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One Thing is Needed

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West Valley Presbyterian Church

Our Scripture reading today is from Luke 10:38–42

As a congregation we have been anxious and worried about many things lately, as we have tried to navigate, understand, communicate and move forward in the midst of denominational turmoil.

Here we are today, about to take a survey/ or a nonbinding vote on whether to leave the PCUSA and instead affiliate ourselves with a new Presbyterian denomination called ECO – A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians. I know that many of you are here today for that reason – so that you can submit your ballot – and that will be done at the end of the service today.

I have listened and said nothing about this debate over the past months. I have tried to stay neutral in my perspective on things, endeavoring to give everyone a chance to speak and be heard.

I was also keenly aware that I could not be the one to lead you out of the PCUSA – or convince you to stay. That is something you must do. That leadership must come from within – the Presbyterian democratic form of government makes that very clear.

That is why I love the Presbyterian process. I believe that God works through his people to bring order, and balance and wisdom to things. And I believe he will do that today.

So I have stayed out of this debate until now...doing ministry...which is what I am here to do. Caring for people, writing, teaching, meeting with staff. Meanwhile, your Session has worked hard and long to research, pray, deliberate and make their recommendation. These are your leaders. You voted to have them represent you. Make no doubt about it...this was a very difficult, long and arduous process. Tears were shed and feelings were expressed on session that were

very deep and heartfelt. This process was a learning experience for Session in terms of how to best communicate and provide opportunities for everyone to be heard. Session's primary concern was that the process be as transparent as possible and be done with integrity. Believe me when I tell you there were no hidden agendas or moves made that were not communicated to you in good faith. In fact the Session did such a good job that at the last PET meeting the PET team commended Session on the excellence of their efforts and told them that they could see that every effort had been made to follow the Presbyterian process and engage people well. Nothing is perfect...there always things we could have done better in hindsight... but Session has a deep love for this church – and for you the people – and bristled at any hint of manipulation or lack of transparency. These folks really have been amazing leaders during this difficult time.

I hope you have or you will express your appreciation to Session, regardless of what side of the denominational issue you are on today. I have never seen people work so hard, so diligently, with such

integrity and soleness of purpose as I have seen them work. You elected your leaders well, and I am so proud of them.

In and through all of this however, people have been inquiring about *my* perspective, what *I* think, and how *I* approach this whole situation.

So today is my turn to share with you what is on my heart.

This is a wonderful church, and you are wonderful people. I am so blessed to be your pastor.

I have been with you about 5 ½ years and have seen the Holy Spirit working in big ways because of who you are as a people.

There is so much here today that was not here 5 1/2 years ago (and I am not tooting my own horn because its you the people who have rallied to make all this happen)– Think about it -Service Worship, Mandarin Academy, Haven Christian Preschool, Tuesdays Together, Rancho Santa Marta, the Welcome Center, the Support Groups – our Hybrid Stephen Ministry Program - Christian Care Ministries, 4 Houseboats this year – a record – of 51 kids just came back from there (huge outreach), and a Service Worship Conference this past March where 91 churches attended... we also have family nights, our

all church family camp every year, and we have taken in at least 10 – 20 new members annually, we've got a new playground, an afterschool program for Hyde kids, *Crash Zone* that's going from three days a week to five days a week next fall because of the demand. Folks the Holy Spirit is moving here. People are coming to know Jesus. We are fulfilling our mission.

I'd like to continue moving forward if you want that. I would like to continue to do ministry with you. All of the rancor around this denominational issue is extremely depleting and gets us off track. I was thinking the other night...man *I wish we could have rallied and used all of our energy that we put into these town meetings and letters and deliberating to do something significant for a group of people so that they could experience the love of Jesus.*

On the other hand **we had to come to this moment.**

Quite frankly I am a bit perturbed that this is taking place on my watch. Your former pastor, Ron McHattie was far more conservative than I am. I am pretty middle of the road most of the time. I am also

a peace-maker and someone who believes that political issues should not be a part of Sunday morning.

I have steered clear of these issues time and again. I told the PNC (the committee that interviewed me for hire) when they came to talk to me that I believed the pulpit existed so that we could talk about Jesus – not about issues that divide us. They seemed to like that – here I am.

However, we had to come to this moment. I want to remind you that this congregation started questioning the PCUSA way back in 2001 – and actually this church became a Confessing Church way back then, which means WVPC was part of a more conservative group of people within the PCUSA.

The reason Session had to deal with the denominational issue NOW – and not wait - is that many people, because of a continued slippage toward universalism in recent years, were coming and saying to us... do you realize what the PCUSA is doing?

If you don't make a decision as to where WV stands, we will leave. I even had people in my membership class, multiple times say to me –

we will not join until you decide as a church whether you are going to stay in the PCUSA or not. If you stay we will leave and not attend anymore. And just so you know, we've lost members already to this debate. When we began these discussions about ECO more progressive folks came to me and said, if you go to ECO we will leave. So session was between a rock and a hard place.

I just want you to know that we are not here today doing this survey vote because a couple of people stirred the pot.

Because a few of our leaders said, "*Hey...we've got a great idea. Let's bring up a controversial issue that will split the church. Can't wait!*". No. This split is happening across the nation and has national as well as international attention. I just got an email yesterday from a clergy friend in Georgia who asked me...what are you doing about the denominational issue? Everyone is struggling with this...not just us.

Approximately 25% of the churches in the San Jose Presbytery are seeking dismissal which represents over 40% of the membership. 258 churches have already left the PCUSA nationwide in the past two

years. So it isn't just us and our little dilemma. This has gained national and international attention because of the scope of the problem.

Unfortunately for us, today, as for so many churches, this is a no win situation. Whatever the outcome of this debate people who we love in Christ will leave this church.

So let me clarify any misconception, or miscommunication that may be rumbling about.

I as your pastor completely support the unanimous recommendation of Session to move from the PCUSA to the new Presbyterian denomination called ECO.

That is what I would like to see us do . I think it is a good fit for West Valley Presbyterian Church given who we already are – not a perfect fit but one that is far more in line with the scope of our mission “to know Christ and make him known”.

I hope you have done your research. I hope you aren't voting from a place of emotion or listening to rumors without having looked at the facts. Session has put a lot of material out there for you. I hope you are voting responsibly today.

And let's just name the elephant in the room. The elephant in the room is what do we do with the gay community? Do we marry them in the church? Do we ordain them and make them pastors? Is this God's will?

Some of you say "Yes absolutely". Some of you say "No. absolutely not!" ECO defines marriage as between a man and a woman. That is why we are having such a debate. I am on the more conservative side of this issue and if you want to talk to me about why, I am happy to do that one on one with you. I am open to learn more, I understand the issues and the concerns. I have read more about this in the last two years than practically any other topic.

But you know what? What you think about these issues is your business and ultimately not my concern. Why? Because it is a non-

essential for salvation. And as long as I am here at WVPC we will always welcome gays and lesbians into our worship and continue to break down barriers, and create community with all people who seek the Lord. I think dialogue and continued learning and growth is so important. Who knows? I might change my mind one day. Who knows? You may change your mind. We're people...we grow...we change...we develop new opinions on things. Besides, I love diversity of opinion and different ways of looking at the world. And the last thing I want to do is to create a community of faith where we all think the same, act the same, march to the same beat. How can we ever learn anything new that way? How can we grow? Iron sharpens iron. A little challenge here or there is good...we need that from each other.

People of good conscience differ. That's what our Book of Confessions says. They just do. We aren't agreed as a Session on the gay issues, but all of session wants to go to ECO. We aren't agreed as a staff on the gay issues, but all of staff wants to go to ECO. Members of our congregation have come to me and said, "*I believe that marriage between two people in a committed relationship*

is ok. But what the PCUSA has done to water down who Jesus is troubles me so much that I am voting to go to ECO. It is the best of our options right now.” I just had someone tell me that yesterday.

We won't all agree about everything, but there is one thing that we must agree about if we are to be a church where the Holy Spirit continues to move and grow us. Do you know what that one thing is?

That one thing is

the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and honoring him as Lord. It all comes down to this. We can be anxious and worried about many things but one thing is needful and that is Jesus.

When Jesus says to us in scripture

“I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” I think we need to take those words seriously.

When Peter proclaims in Acts,

“Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12)

We need to take that to heart.

We are a church because of who Jesus is. He is the Savior of the world, Lord of Lords and King of Kings. And if we compromise on that, all the power will go out of our ministry here.

You cannot say that all religions are the same. They aren't. You cannot say that Jesus Christ is not the only way to salvation, because if you do, you make Jesus out to be a lunatic. If he said he was the only way to salvation, and that's not so, he was a liar. If he was a liar than he wasn't even a good prophet. He was just a weird guy. If he was just a weird guy, then why are we all here?

I went into the ministry because Jesus Christ saved my life. I've told you this. If it hadn't been for his presence and his grace that day, I had the pills ready. I was going to kill myself. And there he was in all of his glory, lifting me up, helping me to experience something so wonderful – the love of God - that I will never forget.

And that relationship with Jesus Christ the Son of God, who died on a cross for us, to forgive us from our sins and who declared to us his uniqueness as the only way to God, is something I will never deny or water down. I can't do it, and I won't. I went into the ministry to talk about Jesus...and I will go to my grave with that sole purpose. Why? Because I owe him my life.

We all do.

Jesus Christ is the whole reason we exist as a church. The uniqueness of Jesus Christ is the whole reason we say that our mission is to "Know Christ and make him known". We can't be saved without him. Otherwise, why be a church? We can be good people together in a building doing nice things around – and just be a community center. That would be fine. We don't need Jesus then. And we can forget about theology and all these issues and just be unified.

But - unity for the sake of unity is just stupid. What are we unified for? What are we unified about? Let me remind you. Carol Mccune made this building in such a way that it all leads up to the cross. The cross that stands there and reminds us that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior. That is why we stand here on this corner. We want people to know him!

So when the goddess Sophia is worshiped at General Assembly to the tune of \$6,000, and when 45% of PCUSA pastors do not believe Jesus is the unique way to salvation anymore, or when we start rewriting the Bible adding things we like and deleting what we don't like, or when people of other faiths are brought in, *not* so we can learn about their faith but so that they can tell us what's wrong with Christianity, or when the head of GA declares that it is now time to stop sharing our faith in Jesus Christ, or when we take out the song "In Christ Alone" from the PCUSA hymnal...to name just a few things...then I have cause for concern.

And let me add one more personal note. How many of you here have ever been to a Presbytery meeting? I am required to go every month.

Quite frankly the outcome of this decision is going to affect me probably more than any of you. Things will stay pretty much the same – if you like WVPC now, you will like it after we go to ECO, *if we do that*. We will keep doing what we do here on a local level and it will be wonderful. We will thrive. Sunday service will not change. Why? Because our mission statement *to know Christ and make him known is still the same*. We haven't changed. That's why you have heard people say the phrase "We haven't left the denomination, the denomination has left us." In order to keep doing what we're doing it's getting harder and harder.

So back to Presbytery meetings...As a pastor I have to go to these meetings every month. Please believe me when I tell you that they are not fun. As a pastor my worshiping community or my church is supposed to be the Presbytery (don't join WVPC)– and the Presbytery is the governing body made up of about 43 pastors representing 43 churches in the area. I am supposed to get built up spiritually there worshiping with my colleagues and come back and share with you all of the inspiring things I learned there. That's the idea anyway...

Most of my colleagues that I am close to in Presbytery actually are seeking dismissal. These are the people that I generally find easiest to have fellowship with. But my experience at Presbytery has been anything but inspiring. Our Presbytery is split down the middle. There is distrust among the clergy and last time I was there, there was name calling and it was done with spite. The time before that we were discussing a political issue that deeply offended many people. It is hard to talk about Jesus at a Presbytery meeting without feeling as if you are being a conservative nut. As a body of clergy we are a pretty sorry lot. There is rancor, division, and a lot of undercurrent and hidden agendas, multiple purposes. Its a broken system.

People say, "Well you should still go and stay and fight and renew the PCUSA". *OK. But then you need to commit to attending Presbytery with me every month to fight that battle with me, because I am weary, and those elders who have diligently attended Presbytery with me are weary...* and the battles that need to be fought have nothing to do with knowing Christ and making him known. And do you really want me to spend all my time renewing the PCUSA, OR do you want me to spend it ministering here, with you, helping West Valley

Presbyterian Church be a light on this corner? If all I had to do was work for the denomination then maybe. But after being a pastor here, and then going there – it is just a formula for burn out. To vote to stay in the PCUSA is to vote to stay in the San Jose Presbytery which is a broken system that is torn apart in very significant ways – and many of the Presbyteries are like this. We are not unified. We are already divided and I don't see a light at the end of this tunnel any time soon. I am tired of fighting.

I want to do ministry. I want to get back to helping people see the love of Jesus and experience him. I want to continue with you to build this church in significant ways for the kingdom of God. I hope that you will take the recommendation of Session seriously, and prayerfully and understand that the issue we are talking about – is the centrality of Jesus Christ – After all is said and done, this is the eternal issue that matters and it is the issue that we stand for as his church.

Remember the Lord's words in the gospel of Luke, "You are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away." Mary had

chosen Jesus. May we be faithful to that end. To Know Christ and
Make Him Known....To God be the glory. AMEN