

“What Did You Bring to Church Today?” November 10, 2024  
2 Corinthians 8:7-12 Westminster, Greenville  
Commitment Sunday Ben Dorr

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Today is the final Sunday of our sermon series on the Apostle Paul.

And our topic today is commitment.

As you just heard, Paul writes to the church in Corinth:

“Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.”

He’s asking the Corinthian congregation to make a generous commitment. To do what the Macedonian churches have done, and extend themselves, take a risk, take a chance.

It’s all right here, in chapters 8 & 9 of 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians.  
It’s Paul’s stewardship sermon.

Now...if you get bored with my sermon today, I won’t take offense if you decide to read Paul’s sermon instead...just don’t do it right now.

Stay with me a little bit longer.

Our topic this morning is commitment.

It’s an appropriate topic, because today is Commitment Sunday.

The day when we bring our pledge cards forward and promise to give a particular portion of our income to Westminster in the coming year.

Now, I never know how much attention gets paid to the title of a sermon.

The title of this sermon—

“What Did You Bring to Church Today?”

--it’s not meant to be a trick question.

It’s a straightforward question.

I hope y’all brought your pledge cards today.

If you forgot, that’s fine—you can find one in the pew rack in front of you....

It’s not a trick question.

But it is a multi-layered question.

Because I suspect that you brought more than your pledge with you this morning. I suspect, that in your head and in your heart, you carried many commitments with you into this room today.

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So let me invite you to consider those commitments right now.

And as you do, I’m going to explore four possible commitments that you’re carrying.

The first—has to do with politics.

Don’t worry.

There’s no need to flee the room.

I do think it’s important to acknowledge, on this Sunday after our national election, that when it comes to politics, we have members who are all over the political spectrum.

We have members who were elated this week.  
And we have members who were frustrated this week.

Westminster, as you well know, is a purple congregation—but beneath that purple haze, I suspect that most if not all of you brought with you today...a strong commitment to our country.

A deep desire for our country to be the best version of itself that it can be.

And while we will NEVER all be in agreement about what that “best version” looks like, I hope we can be in agreement about three things:

- a) As Christians, we believe there is no such thing as a political savior, because we already have a Savior, and his name is Jesus.
- b) That each of our most firmly held political beliefs will always have blind spots in those beliefs, and we need Jesus to work through other people, to help us listen to our neighbors, to help show us those parts of the body politic that we, in our own lives, fail to see.
- c) As followers of Christ, we are committed to a way of life that runs deeper than partisan politics, one that treats every child of God with love and dignity and respect.

I hope you brought a commitment to each of those with you today.

And I wonder if a faithful way for Westminster to respond to our country’s ongoing polarization...is conversation.

A commitment to talk with one another, no matter the topic?

For example, there have been so many positive responses to the adult education classes Leigh continues to organize, classes that periodically deal with difficult political subjects:

Israel and Palestine this year,  
religion and racial justice last year.

At a speech he gave in 1962, Martin Luther King, Jr. put it like this:

“[People] often hate each other because they fear each other, and they fear each other because they don't know each other. They don't know each other because they can't communicate with each other, and they can't communicate with each other because they are separated from each other.

**“And I think one of the great tragedies of life is that more often [people] seek to live in monologue rather than dialogue....”<sup>1</sup>**

On this Commitment Sunday, what would happen if we renewed our commitment to avoid monologues and engage in constructive dialogue—both in here and out there?

Not just to learn about where we differ.

But to see how we can come together, as Christ's church, to figure out new ways to love the people Christ spent so much of his time loving:

The stranger. The outsider.  
The vulnerable. The voiceless.

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<sup>1</sup> From “Towards Freedom,” transcript of a speech given by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at Dartmouth College, May 23, 1962, at [www.dartmouth.edu](http://www.dartmouth.edu). This speech can easily be found through a Google search. The bolded line is my emphasis.

You see, our topic this morning is commitment.  
And commitment can be a funny thing. A complex thing.

Let's move from politics...to PETS.

You see, as much as we'd like to think we know what we're diving into when we make a commitment, more often than not...we don't have a clue.

And pets are a terrific example.

You've heard me talk many times from this pulpit about our dog.  
I know it sounds like I'm tired of her.  
Like if my family let me, I would get rid of her.  
But that's not true.  
Believe it or not, I'm committed to our dog.

Which means I've come a long way.

You see, I didn't grow up with dogs, and I have a vivid memory of the FIRST time I got a dog.

This was over 20 years ago, when I was in my late 20s.  
It was before I was married.  
I was living on my own in Dallas.  
And one day, I thought—you know, I should get a dog.

Got her from a rescue agency, she was a 3-year-old golden retriever. And I was excited about my new pet...but upon arriving at my condo, we ran into some problems.

That first afternoon, she started barking—like she needed to go out and take care of her business. But she had just been outside, there was no reason to take her out again.

So I decided to show her who was in charge.  
 She barked. I ignored her.  
 She barked. I ignored her.  
 She stopped barking.  
 I thought...yeah, I'm getting the hang of this.

Then I noticed why she stopped barking.  
 She no longer needed to go outside.  
 Because she had just taken care of her business...all over my  
 kitchen floor.

My first time with a dog—I could never get the hang of it.  
 She needed more time with me than I was willing to give her.  
 So after one week, I decided to give her back.

And the woman from the agency who came to pick the dog up—  
 she looked like she didn't usually have to do this. So as she took the  
 dog's leash, she said to me, **“Maybe next time you get a pet,  
 you should try a goldfish.”**

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Our topic this morning is commitment.  
 And never mind my history with dogs.

I'm not sure we ever know what our lives will look like, after we  
 make a commitment.

Let's move from PETS...to PEOPLE.

Do you remember our first text for today?

James and John ask Jesus if he will let them sit, one at his right  
 hand and at his left, when Jesus comes in glory.

To which Jesus says:

“You do not know what you are asking.  
Are you able to drink the cup that I drink...?”

Jesus is asking them if they are ready for that kind of commitment.  
But not just James and John.  
Jesus asks us too.

And we sometimes get it in our heads that to drink the cup that  
Jesus drinks means that we have to do it in one big gulp. But more often  
than not, Jesus asks us to SIP.

Drink the cup...one sip at a time, one commitment at a time,  
one selfless act of love at a time...

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I will never forget, almost 25 years ago now, attending my sister's  
college graduation.

Dr. John Hope Franklin gave the commencement address that day.

Dr. Franklin, you might recall, was one of the foremost historians  
of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

His groundbreaking work, “From Slavery to Freedom,” is  
considered one of the definitive histories of the experience of Black  
Americans.

Franklin held a PhD from Harvard, and over 100 honorary degrees.  
He assisted Thurgood Marshall in *Brown v. Board of Education*.  
He was a recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1995.  
His career was as successful as any one of us could ever hope  
for...

When he spoke at that graduation, Dr. Franklin was 85 years old.  
Sharp mind, engaging speaker.

And he told a story about something that occurred some 60+ years earlier in his life.

It was during his first year of graduate work at Harvard.  
Someone knocked on his door.

Not a student.

It was a fellow boarder, someone who was renting a room in the same house in which John Hope Franklin was living that year, and who also was a veteran of WWI.

“He politely said he did not wish to disturb me,” said Dr. Franklin, “but he had received something that he was having difficulty reading....When I took a look at the letter and saw how clearly it was written, I concluded that [this gentleman] was unable to read.”

“Pretending that I too found the letter confusing...I did as he asked [and helped him decipher the letter].”

“When I had finished...I suggested that perhaps he and I could work together to ‘brush up’ on his reading. He thanked me but said that he was certain that I did not have the time.”

“I’ll make time,” John Hope Franklin said.

And throughout the course of that busy year, this gentleman came by John Hope Franklin’s room at 5pm each afternoon, and they would work together for 30 minutes.

Every day. Every afternoon.

They made a commitment to one another.



## One sip at a time...

Dr. Franklin taught that gentleman how to read and write.

After Dr. Franklin shared that story, he told all of us in that auditorium that he was as proud of what he did with that WWI veteran as he was of any of the other accomplishments in his life.

And then he asked my sister's graduating class to think about that, as they went about deciding what to do with their lives...<sup>2</sup>

Do you see how this works?

When Dr. Franklin agreed to teach that man how to read, did he know what would happen?

He knew he wanted to help change that man's life.

What he didn't know at that moment was how reaching out to that man, making a commitment to that man, would end up changing his life too.

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And the good news this morning is that you and I can find commitments like, **small sips of the cup like that,**  
right here at Westminster.

Not just on Commitment Sunday.  
But every Sunday.

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<sup>2</sup> Some of the details for this story also come from John Hope Franklin's autobiography, "Mirror to America," New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2005. The commencement address was given in May, 2000 at Pomona College.

Whenever we stand up during a child's baptism and say, "We do," whenever you commit to serve on the Session for three years...when you say, I don't have young children, but I'll help out with children's church once a month....

When you say yes, I'll help teach Sunday School, I'll go on the Middler Retreat, I'll go to Puerto Rico on the Witness & Service trip this February, I'll raise my pledge for the coming year beyond what I feel comfortable doing...

you know what you're doing, don't you?

When you stretch your faith commitments to a place you never thought you could go, you know what you're doing?

You're saying, Yes to Jesus.  
Jesus, I want you to change MY life.

Have you thought about the commitments you brought to church today?

I hope you haven't forgotten this one.  
It's the fourth commitment I want to discuss, and it's most important one.

We're going from politics to pets to people...to PROMISE.  
The promise, the commitment, that Jesus has made to you.

You see, Jesus promises not only to love you.  
Not only to forgive you.  
Not only to find you when you get a little lost...

Jesus also promises to get behind your defenses.

Because we all have defenses.

Whether it's our bank account or our busy schedule, whether it's our successful career, or the wounds we carry, whether it's our political ideology or all the distractions we love to dive into....in the end, none of those defenses will work.

Jesus will find you.  
And in his love, he promises to change you.

That's why I love Commitment Sunday.

When I see you coming forward, I don't just see you.  
I see Jesus...changing you—  
    making your love more like his love,  
    making your life more like his life  
        one small sip at a time...

Amen.