

**WHAT KIND OF CHURCH DO WE WANT? ROMANS 5:1-8; JUNE 21, 2020;
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Happy Father's Day! I'm sure our children helping to lead this worship service have warmed not only the hearts of their fathers (and mothers) but of all our hearts today.

I know we're celebrating dads this morning but hearing those sweet voices and given this world of uncertainty we're living in, what better way to spend an hour on Father's Day than to ask: What kind of church are we passing on to our children? Which begs a larger question: What sort of world is it we're shaping?

Our ancestors at WPC lived in a time of similar flux and change. They responded bravely to the forces of their age: massive immigration, booming industry, burgeoning poverty, and growing fear of an anarchist movement. They defined the church's purpose as help and hope for the poor.

Nor do I think for a second that they invented that purpose for this church. They were called to it by the Holy Spirit. In fact, I believe that Dr. Holmes and every one of the members in the 1890s found their way to Westminster because God had a purpose for that pastor and those people. That's how God works. God calls people to work for him.

When the mayor of Buffalo showed Dr. Holmes, shortly after his arrival as the new pastor, the living conditions of poor German immigrants on the East Side and asked for help, it was God who moved Dr. Holmes' heart when he said, "I've heard what they're doing in Chicago at Hull House, working with immigrants, helping them make a life in their adopted country, despite poverty and the long, back-breaking hours of heavy industry, plus the language barrier. We'll call ours Westminster House. You can count on us Mr. Mayor."

It was a huge undertaking building and staffing *the second settlement house* in America. But God moved the hearts of the members of this church with their new pastor and they stepped up. God has been calling this church to brave, hard, mission ever since.

I'm saying God needs a Westminster in Buffalo. *You* were called here to continue the brave, hard work of Jesus. Most of you drive past dozens of churches to get here. You would be warmly welcomed in any one of the churches you pass-by on your way to our campus. But you continue to come to 724 Delaware Ave. from East Aurora and East Amherst and 33 zip codes in between because you listened to a voice inside you beckoning you to this place. It's the voice of the Holy Spirit, the voice of the image of God in your heart, call it what you will, it's God summoning you to serve.

You see, it was *God's idea* that you join this church family. God has a purpose for every one of us here. Maybe you're trying to figure out what that purpose is. It's not always what we think it is. But God knows. Keep asking, you'll get an answer. Yes, we're called to worship God in a beautiful sanctuary with excellent music; to equip our children and young people to hear the voice of God calling them; we're here to care for one another in life's hardships and joys.

But it's service to a hurting world, building bridges between immigrants and the community in the 1890s and 2020s; it's repairing the breaches among blacks and whites, among people of faith—Muslim, Jew, Christian; it's opening full membership for LGBTQ persons. It's being Christ to the world and one another. If we lose sight of that we lose Westminster. Mission lives and breathes in the people, in you and me.

What kind of church are we passing on to our children? I start here with mission but I want to shift to money and then come back to mission. The two are inseparable.

I'm concerned about money because there's been a huge shift in America. Let me put it this way: If you sat in on a committee meeting or overheard a conversation in the parking lot you might hear something like this: "Westminster is facing many challenges. Our budget is pretty stretched. If members don't increase giving we may have to cut back on staff and program. Every member has a responsibility to give to the church to support its operations. We know times are difficult and uncertain, giving may be hard; we have to adjust our expectations."

What you're hearing there is a conversation about money minus mission. The theme is scarcity. The question is what do we do when we're afraid there isn't enough to go around? There's one answer: austerity, cut back.

I'm over simplifying for the sake of discussion. I'm not saying every conversation about money at Westminster is pre-occupied with austerity and scarcity but I'd be surprised if anyone here today hasn't heard a version of these sentiments.

In fact, we've raised almost \$3.5 million of our \$4.1 million goal for capital improvements and mission to the East Side. What I'm pointing out is a trace of a virus in our spiritual bloodstream—it's the virus of cost/benefit analysis.

It's not surprising we picked up the bug. Like any virus it spreads opportunistically, even in a healthy organism like Westminster. In society at-large it runs rampant and the result is the disappearance of good will, public spirit, and generosity that used to define the nation.

Bear with me. Cost/benefit. The thinking is the share of national wealth distributed as wages must be kept low to prevent the *cost of labor* from reducing national wealth.

Wages have been depressed. The Walton family's annual income is equal to that of the bottom 50% of American households. A massive privatization of social wealth has created a top tier richer than any time in history, hollowed out what was the driver of the American economy—the middle class; and created a burgeoning population in or near poverty. The protections of the poor and marginalized that used to define this country have been receding for years.

The richest country on earth has been overtaken with a conviction of scarcity that has become an expectation, a discipline, even an ethic. The sense of scarcity justifies itself. It reinforces an anxiety that makes it feel real and encroaching, so that generosity, even investment is considered too risky. The psychology of scarcity defines all wealth as privately gained in a harsh Darwinian survival of the fittest and diminished by claims of the wider society like minimum wage, universal healthcare, preservation of national parks to name a few. The sad irony is that we employ workers in China and Mexico and bank in private offshore tax havens much of the wealth "saved" by not paying our workers livable wages with benefits.

This shift in economics is a radical departure from our past and while it doesn't define every leader, legislator or commercial enterprise, it prevails when it comes to policy.

The most powerful economy in history is so threatened by global competition it must dismantle its own institutions from schools to the post office.

Here's the virus at work: behind every choice is a cost-benefit analysis based on a view of limited wealth given more credence in a pandemic.

This thinking has been around so long it functions like settled policy. An economic theory for everything that includes the necessary discipline in this jungle of forces competing for gain and profit of tightening the belt to the point of taking away benefits from hard working people.

It seeps into every area of life from the workplace to the kitchen table where bills are laid out and paid to the organizations we belong to including the church. We hear it in conversations like the one I offered at the start of the sermon.

And so I ask on this Father's Day what kind of church, what kind of society, what kind of life do we want to pass on to our children. Reversing the trend will be hard, will shape character, take faith, and be fueled by the hope we heard our children read about from the letter to the Romans.

It is a fiction to think by tightening our belt we are saving our children from debt. If we fail to fund the institutions that make the quality of life in this country the American dream that attracted people from all over the world by the tens of millions and who labored and generated wealth in this country upon their arrival, it is a fiction to think by dismantling the inheritance we received that we will be doing our children a favor.

It will take them longer, if they are able at all, to reinstate the societal institutions, the esprit de corps that our parents bequeathed to us and that we were able to thrive in. Accumulated social capital and wealth takes a long time to generate and a short time to waste and squander.

Which brings me back to our precious children who are helping me to lead this worship service today. What kind of life will they and their friends have? What kind of future and world is in store for them?

That's a Father's Day question worth considering after you've opened the cards and boxes with thoughtful words and gifts.

I said I wanted to bring this message back to mission; it makes all the difference in the world what kind of financial lens we bring to this cherished institution Westminster. If we approach our giving and budgeting with a cost/benefit analysis we will witness the shrinking and disappearance of our mission and not long later the church itself. Because churches can't survive without mission.

What sustains churches, what is life-giving to people is not scarcity but abundance. Witness the father, on this Father's Day, of the prodigal son; witness the wine Jesus provided for the wedding at Cana; witness the fish bursting the nets of Peter, James and John when they came in with nothing and Jesus told them where to cast their nets.

By all the laws of logic and arithmetic, to give yourself and what you have away, in love, to another person or cause or mission would seem to mean that you end up with less of yourself and your resources than you had to begin with.

But the miracle is that just the reverse is true, logic and arithmetic be damned.

To give yourself and what you have away, like that prodigal dad, is to become for first time fully yourself. We can try to explain that to our children but the best way is to show them by our actions.

Look! Here's abundance! Here's faith at work!! The world is waiting for God to answer through our example of abundant giving the cold injustice, the harsh struggle, the loss of hope by so many. I can't think of a better church to leave our children. Amen.