

“Doing Our Best”
Romans 12: 1-13

November 11, 2001
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*Once to every man and nation
Comes a moment to decide
In the strife of truth with falsehood
For the good or evil side.*

In the wake of worldwide terror, I have wondered aloud and pondered deeply what the leadership role of the church should be in a time such as this. Should we push forward or pull back? Should we unveil a new vision for this congregation or wait for a better day? I have asked many of you to give us some guidance. You have said to me without exception, “Howard, the Church is needed now more than ever before.” Of course, you are absolutely right. In this time in history, the church is needed more now than ever before.

This morning I want to talk with you about the concept of commitment. I invite you today, to make a commitment of your prayers, your presence, your gifts and your service, through the ministry of this church, for the glory of God, and the good of the world. There is a renewed movement of commitment in our day. It is a wonderful thing to experience and share. After all, commitment is the glue that holds our lives together one with another. Commitment is an island of security on a sea of change. Commitment is an enclave of steadiness in a jungle of change. Commitment is a promise of presence in an unpredictable future. Or, as Lewis Smedes says, “Commitment is that invisible fiber that binds together a collection of individuals into a caring community.” Let the Church be the Church. Let it be known by its commitments.

LET US UNITE IN PRAYER:

When we have unveiled the vision of this congregation to this community of faith, the common response was that it is big and bold.

Of course it is! Dare we do anything less for God than something that is beyond the reach of all of us? Robert Browning said, “Ah, but our reach should exceed our grasp, or what’s a heaven for?” The vision we have cast before you these last few weeks is a kind of vision no one is going to pull off on their own. That is why the very first thing, the most prominent thing, the most urgent thing we must do together as a community of faith, is unite in prayer.

A portrait of Abraham Lincoln bowed in prayer hangs in my office. I keep it there as a constant reminder to me that leaders must always seek Divine guidance in the treacherous times of life. Lincoln once said, “I go to my knees, because I have

nowhere else to go.” I do not know about you, but I have felt that way many, many times in my life.

On September 11th, America dropped to its knees. It dropped to its knees, not in despair, but in prayer. I have never seen anything like it in my fifty-six years of living. Suddenly, no one was asking, “When is it appropriate?” “Is this the right place?” “Is it the right time?” “Are we saying the right words?” Suddenly, none of that “stuff” mattered anymore. Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, people like you and me, flocked by the thousands to churches, synagogues and places of prayer. We held hands, because suddenly we realized that deep, deep, deep in our souls we needed the guidance and intervention of God in a moment of tragedy. If we can unite like that in an emergency, cannot the faithful people of the world unite like that for the unity of humankind?

You see, I want to build an army today. I want to build an army of people today, not to drop bombs, but to spread blessings throughout this world of ours. I want a hundred people who will commit to being an intercessor for the needs of the world, to bring humanity’s needs to the throne of grace that God may see fit to bless us. I want one hundred people to do that. I want five hundred people today to say, “I will pray, by name, for the boys, girls, and youth committed to our care.” The children have been here by the hundreds all morning long. They are brought here week after week as babies for Baptism. We stand and make a promise and I am asking us to fulfill that promise, to surround every child and youth who is in this community with such an umbrella of love and prayers that the evil one will not be able to intercede in their lives. I am looking for one thousand people today who will say, “I will turn my daily life into breath prayers.” “Lord, make me a blessing.” Say that with every breath you breathe everyday. Over the years, I have discovered that prayers do not change things, but they change me.

Paul says in Romans we must discern the will of God, His pleasing, perfect, acceptable will. We discern that through prayer. You will learn the will of God when you learn to pray. Paul says in this passage in Romans that we must have a transformation of our minds; we must think in new, different and creative ways. That will happen when we consecrate ourselves to praying. You cannot be on your knees before God and keep thinking like the world thinks. You just cannot do it! Before long, your prayers will be changing. They will be changing beyond “God bless America” to “God love the world and save the world for the sake of humanity.”

Only by prayer will we learn to bless those who persecute us. Only by prayer will we be able to deal kindly with those who do evil toward us. Only by prayer will we learn the mystery of what it must mean to love our enemies. If ever there was a time we needed to get on our knees, now is the time. Will you join me in a massive group of people from this congregation who are covenanting together to pray? Let the Church be the Church. Let us unite in prayer.

LET US BE PRESENT FOR ONE ANOTHER:

Let the Church be the Church. Let us promise to one another and to God our

presence. Our text for today says, "I beseech you brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God that you present your bodies as living sacrifices to God, which is your holy act of worship." I am grateful for those who are present in spirit in the Church, but I admire those who are present in body. They just make a lot of difference in the long run. The finest gift you can offer another human being is the gift of being present with them in their lives. In the days of celebration, what is a party without someone to share it with? What is a sorrow without someone to make the journey with you? That is what presence is all about.

When Richard Nixon was struggling with his resignation, he received a letter from Harold McMillan, the Prime Minister of Great Britain. The note, in part, went something like this: *I feel impelled, in view of our long established friendship, to send you a message of sympathy and good will. I trust that these clouds will someday roll away.* Later on, it was Richard Nixon who said, "What you learn when you fail is that you hear from your friends." Who has been there for you when you were hurting? When have you been there for another in their hour of need? There is no greater gift that we could offer another person than the gift of our presence. We are not butterflies fluttering here, there, and somewhere else trying to find the sweetest nectar. We are human beings, made in the image of God and created in such a way, that we can make strong commitments and keep them for a lifetime. That is the beauty of being a human being. I invite you today to ponder those kinds of commitments. What would our lives be like if the most we could ever expect from another human being is, "I'll be there if I can, but do not really count on it." You cannot build a world that way.

So, I would like to simplify your weekends. This is partly out of experience. In my fifty-six years of life, I have never made a choice whether or not to worship on a weekend. In the home where I was raised, you would never ask that question. Since I have been an adult, I have gotten paid to go to church. I suggest a very simple way to handle your life. Why don't you as a family make a covenant with one another and God that you are going to be in church every weekend, except when you are sick or out of town. Why don't you just do that? You do it for work, you do it for school, and you do it for social functions. It makes life a lot simpler. You do not have to get up on Sunday morning and make a decision. You are just going to do it. Just go on and do it now.

Hundreds of you already do that, I know. I am aware that worship attendance in this congregation is higher now than it has ever been in the history of this church. I am also aware that in the last eight weeks, worship attendance has grown by 34% over last year. I am keenly aware there is a hunger in America to be present with one another. A great awakening is going on right now. Don't you want to be a part of it? I do. Let the Church be the Church. Let us be there for one another.

LET US OFFER GENEROUS FINANCIAL GIFTS:

We need to commit our best in financial resources for the good of this congregation and the world. When I was a kid, I used to ride my bicycle to my

uncle's house to watch my favorite television show because we were too poor to have a television of our own. My favorite series was a cop show of the Los Angeles Police Department with a star by the name of Joe Friday. Some of you are old enough to remember *Dragnet*. The thing I loved about *Dragnet* was the matter-of-fact sergeant, who regardless of the circumstances, always turned out well at the end. It was a simpler day. We could look a person straight in the eye and say, "Just the facts, Ma'am, just the facts. I just want the facts."

Let me share some facts with you. It is a fact that we need \$4.1 million to fund the ministries of this congregation for 2002. The facts are: this is 10% more than it was last year. The facts are: that 10% is going almost completely to expanded ministries for children, youth and adults, in this church and community. The facts are: there is a deep hunger in the lives of human beings to share. Do you realize that 70% of Americans did something in light of the tragedy of September 11th? They gave money, blood, or volunteered their time. Do you realize that when asked, "What does that mean for your charitable giving?" three-fourths of them said, "I'll give as much, or even more than I gave last year, because the world needs us to be giving people." Those are the facts, my friends.

The facts are: some of you are making more money right now than you have ever made before in your life, even in the last few months. The facts are: most of us in this room are much better off today than we were ten years ago. The facts are: a few of us are having deep financial trouble.

What does this mean for the Church? It means that those who have the spiritual gift of giving need to lead. God has given some of us the gift of giving. We need to lead the way. It means that ALL of us must contribute to the needs of others. Read it in the Bible. I did not make it up. It means the tithe is forever the standard of stewardship in Christian discipleship. It has been, it is now, and it needs to be in the future. The facts are: we must do it for the sake of this community and the ministry of this church.

A little kid came up to his pastor and said, "When I grow up I'm going to give you a lot of money." The shocked pastor said, "What would make you say a thing like that?" The boy said, "My daddy says you're the poorest preacher he has ever heard." If it is a matter of paying the preacher, then we can get by with less. If it is a matter of doing business, we could charge for services rendered, put a price tag on everything we do and balance the books in the finance office. It is a ministry we are talking about today. We are talking about shaping, and forming the lives of boys, girls, and adults. We are talking about your children, my children, and the people committed to our care. We are talking about touching hearts and transforming the lives of those who are here and those that have not thought yet about coming here and being a part of this community of faith. Nothing less than our best is ever enough for God. Let the Church be the Church. Let us give generously.

LET US SERVE ACCORDING TO OUR SPIRITUAL GIFTS:

And so it is we are called to serve according to our spiritual gifts. No congregation can be what it could be or what Jesus prayed it should be or what the Holy Spirit gifted and empowered it to be until every member is engaged in at least one ministry of service. It is to that end I set in motion several months ago a Lay Ministry Team and charged them with the responsibility of seeing that we equip, empower and deploy every member of this church in a vital ministry through this congregation and community. They have done a marvelous job. Most of what you see in the Narthex today is a result of their work. They are offering a class for you to find your SHAPE for ministry. We will keep offering it until we get it. When you sign to serve, you will be called and if you are not, call me.

People every day come to me and say, "Howard, how can I help? Just tell me what I can do." Today, I tell you, here are 172 things to do. You can do at least one of them and if that is not enough, there are 140 in the catalogue in the Narthex. Pick one of them. The catalogue even tells you how many hours you need to volunteer for that particular service. The church is not a spectator sport. It is a participant opportunity. Somebody here, by the power of God, will be moved to do a ministry that we have not even thought of yet. God is calling on you. Write it down on the Service Card. If there are four other people that God moves in the same way in this service, we will help you facilitate it and see that it happens. I see a great explosion of what God may choose to do in this place when people dare to give of themselves with their time, effort, energy, and talents for the good of humanity. Now is the time to be a community of servants together.

Charles Wesley wrote a long time ago:

*To serve the present age,
My calling to fulfill
O, may it all my powers engage
To do my Master's will.*

The present age is knocking at our doors. Unlike any other time in my lifetime, the present age is knocking at our doors, seeking comfort and counsel in these troubled times. The present age is knocking at our doors saying, "Can I find love in a world of hate?" The present age is knocking at our doors saying, "What can I do with this fear?" "How can I find faith in the midst of fear?" The present age is knocking at our doors saying, "What is the reason for the hope that lies within you?" I am saying to you, "God is trusting us to answer those questions.

Commitment. What a beautiful word. Commitment is not a prison. You are not locked into anything today. It is just a promise. It is a statement of certainty in a world of confusion. It is taking all of that which is unpredictable and unknown and saying, "While no one knows what tomorrow holds, there is one thing for certain, I am going to be there and I am going to share it with you." I make that promise to you today as together we make that promise to the Lord.

May God bless you as you ponder your calling. Amen.

