

“Commitment Sunday Every Sunday”

Acts 4:32-37

24th Sunday after Pentecost

November 12, 2023

Westminster, Greenville

Ben Dorr

Those of you who have a sharp eye may have noticed that the scripture passage I just read is NOT the same as the one that appeared in the bulletin that was mailed out to you this past week.

This doesn't happen very often, where I change course mid-week.

But this week, I didn't feel very committed to what I originally had in mind, so I changed my mind.

Which somehow feels appropriate on this particular Sunday.

Because today is Commitment Sunday.

And our topic this morning is commitment.

As I hope you've heard throughout our stewardship campaign, we are asking everyone to make a commitment to Westminster this year, a commitment that goes beyond what you have done in the past.

If you've never pledged or given to our church, we're asking you to make a pledge, a commitment to give a particular amount over the course of the year. If everyone who does not give to Westminster right now made a pledge of \$75/month, we would reach our goal.

And if you do pledge, if you do give regularly to our church, we're asking you to make a commitment to stretch your pledge if you can, to raise the percentage that you give, to go beyond what you typically do...

Now I know it's not possible for everyone.

For financial reasons, for family reasons, not everyone will be able to do what we're asking this congregation to do, and that's ok.

But I hope, over the past 6 weeks, you have asked yourself:
**What kind of commitment is God asking me to make...
 and how can I go beyond what I typically do?**

You see, our topic this morning is commitment.

And there can be a natural hesitation when it comes to stretching one's commitment, changing one's habits and patterns—whether it's with how we give our time, or how much money we give away...

I'm thinking about something that the retired Methodist pastor, Mike Slaughter, once did at the church he was serving. Almost 20 years ago, the Rev. Slaughter was reading about the humanitarian crisis going on in Darfur, and he wanted to do something about it.

He writes:

“I stood before our congregation in the fall of 2004, and [I] said, ‘I want you to have a slim Christmas this year . . . whatever you spend on your family, bring an equal amount for hunger relief in the Sudan. Because Christmas is not your birthday; it's Jesus' birthday.’”¹

Shortly thereafter, one of the members of his congregation came into his office with a scowl on his face. This was a father who liked to take his family on a ski vacation every Christmas. That was their habit. That was their tradition.

¹ From “Christmas is Not Your Birthday” sermon series, posted by Mike Slaughter on July 25, 2011, at www.ministrymatters.com.

After hearing his pastor's appeal to give away the amount he would typically spend on his family at Christmas, he wrote a check for \$5,000, gave it to his pastor, and said:

“You've ruined my Christmas this year.”²

Our topic today is commitment.

What does it mean to make a commitment?

Of course, it's not like most of the commitments we make in our lives ruin our Christmas, or bring a scowl to our faces...

There are plenty of times when it's a JOY to do it.
When it's a delight to make a commitment.

For example, you already made a commitment at this service during the baptism(s) that took place earlier. When you stood up to promise to help raise [Conrad & Sullivan] / [Wesley] in the Christian faith, did you say to yourself:

Ugh, do I have to do this again?

Or did you say to yourself:

It is a gift.

It is a gift to be at a church where we have baptisms almost every week!

I get to do this again!

Do you see the difference?

Maybe that's why Luke described the early church in such a ROSY way in our text for today.

² I heard the Rev. Slaughter tell this story at a Festival of Homiletics preaching conference a number of years ago.

In this passage, Luke paints a glowing picture of the early church—almost like it's the perfect church, the dream church:

“Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul,” Luke writes.

“...great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.”

I mean, good grief.

Luke makes it sound like every Sunday was Commitment Sunday in the early church!

And at first blush, it can be something of a discouraging text.
Who among us wants to hold everything in common?
Who among us is ever going to sell all we have and give it away?

It feels like an impossible standard.

But I don't think Luke was aiming to DEFLATE US with this text.
I think Luke was holding up the power of God in this text.

God's power to do things—
with our lives, with our commitments—
that we never dreamed God would do.

The truth is, God can do remarkable things with our commitments.

As Paul puts it in his letter to the Ephesians, God is able to accomplish through us “far more than we can ask or imagine.”

It can happen outside the church as well as inside the church.

I recall the story of Army Ranger Benjamin Kopp.

Kopp served two tours of duty in Iraq before he landed in Afghanistan in May, 2009. Later that summer, Kopp suffered a wound in a firefight, a fight in which he was credited with saving the lives of 6 members of his platoon.

Tragically, the wound Ben suffered eventually proved to be fatal.

Before heading to Afghanistan, Kopp had designated himself as an organ donor. When Kopp was wounded and then put on life support, his mother set up a CaringBridge site to let family and friends know what was going on.

One of those family members worked with a woman named Judy.

Judy was in need of a heart transplant at the time. She had been on the waiting list for over 70 days, and her heart was failing.

It turned out that Judy was a perfect match for Ben's heart.

"Where does one life end and another begin?" asks Robert Poole, who tells this story in his book about soldiers who served in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"...in the years since her transplant, Judy Meikle has developed an inexplicable craving for green beans, which she had detested for half a century. When she told [Ben's mother] about it, there was stunned silence on the telephone line.

“That’s Ben’s favorite dish,” said his mother, Jill. “That’s what he always ordered when we went to Ruth’s Chris Steak House. He wasn’t as interested in the steak, just the beans.”

“There isn’t a day that goes by that I don’t think of [Ben] and thank him,” Judy says.

So she makes regular visits to Arlington Cemetery to visit Ben’s grave, where she passes the time talking with this Army Ranger whom she never met but whose heart literally beats inside of her...³

Our topic this morning is commitment.

What God can do that **goes beyond** what we imagine God might do.

And God doesn’t just do this when life is rosy!

God does incredible things with our commitments, even when life does NOT go *the way God or we hoped it would go...*

- When a marriage falls apart, God can still work wonders through your commitment to you kids.
- When you no longer belong to the church you were a member at for many years, God can do remarkable things through the faith and hope that still resides in you.

Do you know what God will do with whatever commitment you make today?

Of course not.

³ Robert M. Poole, *Section 60 Arlington National Cemetery: Where War Comes Home*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2014. One can also see a news clip about this story on YouTube.

None of us know.

And that, my friends, is the good news of the gospel.

The power of God to do that which we never dreamed God would do. That's why we're asking everyone to go beyond in their commitment this year...

The Presbyterian pastor Tom Are tells of what happened in one of his former churches during their stewardship campaign. The church decided that year that they would do a campaign in which every member of the church received a personal visit.

Every person or family—their name was written on a notecard. And each member of the Session would get notecards with names. They tried to get names of people they knew.

But Peter, one of the elders, was running late and got there late and got a name he didn't know.

It was Rebecca.

He asked Tom, his pastor, what he knew about Rebecca.

Tom said he didn't know Rebecca, but Peter should still visit her.

So Peter goes to visit, pulls up to her house.

The yard is a mess.

Weeds everywhere, lawn needs mowing.

House was peeling paint.

It looked like nobody lived there.

He walks up, knocks on Rebecca's door.

The door opens, but only enough for Rebecca to see who's there.

“Yes?”

“Rebecca, I'm Peter, I'm from the church.”

“I don’t go to that church anymore.”

“Well, that’s fine, but I just wanted to check and see how you’re doing.”

“I don’t go there.”

“Well, I just wanted to stop by.”

“Thanks for coming.”

And she closed the door.

The next day Peter’s back at work. It was getting cold that time of year, and Peter was warming himself with a space heater he had in his office...and when he did that, he remembered what he saw the previous day.

Because you see, when Rebecca opened the door, with the chain on the door, just peering out at Peter—he noticed she was wearing a coat.

Not outside her house. Inside her house.

So he went by her house again after work.

Knocks on the door, she opens the door.

“It’s Peter.”

She looks at him: “You know you’ve already been here, right?”

“I know...but I’ve got a space heater with me. I was just wondering if you might like to use it?”

There was a LONG PAUSE.

“You reckon you can show me how to use it?” she said.

So, she invited Peter inside.

Inside was no better than outside.
Rebecca was a hoarder.
Junk was everywhere!
It didn't look like anyone but Rebecca had been inside that house...in years!

But Peter showed her how to use the space heater.

And a couple days later, he was out buying groceries, and he found himself thinking about Rebecca...he bought more than he needed, and he drove to her place from the supermarket with an extra bag of groceries.

“Rebecca, it's Peter.”

“You want your heater back?”

“No, I was, well...just at the store, picked up some extra things, thought you might want them.”

Peter said he found himself heading over to Rebecca's house every month or so.

He asked to clean up her yard, and she let him do that.
And he tried to clean up the inside, she wouldn't let him do that.

This went on for a year and a half, and then one day, Rebecca died.
There was a small funeral for Rebecca at the church.
Not many people there, but Peter was there.

After the funeral, Tom Are said to Peter:
“You know you were the church to her.”

Peter said:

“No, Tom. It’s just that whenever I kept going back, it was as clear to me as it’s ever been that Jesus was in that house.”⁴

You know what our topic this morning is, right?

Commitment.

And Commitment Sunday is one of my favorite days in our church year.

Because when I see each of you coming forward,
during the final hymn, with your pledge,
what I see is what Luke described long ago.

I see a church of one heart.
I see a congregation of one soul.

When you come forward this morning,
make no mistake,
it is as clear to me as it’s ever been—
that Jesus is in THIS house.

And it is his heart that’s beating inside of you.

(Amen.)

⁴ As told by the Rev. Tom Are in a sermon preached at the Bold Word preaching conference at Mo-Ranch, in Hunt, Texas, 2015.