

10/15 Dialogue Sermon
Julie Zenger, Tom Yorty

“Faith Works”

Tom: Julie, we are continuing a tradition we started several years ago of the pastor and lead chairperson of the giving campaign offering a dialogue sermon at the start of the campaign. So first, on behalf of our congregation, I want to thank you for serving this year as our campaign leader and also Melissa Balbach, your co-chair. There is an entire team of church members who contribute time, energy and leadership to raise the gifts that make our ministry possible. Elder Mimi Steadman chairperson of the Ministry of Generosity Committee leads that team and Sawrie Becker our Director of Development provides excellent staff support.

Julie: Tom, as you know, our campaign theme is chosen each year after careful deliberation as we try to find the right words and a phrase that will resonate with the heart and ministry of our congregation. “Faith Works” is the theme of our 2018 Giving campaign. We like the theme because it has many meanings. “Faith works” are literally works of faith – mission projects and daily acts of kindness in a myriad of forms. Or “faith works” could be a sentence. Faith works for us when we are struggling. Faith works for us when we are succeeding. Faith works for us when we are grateful.

We live in a busy, at times confusing and dangerous world. No one can reach their best alone. It takes the support of a loving community and moral and spiritual values that transcend human limitations. My faith is bolstered and firmly rooted in my experience as a member of Westminster. My family and I have been blessed with such care and kindness that we are inspired to be more giving. The youth programs our children have been blessed to be a part of, WEDI, and for me, singing with our amazing choir and receiving unconditional care and support from church members when I was battling a serious illness. These are just some of the ways faith works in this congregation and touches my life and the life of my family. Each one of us here can point to ways this community affects the way we live and see the world. Over time, I have come to rely on my faith more and more. Where faith works, faith grows.

Tom: Julie, your story of faith at work is wonderful illustration of what today’s reading from the Epistle of James is trying to convey. If faith does not result in the kinds of giving and care and service you mentioned it is, James writes, “dead.” The other word for faith is “trust”; our faith in God is our trust that God will guide and lead and equip us to make a difference in the world. Faith thrives in specific circumstances where we rely upon that trust to be our best, to be the people God calls us to be. If there isn’t some real difference being made for a better stronger neighborhood, a more just world, a deeper marriage we’d have to question if faith is involved. Faith is visible in the tangible ways people treat each other and care for the world; a person or congregation where faith is at work has a ripple affect – those acts of faith, love, caring, justice and stewardship spread out into the community and world.

Julie: Beginning today, and up until Generosity Sunday, November 19th, we will explore the many meanings of “Faith Works.”

At Westminster, we have a generous community of people who worship God together and who know that faith requires more of us. Our faith is alive in our spirit and in our deeds. The many acts of giving financial support are no less than acts of love and justice that strengthen this church and enable us to reach out as far as we can.

And let me say further that annual pledges enable the work of the church to be planned ahead of time, thus making financial support most effective where it is most needed. I grew up as a child of a UCC pastor, and I saw firsthand the importance of financial planning for a church year after year. My Dad’s last call in Buffalo was Pilgrim St. Luke’s on Richmond and West Utica. In the early 1980s, that church building burned to the ground. There were talks of merging with another local church. Lafayette Presbyterian Church housed the folks at PSL while they regrouped and considered options. Ultimately, the members of PSL wanted to go home – back to their original location. The details were worked out and a new church home rebuilt over the course of a year. At the time I was in college, but I got updates regularly, over the phone as to the progress of this operation. Everyone at Pilgrim St. Luke’s was relieved and grateful that they were able to continue the good works of the church during this incredibly difficult time because of the planning for stewardship, which had already been set. Without knowing the pledge dollars ahead of time, it can be difficult to plan, implement and sustain physical plant maintenance, salaries, day-to-day needs and mission of the church ... The big picture items like the wonderful mission work we do here at Westminster are virtually impossible without such a plan.

Tom: Julie, that old word from the bible “stewardship” points to exactly the kind of planning you are talking about. Stewardship is another word for careful, faithful management and planning. God made us stewards of the earth. The way we care for creation – land, sea, air quality and all the living creatures within it – reflects the depth and seriousness of our stewardship. We need, now more than ever, serious stewardship of earth’s resources that in the end don’t belong to us but are entrusted to us to manage for the welfare of creation and future generations. All of this affects not just me but my neighbor. John Calvin was right when he said we each play an important role, whether large or small, in the stewardship of the earth. It is perhaps our primary calling.

Julie: There’s another sense in which faith works; it reveals how we choose to approach the future. Westminster member, Bob Constantine recently gave some remarks at a gathering I attended. Bob referenced a sermon given by Tom Stewart years ago, in which he painted a picture of the history of the faith that built the great cathedrals. Those massive, landmark buildings required trades- and craftspeople who would devote their entire lives to plan for and lay the foundation of a church, depending on the next generations to figure out how to design and erect the walls and roof. Some of these churches took a century to complete. But they had faith that this work would be done, even though most of them would probably not live to see the completed project. Each

successive generation stood on the shoulders of the ones who came before, believing in their vision and in the work, which they felt called by God to do.

Here at Westminster, we have a rich history as well. 40 people, led by Jesse Ketchum, founded our church. Right from the beginning, Westminster members had that faith – the courage and vision – that enabled them to dream big and to focus on mission and outreach into the community. We are standing on their shoulders, as Mr. Constantine reminded us this summer. As heirs of those founders and the generations before us who enabled Westminster to be a leader in this community, we have a great responsibility and a privilege.

Tom: So the faith that was at work back in 1854 when this church was founded by a handful of community leaders is still at work all these years later; we wouldn't be here today without that first generation relying on their faith to give what they had – the land and stone and copper and slate – to build this sanctuary and start a rich tradition of serving the community caring for those in need and standing up for those disadvantaged and oppressed. What you are also telling us in that story, Julie, is that it is our hope and goal that our children and grandchildren will say someday that the faith that is at work in their lives came from the faith that is at work among and within all of us here today.

Julie: Judging from the progress to date future generations will look back with gratitude to this generation. I would like to say a personal thank you to all of the Elders, who have made their financial commitment already and are leading the way for all of us in this campaign for 2018.

Last year, we set a new record in giving by reaching our goal of \$600,000 pledged during the 2016-17 Annual Giving campaign. This year, our goal is again \$600,000. \$600,000 is a good goal but somehow I believe that we could do even better than that. What it comes down to finally is each household, each member determining how they want to manage their material resources for the support of this church. It's more than a question of sharpening the pencil and doing the math. It's a question of trust, of faith, of letting God use us – in these challenging times in which we live – to continue to make a difference in Western New York.

Tom: Well said Julie! Inspiring. I'll say "Amen" to that!