

Commitment Through Gratitude and Trust

Commitment Sunday

Colossians 3:12-17
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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I've been thinking a lot about commitment lately, and not just because this is what we call Commitment Sunday. I have officiated four weddings in the past month. I usually go more than a year without doing that many. Honoring the commitment made between two people in love in a covenant of marriage is something beautiful and not to be taken lightly.

Commitment involves a conscious decision to make a promise, vow, or pledge to do or give or support someone or something. A commitment involves dedication to and a strong belief in someone or something. And the element of trust is deeply imbedded in any decision to make a commitment. Why would anyone commit to something or someone they don't trust?

In relation to our purpose today, we set aside this time each year to put an exclamation point upon our commitment to God, and to the life and ministry of this community of faith. It is this Sunday each fall when we make a public display in our service of worship through the presentation of our Pledge Cards. This serves to demonstrate and reflect upon the financial commitment we hope to make to the church during the coming year. And though not specifically written down, it is also the commitment of our time and talents as we reflect upon how to give of ourselves in helping and equipping College Hill to function at its fullest potential.

Let me return, now, to what is involved in the decision to make a commitment, or in being reluctant to make one. For some, it may first require overcoming any fear, trauma, or unmet needs from a *previously* unsuccessful or damaging commitment or experience. This can apply, of course, when deciding to enter into a new committed relationship with another person. It may also be necessary when making a commitment to an organization, including a church. Many people have indeed been hurt in any number of ways by organized religion, and it makes it hard for them to try again to reconnect with another congregation.

Reasons for commitment to a particular church can be a complex issue, for it often flows from more than one source or motivation. Some commit their time, talents, and financial resources to the church out of a sense of **obligation**. That decision is based on one's sense of **responsibility and duty**, as a good and faithful Presbyterian, to help support the life and ministry of the congregation and denomination to which they belong. This motivation has been a hallmark in all the mainline denominations over the past century. I often wonder just how much of my own family's weekly church attendance, when I was a kid growing up, was motivated primarily out of a sense of

obligation and duty? That's not necessarily a bad thing, for many of us are guided by a personality and temperament where being a responsible and reliable team player strongly influences how we make and live out our commitments.

Living through the Covid-19 pandemic over the past year and a half, however, has led many to reevaluate any number of their commitments in many areas of their lives, including employment. And sociologists indicate that some generations simply don't make the same level of commitments as other generations, especially to organizations. You may hear the phrase, "We're just not joiners." In fact, the concept of membership itself, generally very important to mine and previous generations, is transforming and simply doesn't carry the same weight now here in recent times.

There are other factors that motivate our sense of commitment. And some, in my opinion, are damaging and hurtful. For example, based on a misguided theology peddled by some preachers and religious organizations **there are those who commit and give out of a sense of compulsion or fear that God won't bless them unless they give to the church. That's spiritual abuse and manipulation!** Some demand nothing less than 10% of one's income. Now, giving a tithe, 10%, is fine. (In fact, that would be great!) But it becomes problematic when strings are attached that give the impression that our giving is necessary to *earn* God's favor and blessings. Therefore, as it turns out, **just as some are afraid to make a commitment, others are afraid not to.**

In response to this I like to remind folks of the words from apostle Paul found in 2 Corinthians, "**Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.**" Note that this is the opposite of a **fearful giver**. But let's face it, the church today is not the same institution it was 30 or 40 years ago – primarily because our society and culture continue to change. For instance, an ever-increasing percentage of people who are not retired work outside the home. Or, during this pandemic still have to work, but inside the home. That makes volunteering and dedicating one's time at the church difficult to fit into an already very busy schedule.

Over-commitment, admittedly to other important responsibilities in life, make it hard for many to spend much more than an hour or two at church in any given week, and preferably restricted to Sunday mornings, thank you very much. And since most congregations no longer draw membership and participation primarily from their nearby neighborhood, there are travel issues involved as well.

And when it comes to committing our financial resources, let's be honest. In our current culture, many more folks than in previous generations are up to their eyeballs in debt. That leaves little, comparatively speaking, to contribute to the church or other non-profit organizations, all of which function only out of the generosity of committed donors and supporters.

All these things, and more, contribute to make "doing church" more complicated in the 21st century. And maybe that's not a bad thing either. Institutionalized and organized religion is finally starting to face a new reformation. The current situation, however, that that no one knows exactly where that will lead us.

That leads to another factor that plays a big part in how we choose to make a commitment. It has long been understood that authentic commitment – to God and to the church, or basically to anything or anyone – flows first from a place of gratitude and trust. In other words, **there is no deep sense of commitment where there is not first a sense of gratitude and trust.** For gratitude itself is the affirmation of a bond between the giver and the receiver.

Perhaps you've noticed, as stated in the our worship bulletin each Sunday, we don't "collect" pledges and offerings, we "gather" them. Theologically, there's a big difference. As I've shared with you in previous sermons on the topic of gratitude, a Roman philosopher named Cicero, writing in the century before Jesus was born, stated, **"A thankful heart is not only the greatest virtue, it is the parent of all virtues."** Some suggest, however, that gratitude has become an ever-increasingly neglected virtue. While that may or may not be an accurate assessment, I agree with those, like Diana Butler Bass in her remarkable book "Gratitude", that **learning to be grateful and expressive of our appreciation of others, and for the blessings of life, is perhaps one of the most important qualities in developing a healthy, vibrant spiritual life and a connection with the Sacred Presence of the Divine in our midst.**

Which brings me back to the link between gratitude and commitment. In a spiritual and religious context, our commitment to the church includes, first and foremost, **deep gratitude for the grace of God working in and through our lives.** And then, **gratitude for the life and ministry of the community of faith to which we choose to belong.** And as mentioned earlier, that gratitude and trust runs in both directions. Know that I am deeply grateful for all the time, talents, and financial resources that you commit to the life and ministry of this remarkable congregation. Perhaps this is what ultimately leads us to commit ourselves, as people who choose to follow the ways and teachings of Jesus, to the calling heard in this morning's Epistle reading from Colossians 3:

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another... forgive each other... clothe yourselves with love... and be thankful...

That is a worthy challenge to each of us, to **commit ourselves to a life filled with:**

- Compassion
- Kindness
- Humility
- Meekness
- Forbearance
- Patience
- Forgiveness
- Love
- Thankfulness and gratitude (especially to God)

Hopefully, the connection each of us have with this community of faith and with each other is helping you and I to live out that commitment in our daily lives.

So, on this Commitment Sunday, **reflect upon that which motivates you to reach the place of making a commitment** – to your loved ones, your work, your association with volunteer and non-profit organizations, and yes, to the church, and especially to God. And pay special attention to **how an authentic sense of gratitude and trust contributes to your decision to make a commitment.**

Amen.