

**The Sacrament of Neighbor  
Galatians 3: 23-29  
Ann Hatfield**

As Pastor Don mentioned in his introduction to our series last week, several years ago Westminster joined our denomination's Matthew 25 initiative to focus on three, key areas of ministry:

- Building Congregational Vitality
- Dismantling Structural Racism
- Eradicating Systemic Poverty

Obviously, these three areas do not represent the sum total of the church's mission and ministry. However, the Presbyterian Church USA believes focusing on these three priorities is an urgent task for our denomination in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Today's focus is Building Congregational Vitality. As we highlight this priority, I am deeply grateful to Gail and Maria for sharing about Westminster's Celebrate Recovery ministry.

Celebrate Recovery – or CR, as it is affectionately known – is a ministry, which helps people experience freedom by addressing their hurts, hang-ups, and habits. CR participants discover RECOVERY is not a word to be feared. Instead, recovery becomes a pathway TO freedom – freedom from that which keeps them from knowing their true identity as beloved children of God.

So.....Building Congregational Vitality. The concept of "Building" is pretty self-explanatory – to construct, to make, to raise up. And the word "Congregational" we understand as referring to Westminster Presbyterian Church – this incredible faith community!

That leaves us with "Vitality."

According to the dictionary, vitality means a lively and animated character, as well as the capacity to live and develop. Vitality is the essence that distinguishes the living from the nonliving – separating what is growing and developing from what is dead. Congregational vitality describes a spiritually enlivened church community – a congregation that is active, dynamic, and thriving.

In his letter to the Galatians, the Apostle Paul explains this vital essence does not find its source in the Jewish laws, which imprison and restrict. Nor does this life-giving spirit come from within us. Rather, its source is GRACE – the free – and freeing – gift from God.

Paul fleshes that out by describing our very baptism as being “clothed with Christ.” In an act of amazing grace, God claims us as beloved sons and daughters. In Jesus Christ, all believers – including you and I – become one family.

Moreover, when we are united in Christ, the old distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female cease to be relevant in terms of our relationship with God or with each other. Anything separating us from one another is gone. And this oneness and unity in Christ is at the heart of congregational vitality.

There are MANY ways Westminster demonstrates congregational vitality. After all, this is a vibrant and active congregation! Just think back to this morning’s announcements: meal packaging, pledges, upcoming New Members class and election of officers, choir singing, prescription drug drop-off, and a Blessing of the Animals – to mention just some of the ongoing ministries. And that’s just over 8 days!

Today’s particular focus on the ministry of Celebrate Recovery is just one way to remember the sacramental nature of this thriving congregation. As the sacraments of communion and baptism provide visible expressions of God’s invisible grace, so too does our congregation provide such expressions.

As we serve and support one another with love, compassion, and understanding, you and I become visible expressions of God’s extravagant grace.

Recently, I read a lovely story of a pastor and his young daughter. They were sitting in their car outside a restaurant waiting to pick up pizza, when they witnessed a car accident. From the backseat, the pastor heard his daughter ask, “Daddy, what happened?”

Looking out the window, he saw a van sticking halfway out of a bush, just down the road. Already, people were rushing to help. The driver seemed to be communicating, and paramedics quickly responded to the scene. Eventually, their order of pizza was ready, and everything seemed basically resolved.

But NOT for his daughter. She got more and more upset. Why did the van crash? Will the people be okay? Why hadn’t she gotten to call 9-1-1?

“We could say a prayer,” suggested the pastor. However, when he finished praying, he heard loud protests from the backseat.

“No, not amen!” his daughter insisted.

“What? Why not?”

“First, we pray. Then, they go to the hospital. Then, the doctors take care of them. Then, they go home. Then, amen.”

The pastor explained that “Amen” means something like “May it be so.” It does not mean everything is fixed. It just means we are leaving the prayer with God. His daughter remained unconvinced. She refused to close the case until everyone could say “amen.”<sup>1</sup>

Building congregational vitality means we continue to live sacramentally – witnessing to the grace of God, in all we say and all we do – until everyone can say, “Amen.”

A vital, growing, and life-giving congregation allows people to share their stories, without hiding or holding back. We can walk with people through tragedy, and rejoice in their celebrations. Especially through the ministry of CR, Westminster continues to grow into a community where judgments and preconceived perceptions are set aside. We cultivate spaces where forgiveness can be shared, reconciliation experienced, and transformation can happen.

This video from Celebrate Recovery reminds us that God knows us and loves us, and we are not defined by our mistakes. Let’s watch:

### **Transcript of CR Video**

Where did your dreams go? The dreams of childhood - wishes the young and innocent heart, the hopes to make the team or to make the winning play, to make your family proud. Dreams to go somewhere – to do something, to become something, to get out ahead of the world, to leave behind your fears and worries, to see how vast and beautiful the world can be, to discover, to dare, to dive in, to know and be known, to love and be loved. All of those dreams, where did they go?

One day we wake up and we feel the weight of our decisions, the consequences of what we’ve done and what’s been done to us, the words, the actions, the lies and addictions, the shame, the cycles, the anger, the spiral. There’s an emptiness that sets in and all the years, days, and dreams that are gone. We wake up and realize we’re not as strong as we think we are, and it may have taken a great sorrow for us to realize that; but thankfully, you’re not the only one with a dream for your life.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from “Not Amen!” by Vince Amlin, *Still Speaking Daily Devotional*, September 15, 2021.

There is One. Our Maker, our Creator, the Dream Giver, who before you were even born had a plan for your life. A plan to prosper you, not to harm you. The One who imagined you, the One who delights in you, who gave up His own life for you. He has a plan for you. It's bigger than your mistakes, bigger than your regrets, bigger than all the hurts, hang-ups, and habits that have tried to steal your hope. No matter where you've been and no matter what you've done, you're not too far gone.

God is for you and His dreams for your future are good. A future of joy; a future of purpose; a future filled with redemption and renewal, promise, and possibility. Don't stop now, don't give up yet. This is the part where the story gets good, where the battles are won, where the prodigals come home, where the dead awaken to life. Your past is not your future. There is a God who does the impossible. There is more to come. Come, rejoice with us. Welcome to Celebrate Recovery.

Many of us may not remember our baptisms. The water has long since evaporated. But be assured, you are marked as belonging to Christ – clothed with Christ. You are covered by God's amazing grace.

Building congregational vitality means living into our calling to be one family united in Christ. As one vital, life-giving congregation, let us practice radical hospitality – creating a welcoming community in which all God's children are at home. May it be so. Amen.