

WESTMINSTER
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SERMON

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HEART of GENEROSITY A Complete Circle

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HEART of GENEROSITY: A Complete Circle

When each hour grinds with routine and one day bleeds into the next, we can almost feel the life drain from us. Or the opposite. Regardless of our well-coordinated calendars with spouse and kids and school and work, all it takes is one little thing to blow-up our schedule. And it seems to happen every day that something or someone from the dog getting sick to the sink backing up, leaves us a little depleted, maybe feeling helpless.

Let me get to the point.

From one extreme of living like a programmed human-*doing* and not a human-*being* to the other end of feeling uncertain despite best efforts. Most of life in between those two extremes confronts us with how little we can control.

Our desire for control intensifies from being programmed to make the best use of our time, our relationships, and our stuff. Don't we need to seize control?

Since the ancient of days, faith returns us to solid ground. Listen to the wisdom of the psalmist.

Dear God,

*Send your spirit among us that these ancient words
humble us to see our world and our lives as gifts from you.*

Inspire us to live in gratitude to you and with one another. Amen.

Psalm 24

The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it,

²for the Lord has founded it on the seas
and established it on the rivers.

³Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?
And who shall stand in his holy place?

⁴Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,
who do not lift up their souls to what is false
and do not swear deceitfully.

⁵They will receive blessing from the LORD
and vindication from the God of their salvation.

⁶Such is the company of those who seek him,
who seek the face of the God of Jacob. *Selah*

Designers of the International Space Station conceived of a seven-window dome to provide astronauts with a view of the station's exterior to visually monitor the robotic arm. They call it a cupola.

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As expected from scientists, it exists for a very functional purpose....and it became so much more.

Before the cupola, space and the earth were visible only from single, portal-like windows. One astronaut remarked, “Your favorite places on Earth would flash by the tiny window so quickly, you couldn’t take them in. But from the middle of this dome...(you have) the best window imaginable for looking at our world.”

The cupola expands into a panoramic view. Of course, the distance from space dissolves national borders and the land masses almost merge with oceans.

Astronauts report feeling a cognitive shift as they watch the fragility of our planet below them, something they call the “orbital perspective.” That renewed perspective shapes them from the moment they arrive at the station and influences them even after they return to Earth.¹

¹ I am indebted to the Rev Pen Peery’s sermon, “Ownership: The Big Picture,” delivered on Oct 13, 2024 at First Presbyterian of Charlotte for opening my awareness to the cupola and its impact. All sorts of articles recounts astronauts’ experiences. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/02/science/space-station-cupola.html>

I often wonder about the two astronauts whose eight-day mission now stretches to at least eight months if they return to earth next year.

When not working, the mission commander Sunita Williams spends her time in the cupola. She puts this delayed journey into perspective with,
“It’s so silly...We take life a little too seriously on Earth. We get aggravated with some of the littlest, stupidest things that really we shouldn’t because this is *our one* big planet.”²

To sustain her faith, she carries a sacred Hindu text, the *Bhagavad Gita*, a study in humility. Before lift-off she and her partner Butch Wilmer huddled together with the ground support crew to pray. Wilmer told reporters before the flight, “We trust in sovereign God. Whatever the plan is, we’re ready for it, whatever that might be.” His wife claims that faith that *God is in control* gives him and their family great peace.

Both astronauts bring their scientific critical thinking and experience to anticipate, respond, and carry out their mission. Each of them remains humbled by how little they control. And each of them nurtures a sense of peace from their respective awe in the divine.

² <https://www.wgbh.org/news/local/2024-10-16/astronaut-sunita-williams-says-being-in-space-puts-lifes-troubles-in-perspective>

That's exactly what this ancient psalm asks of us: to stop and notice who you are in this world.

It contains that strange word peppered in other psalms – *Selah*.

Selah is a liturgical instruction. Whenever a psalm instructs *Selah*, it asks us to take a moment. The psalm is telling you to take a moment to consider what you just heard, said, or sang.

Don't just go through the motions or recite the words without engaging your heart and mind. For example these are other instances of reading *Selah* in a psalm: Take a moment to accept your humanity because you can't do this on your own, nor do you have to. Take a moment because your God deserves this time. You need this time. *Selah*. Take a moment to seek God as your refuge and strength. *Selah*. Remember that God is your help. *Selah*.

The passage we read from Psalm 24 ends with *Selah*, asking us to go back to the beginning of the psalm. It asks us to check our perspective on life before reading further.

The first line states the most important and overlooked fact of reality: everything in existence, including us, belongs to God. God owns the world from God's generous heart.

When we get so caught up in our attempts to be in control or wrest control from others, that is exactly the time to ponder to whom the world belongs.

Do we believe the world belongs to a roster of nations? The state? The corporations whose products and smart phone apps count our steps and monitor our time in an attempt to make our lives easier?

The psalm begins as creation began, with God in control. God is the one who overcame chaos and subdued evil at the beginning, and still does. Take a moment to realize God's rule derives from creative goodness, not from violent coercion. God creates and never rests from ordering the entire universe to provide a stable existence for us.

This writer continues with the question: Who shall ascend to God's holy place? And immediately it answers: those with clean hands – meaning whose work does not inflict harm on others. And, those with pure hearts – meaning people whose ethics compel them to think and will themselves to God's desires.

There is an important circle created. God gives life and relationship. And every day we creatures receive the freedom to live in ways that delight our creator. We can choose to

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keep the circular motion and forward movement God initiated, unbroken and in harmony with the rest of creation.

I have the choice to live as if this is God's expansive world, forever dependent upon God, and obliged to participate as one of the multitudes. It's both humbling and liberating at the same time.

Or I may doubt God's care. If so, I need to create a circle around my life that I can control. I need to claim ownership of my possessions. If I do this, I will to live a life informed by my perspective, begin see others as predators, and however limited it may be, institute rules I control.

Isn't that where we started this sermon? Exhausted by the human-doing-ness or by the constant anxiety of losing control of calendars and time and stuff?

Selah.

The blessings of our lives – indeed our very lives themselves – are gifts from God, given for a time, and eventually claimed by the one who creates us. This is the past we share, the present we shape as stewards of creation, and the future we give to our heirs.

Today was supposed to celebrate the conclusion of the *Heart of Generosity* campaign and the gifts and pledges you made to Westminster to fund 2025's ministry programs.

Events from last weekend threw a wrench in those plans. Despite a fully inspected fire alarm system and all the work to upgrade our electrical infrastructure, when an aged electrical panel, slated for replacement at the final switch next year failed on Friday night, our life changed.

Praises go to the custodial staff and USCFD for their quick response.

Everything about this building fell dark. We lost all control.

Those of us who drove past 2040 Washington Road, meaning this building, felt the jolt of an entirely new perspective. We no longer saw the steeple light the sky, and the building stretching its arms to welcome the community.

To me, it looked like an abyss of darkness fell alongside the road.

Thanks be to God that no one was hurt. No one was hurt nor did the building that supports our ministry suffer extensive damage. Quick work by custodians and the Property

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Commission led repairs, inspections, and we returned to the building and normal operations on Wednesday.

Here's where we as a congregation received a blessing of being part of a circle, larger than just ourselves. Temple Emanuel opened their sanctuary to us.

Anyone who worshipped last week felt their warm hospitality – not merely a smile of friendliness – but a hospitality to serve our need. They saw us. They fed us. They gave us space to teach our children and worship God in a way that soothed our souls.

Against the backdrop of an election that triggered angst among us and the question of who is in control, we felt grounded by their faith and our faith to know...God...God is in control.

The more we give as God gives to us, the better our world becomes.

So today, the final Sunday of our *Heart of Generosity* series, the events of last weekend serves as a *Selah*.

Practicing stewardship, that focuses on generosity, isn't solely about raising money. That is one aspect of participating in God's circle of creation.

Practicing a heart of generosity is about perspective. Do we notice Westminster's vital role in this community that so many rely upon? Classes for those with Parkinsons. Youth. Scouts. Music. JAM. Food Drives. Counseling.

Do we rely upon this congregation to nurture our faith?

How do we support it with our thoughts, our hands, our stuff – yes our money – so that the light of Christ shines in what we do?

Selah, my friends. Give thanks that God's generous heart controls our lives. Be a part of that ever expanding and ever enduring circle.



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