

Commitment: Completing What We Have Begun

Commitment Sunday

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

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November 3, 2019

This being what we call Commitment Sunday, let's talk about commitment. **A commitment is an agreement or pledge to give something or do something.** While many consider making a commitment as similar to making a promise, perhaps to the point of a formal contract, I prefer a more theological term - a commitment involves entering into a covenant relationship. Studies have shown, however, that as a society we are less likely to make a formal commitment than in the past. That especially applies to making a commitment to an organization or institution, and to some extent, to an employer.

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 generationally 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.' Us Baby Boomers, not as much. Today's younger generation, even less. The study that believes generational change is cyclical predicts that organizational involvement will return within the upcoming generation or so. We'll see.

For those of us who consider ourselves people of faith, there is an undeniable **spiritual component to making a commitment.** You may be surprised to learn, however, that the word translated into English as *commitment*, only occurs once in the entire Bible, and that's in Leviticus, and it's in reference to God making a commitment. After doing some searching for a biblical reference to this theme of commitment, I found a story in 2 Corinthians 8. Since it never makes an appearance as an assigned lectionary reading, you may not be familiar with this story.

The apostle Paul, in his second letter to the Christian community 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. So, 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 the Christian community in Jerusalem. **Their need to give and make a contribution was even greater than the church's need to receive.** That is a phenomenon just as true for us today. There is psychological evidence to support the phrase: It is better to give than to receive.

Paul then gets to the heart of the matter with the verses that caught my attention. 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 – a congregation like ours. Quoting Paul, "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).

Commitment is what is needed to transform a promise into reality. So, how can we apply that to our community of faith? College Hill has begun many remarkable ministry efforts over the past century – according to our means at any given 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 its commitment to a ministry of social justice as an expression of our corporate spirituality.

The good news of Paul's message is: **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 we do not have.** 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.**

We are left 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 fully completed. And, **it takes all of us contributing together in order to most effectively fulfill the mission to which God has called us.**

The Rev. Tyler Edwards, while pastor at Cornerstone Christian Church in Joplin, Missouri, wrote a book in 2011 entitled, "Zombie Church: Breathing Life Back Into the Body of Christ. In it, he writes, "The problem that we are facing in the church today is that **we have so many Christians who have made a decision to believe in Jesus but not a commitment to follow him.**" That, of course, has been a primary critique from the progressive side of the theological and social spectrum for quite some time now.

But let's be honest, **if the church has any chance of being relevant, now and especially in the future, we need to continue to move from simply talking about God, to**

having an experience of God. That is certainly one of the things we are learning from the younger generations. That's why Edwards encourages his readers, "Get plugged in at your church. Find a way to invest yourself. **Let's change the church's problem from 'Where do we find the help we need?' to 'What do we do with all the help we have?'"**

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 on urbandictionary.com. I posted it this morning on both my personal and the church's Facebook pages.

*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.