rouge. When the Khmer Rouge took over, Vera and her husband were separated.

He was sent to a work camp.

While he was in the work camp, Vera became ill. Word got to him that his wife was ill, so he did something that, in Vera's words, was "the most loving thing that's ever happened to me."

At midnight one evening, her husband stole his commander's bike, and rode for three hours in the darkness to be with his wife, so he could comfort her during her sickness, just for a bit...and then he rode three hours back so that the bicycle could be put in its place before dawn.

Vera said that when her husband arrived in the middle of the night, his face was swollen with bee stings. Why? He had stopped at a beehive along the way, to collect honey—to give to her as a gift.

When she was interviewed later in her life about how she came to the Christian faith, Vera said:

"My husband died in that camp.

"And in my sorrow, somebody told me the story of Jesus,

and I RECOGNIZED IT.”²

Now I realize we are not in Vera’s shoes.

But I bet if I asked each of you to think of a time when someone went beyond for you...when someone was there for you, and walked with you, and made a sacrifice for you...you would say it wasn’t just that person who was there with you.

It was Jesus.

Going beyond always leads us to Jesus.

It’s happened in this church before.

Not just back in 1968, but even more recently than that.

Let me share a story with you that many of you will remember because you were here and present that Sunday.

I wasn’t here, but many of you were here.

But I’ve heard this story a number of times since I got here.

It’s about one of the saints of our church.

She died just this past year,

but about 6 or 7 years ago,

shortly before I arrived at Westminster,

it was Commitment Sunday.

Everyone was coming forward during the final hymn with their pledge card.

² This story comes from the Rev. Dr. Tom Long’s sermon at the Festival of Homiletics preaching conference in 2009.

And she was getting on in years, and she lost her balance and she fell. Walking up with her pledge card, she fell and broke her hip at the end of worship!

So there were plenty of people who came over to help her.
And one of those people was her neighbor.

She recognized his face.
And flat on her back, with a broken hip, you know what she did?

She shot her arm up in the air, and gave her pledge card to her neighbor, so he could put it in the basket with all the other pledge cards.

Do you know what that's called?
GOING BEYOND...

Going beyond what's expected.
Going beyond what's required.
Going beyond is what she did...out of love for this church.

Now... I realize I've spent this entire sermon NOT directly answering the question, "What do Presbyterians believe about money?"

But I hope that you've already figured out the answer.

We believe that what we do with our money
is what we do with our life:
we give it away in love.

Commitment Sunday is two weeks away.

I hope you will spend some time the next two weeks—

considering the love you have experienced in this church,
and how you might be able to go beyond...

Amen.