



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker -
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Free Riders Welcome Here

Scripture Lesson: Luke 15:20-32

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”—Matthew 11:28

But when he heard this, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. . . . For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”—Matthew 9:12-13

Preface to the Scripture Lesson:

Our Scripture Lesson, from the New Testament, The Gospel of Luke chapter 15, verses 20-32, is the second-half of a familiar story. We call it the story of the Prodigal Son, but you might better call it the story of the no-good, ungrateful, disrespectful, irresponsible, spendthrift, shameless, free-riding, free-loading younger son.

At the beginning of the story, this younger son asks his father to give him his share of the estate immediately. By doing this, what he’s really saying to his father is this:

“Dad, it wouldn’t bother me a bit if you were already dead, but since you’re not, give me my inheritance now—and then I’m outta here.”

Later in the story, when the boy has blown through all his money in a faraway land, he’s in desperate straits and hungry, with no place else to go. So he decides to go back home. Like so many of us who have ever come home at an unexpected hour facing an uncertain reception from our parents, he works up a little spiel in hopes of appeasing the parental wrath.

“Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ So picking up with verse 20, listen for God’s Word . . .

Some books were meant to be read and then put down; others to be read and then picked back up to be re-read; still others, to be thrown across the room.

That quotation was on my mind this summer, because I was reading books on stewardship. (Stewardship, you know, is the word we use in church for fund-raising.)

Oh, the authors of these books mean well, they want to help. They’re almost always pastors, or former pastors who have become “stewardship consultants,” and they all pretty much say the same thing: “It’s a new day, pastor. It’s not your Father’s Offering Plate anymore. In the old days, the church had a special place—first place—in people’s giving, many people tithed (that’s the Biblical mandate—the first 10% of your income to God), so you didn’t have to do much for stewardship but give a sermon . . . or two . . . or three . . . just to remind them; and send out a letter . . . or two . . . or three . . . just to remind them. But the old days are long gone; nowadays people feel no such loyalty, no such obligation; they see the church as just one more non-profit, just one more institution, among many others, vying for their charitable dollars. So pastor, you and your stewardship committee better wake up and get with the program: you need to adopt the strategies of those other non-profits, or they will EAT YOUR LUNCH. You need to identify your various target audiences, and market, market, market, brand, brand, brand. It was at this point that I would throw the book across the room—THWACK!!!!—right into the wall. Adding—OK, shouting—a few choice words of my own in the process. “Right, that’s just what Jesus said at

the end of Matthew's Gospel: "Go and make target audiences of all nations, branding them in the name of Mammon, Mammon, and Mammon."

And then I'd turn on the Reds game, seeking some measure of solace. . . reading books on stewardship and seeking solace in a team that ended up losing 94 games for the second season in a row . . . it was a long summer.

But the next night, because I had a Stewardship Ministry Team meeting later in the week, I would pick up that book again, or another one like it. Here's what I read:

Nowadays, people, especially younger people, don't like institutions; they distrust them; they see them all as self-serving. So, pastor, don't talk about the church—it sounds like an institution; and don't talk about the church budget and why the church needs money. Budget numbers and utility bills don't move anybody. No, no, no: Tell them stories, stories, pastor, stories—stories about people's lives being transformed in the church, younger people especially; and, pastor, sermons won't cut it anymore; nowadays, people don't really listen to sermons; make a video, a video of people telling their stories about how the church has transformed their lives . . . and if you can get them tearing up a little on camera . . . well, all the better.

THWACK!!!!—right into the wall. Me, shouting: "Oh, you're right! I know people, lots of people, including younger people, whose lives have been transformed at Westminster: The Holy Spirit, has often moved through this church and its people to do something beautiful by God for God. . . And when I hear of such an thing, this is what I'm supposed to say?!?: 'Thank you, Jesus, thank you,—now we finally have something for the Stewardship video?'"

OK (sigh): Who's the starting pitcher for the Reds tonight? . . . Never heard of him.

The next night: one more time back to the stewardship books. Here's what I read:

People want to feel that their dollars are supporting not just something good, but something successful. You need to project an image of success; people don't want to throw good money after bad. People like winners—that's what makes them feel good, and people like to feel good about themselves when they give their money.

THWACK!!!! "Yes, but our Lord was a loser." (I was really shouting now.) "His earthly ministry ended in failure. He died alone, rejected by his own people, betrayed and abandoned by his friends, feeling forsaken by God, when he himself was the beloved one of God, when he himself was without sin. He died in agony—physical, emotional, and spiritual—hanging on a cross. And he told us to pick up our cross and follow him. Maybe, just maybe, it's not all about projecting an image of success and feeling good about ourselves." THWACK!!! I threw another book against the wall—a hardback, this time, not even related to stewardship—just to make my point.

The next morning, I happened to be leaving my apartment at the same time my next door neighbor was leaving hers, and I noticed she was gave me this surreptitious, sideways-sort-of glance. And that evening when I got to the Stewardship Ministry team meeting, where we were supposed to discuss the most recent book we'd read, I could see them all exchanging the same glance: "I wonder what's he not going to like about this one?"

I don't mean to be difficult, I really don't. And the times are changing; they have changed—I recognize that. And because the times have changed, because people do not identify as much with institutions anymore, the church, like many other non-profits, is more and more beset by the free-rider problem. The free-rider problem: when those who benefit from goods, services, or social practices do not pay for them, or at least do not pay their fair share for them. Most non-profits suffer from the free-rider problem, but perhaps it's most noticeable in Public Radio: it's estimated that only about 10% of public radio listeners actually pledge—give money—to their local stations, leaving 90% of the listeners as free-riders. The older brother in the Prodigal Son Story complains that his father is letting his younger son get away with be-

ing a free-rider, even a free-loader: “That son of yours took all that money out of our family home and business, put nothing back in, and now that he’s come back, he not only gets to reap all the benefits—but has have a party thrown in his honor?!?! You gotta be kidding me!!”

And to an extent (but only to an extent) he’s right: free-riders are anathema to any organization; too many of them and the institution collapses, and the benefits disappear.

So the problem: how do you get people to identify with, and support, these institutions, to acknowledge the benefits they receive from them, and so to pull their weight, to contribute their fair share?

Hence, the past summer on the Stewardship Ministry Team, we came up with a great theme for the Stewardship this year: “As the Spirit Calls Us: Growing the Legacy We’ve Inherited.” You can hear it, can’t you? The idea that, as members of this church, we are part of something greater than ourselves—that’s what Bob’s vision communicated so powerfully: we are part of the this great cloud of witnesses stretching backward and forward in time, and this—and this, this is what gives us our identity as part of God’s people. This is something that we didn’t create, but that we do benefit from (that’s the legacy part); and so we need to pull our weight, to contribute so that we and others, especially future generations, can continue to reap the benefits (that’s the growing the legacy part) perhaps even in some new ways (that’s the As the Spirit calls us part”) “As the Spirit Calls Us: Growing the Legacy We’ve Inherited.” It’s a good theme. I like it. I helped develop it. I voted for it.

But this week, I decided to develop my own theme. I haven’t told the Stewardship Ministry Team about this; haven’t really told anybody. I’m unveiling it today, right here, right now. To you—in this sermon. You ready? Here’s my new theme . . . Are you sure you’re ready? OK the new theme for the 2017 Westminster Presbyterian Church Stewardship Campaign is . . .

Don’t Give.

Yes, that’s right: Don’t give: be a free-rider. It’s OK: Jesus loves free-riders. Jesus loves us all.

In fact, when it comes to God’s love and grace in Jesus Christ, we are all free-riders, no matter how much we put in the offering plate—tithing isn’t even a drop in the ocean towards paying back that debt.

He died alone, rejected by his own people, betrayed and abandoned by his friends, feeling forsaken by God, when he himself was the beloved of God, when he himself was without sin. He died in agony—physical, emotional, and spiritual—hanging on a cross. For us. He paid the price for us; he bore the weight and the punishment of our sin. For us. So that we might reap his benefits: so that we might have life; so that we might have life with God and one another; so that we might have peace, a peace that passes all understanding, a peace that the world cannot give.

So don’t give: be a free-rider. It’s OK: Jesus loves free-riders. Jesus loves us all.

So don’t give. Jesus will still love you. This church will still love you; and you will still reap whatever benefits this church has to offer you, as part of his body. I promise. And I can promise that because he promised that.

Now, I know I haven’t always talked like this. In years past, I’ve offered any number of arguments in favor of giving to the church. One closest to my heart—because it’s been my heartfelt experience—is that giving to the church is a spiritual discipline. Sort of like exercise is a physical discipline. I don’t always want to do it, or like to do it; sometimes I have to make myself do it, especially at the beginning. But over time, I feel better when I do it—feel better in a real deep-down-inside-this-is who-I-am and what-I-want-to-be sort way, not a superficial-this-is-the-image-I-want-to-project-to-the-world-and-what-I-want-the-world-to-think-about-me sort of way. And yes, some years, in January, when I get that statement of my previous year’s giving, I look at the number at the bottom, and think, “You know, I could have done other things with that money.” But then I think: “No, this is what I want to do, it’s what I’m called to do, what I’m given the grace to do: to live a life ordered in faith and gratitude towards God, and that includes what I do with my money.”

That's all to the good, and I still believe it. The problem is that when Jesus came to earth, he did not say "Come to me all you who are living lives ordered in faith and gratitude towards God, and that includes what you do with your money, and I will give you your due reward." No, what he said was "Come to me all you who are weary and heavy-laden and I will give you rest." When Jesus came to earth he did not say, "I came to call those who are in good spiritual health." No, what he said was this: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick . . . for I have come to call not the righteous but the sinners."

So now that I've started this "Don't Give" theme, I mean to stick to it. But I feel that I ought to at least make one nod to our earlier theme, *As the Spirit Calls Us, Growing the Legacy We've Inherited*, just in case the Stewardship Ministry team might be a little put out with me right now.

If you're going to give, if you're going to go against my new campaign theme, if you're going to pledge, do it because there needs to be one place on earth that welcomes and loves free-riders, that openly and joyfully proclaims God's love in Jesus Christ to all free-riders, because we are all free-riders. Do it so we can open our doors to others who need help, hope and healing, so we can go out those doors to others who need help, hope and healing, because we have found those same things here. Pledge because there needs to be one place on earth that openly, joyfully, proclaims, by its very existence, and by everything that it says and does, that here and in him, the weary and heavy-laden can find rest, here and in him, the sin-sick soul can find healing and health through the Great Physician.

And pledge because no other non-profit—for all the good they do—does that.

Am I now trying to make you feel good by projecting an image of a successful church? No, because I don't need to: you know the joy, the deep joy, of being part of the church here at Westminster—yes, the church, a human institution with a budget and utility bills, but also more than that, the Body of Christ, and the people of God.

Am I now trying to move you emotionally by telling you stories of lives that have been transformed here at Westminster? No, because I don't need to: You know those stories, you are those stories: you've had those experiences yourselves, and you've been part of them with others. Some of them are too deep for words, too deep even for video.

Am I now trying to divide you up and identify you as various target markets so we can market, market, market, and brand, brand, brand you? Good Lord, I hope not. You are my friends, and friends don't do that.

Am I going to deliver another sermon or two just to remind you of the stewardship campaign? Well, er, yes. And are we going to send you another letter or two to do the same? Well, I have to say, yes, again.

But for now, just this: When that wayward boy, that prodigal son, came home, his father threw a party, because in that house free-riders were always welcome. So God to us, in this house, God's church.

Let's not be like the older brother; let's join the party. It's been going on a long time; let's keep it going: As Bob said, "Through the Life-Giving Spirit we are privileged to experience and participate in the living legacy – joining with all those who have gone before and who are with us yet drawing us closer and deeper into the Kingdom of God." That's the party.

As the Spirit Calls Us, Growing the Legacy We've Inherited—at Westminster Presbyterian Church.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.