

Let's Complete What We Have Begun

Commitment Sunday

2 Corinthians 8:1-12
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Each year, we designate the Sunday following Stewardship Emphasis Sunday, as Commitment Sunday. So let's begin with an understanding of what it means to make a commitment. **A commitment is an agreement or pledge to give or do something in the future.** During a service of marriage, for example, that takes the form of wedding vows, pledging one's love and care and faithful loyalty to another. Ruling Elders here at the church say vows in their commitment to serve God and this congregation by providing leadership through their work on the Session and ministry teams. Commitment, then, means **involvement in a willing obligation to a person or cause.**

While many define commitment as making a promise, I prefer the more theological term that a commitment involves entering into a covenant relationship, rather than a formal contract, which sounds cold and businesslike. Commitment as a covenant agreement indicates there is an actual relationship between two people or parties. It also involves **the quality of being dedicated to a cause or activity or undertaking.**

Studies have shown, however, that as a society we are less likely to make a formal commitment than in the past. That includes not only a commitment between two people, but also between a person and an organization or institution. We are certainly experiencing that as a national trend as it relates to making a commitment to organized religion. Yet studies have also shown that making commitments to institutions is cyclical. My **parents' generation**, for example and in general, were big on committing to being a member of and involved in a variety of organizations and institutional life, including church life. **They were 'joiners.' Today's younger generation, not so much.** Yet in response to those predicting the demise of organized religion in this country, many are saying "just hold on" because the cycle of organizational involvement will return. We'll see. But you and I are here this morning on the Sunday we make a public affirmation of our commitment to the life and ministry of this particular and very special community of faith.

There is an undeniable spiritual component to making a commitment. You may be surprised to learn, however, that the English word, *commitment*, only occurs once in the entire Bible, and that's in Leviticus, and it's in reference to God. But I found a story this week in the eighth chapter of 2 Corinthians that deals with this overall theme. Unfortunately, it isn't included in the Revised Common Lectionary readings. Therefore, you may not be familiar with this story – I wasn't.

The apostle Paul, in his second letter to the Christian Church in Corinth (which is in modern day southern Greece), makes an appeal to that congregation to follow through with their previous commitment to take up a collection of money to help

support “the saints” in Jerusalem. Paul has sent Titus to receive their collection. Paul appeals to their earnestness by first telling them about the churches of Macedonia, who “during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part” (vs. 2). You don’t often hear the words “abundant joy” and “extreme poverty” in the same sentence. Yet, **it is commonplace for Paul to refer to experiencing joy even while in the midst of affliction – something that I would suspect is hard for most of us to do.**

Paul explains how those churches in Macedonia voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, and that they even begged earnestly for the *privilege* of sharing in this ministry to help those in Jerusalem. **Their need to give and contribute was even greater than the church’s need to receive.**

Paul then gets to the heart of the matter with the verses that caught my attention this week. They provide a necessary reflection upon the church’s commitment to good stewardship by actively participating in God’s work in and through the ministry of a local congregation. **“It is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something – now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means.”** (vv. 10-11).

How can we apply that to our congregation? College Hill has begun many remarkable ministry efforts over the past century – according to our means at the time. Some of those have been followed through to completion, while many others remain continuing efforts, like reaching out to those in need right here in the Kendall Whittier neighborhood. And **perhaps the greatest theme that runs throughout this congregation’s history has been a ministry of social justice as an expression of our corporate spirituality.** The part that I think I like best about Paul’s message is he reminds us that if the eagerness and earnestness is there, then whatever it is we offer to God through the work and ministry of this congregation is acceptable according to what each of us *has*, NOT according to what one does *not have*. In other words, every contribution is vital. But here’s an important reminder, as stated in the *New Interpreter’s Bible* commentary:

If we wait to share until we find ourselves with surplus, we may never share because we have been subtly acculturated to think we never have enough. In the process, we readily lose sight of how much is genuinely ample – and accordingly we are sometimes blind as to how much we really have to share.

Furthermore, our sharing does not have to be solely or even primarily relegated to our goods or possessions; **our time, though we may also feel overdrawn there, is often the dearest giving of ourselves.**

So where does that leave us? It leaves us face to face with our own personal level of commitment, and this congregation’s level of commitment, to contribute to the completion of what we have begun, knowing, of course, that God’s work in the world is never done. And know it takes all of us working together in order to most effectively fulfill the mission to which God has called us.

And here’s another important reminder. **Our primary faith commitment isn’t so much to believe in Jesus as it is to follow Jesus. Living a life of faith is more about what we do with what we believe than in what we specifically believe from a doctrinal standpoint.**

If the church of the future, even the near future, has any chance of being relevant, then it will be because those of you who choose to attend and contribute experience the Sacred Presence of God in your life, prompting you to follow the teachings and example of Jesus by putting your faith into action. **And our focus, no matter how you or I understand the nature and character of God, is to be on God.** For it is the Spirit of God that gives us life, including life to our congregation. As the Spirit moves, therefore, we have a choice to make – to follow or stand still. Churches that stand still have a tendency of turning into what some call a zombie church. **We, therefore, must not neglect the spiritual nature of our individual lives or our congregational life.** Call it, zombie protection.

So this brings us back to the issue at hand – commitment. I want to close this morning's reflection on completing what we have begun with a definition of commitment as stated in a poem that I found at urbandictionary.com.

*Commitment is what
Transforms the promise into reality.
It is the words that speak
Boldly of your intentions.
And the actions which speak
Louder than the words.
It is making the time
When there is none.
Coming through time
After time after time,
Year after year after year.
Commitment is the stuff
Character is made of;
The power to change
The face of things.
It is the daily triumph
Of integrity over skepticism.*

Through our commitment to God's mission for you and me, and for College Hill, let us heed Paul's admonition to complete – to work on completing – what we have begun.

Amen.