

Westminster Presbyterian Church + 533 S. Walnut St. + Springfield, IL 62704

Dr. Lonnie H. Lee

6/29/07

Spiritual Capital

Luke 11:1

Westminster's archivists have recently discovered an issue of *The Christian Century* magazine dated December 21, 1911. The article featured on the cover is a detailed analysis of the results of a Billy Sunday revival which was held in Springfield two and one-half years earlier. Westminster was one of the sponsoring churches for that revival held in the Spring of 1909. We also have in our archives a photograph of the temporary arena which was built to accommodate the revival. It was called the Billy Sunday Tabernacle. Billy Sunday was the most famous evangelist in America during the first three decades of the 20th century. He was a former major league baseball player known for his highly dramatic preaching style. The revival in Springfield was one of his most successful campaigns with five thousand conversions and an offering for the evangelist of \$11,000.

Hugh T. Morrison was a Springfield physician who conducted a survey of Springfield churches in the years following the revival to test the impact of that event. Almost all of the churches in Springfield reported a similar pattern. They received new members from the revival and had a surge in worship attendance. But the surge was temporary. A year after the revival was concluded attendance slipped back to where it was before the revival. Morrison also reviewed the financial operations of the churches. He found no significant increase in giving to churches as a result of the revival. These meetings had also been promoted as a way to reduce crime, gambling, prostitution, and the booming saloon business in Springfield. Morrison found that while the revival was in progress, drawing thousands of people every night, participation in these activities did in fact decline. But as soon as Billy Sunday left town the vice business was better than ever.

Morrison's deepest disappointment with the revival is that very little changed in the lives of the five thousand people who were "converted." Those who participated in vice activities before went back to them again. While three thousand joined churches, they promptly became non-participating members. Morrison coined a phrase to describe what these people did not get; spiritual capital. He reflected on this sad result in these words:

Mr. Sunday's meeting does not create spiritual life. Every attention is given to method, to first aid to the fainting, to the advertisements and reporters, to expeditious ways of clearing the front seats and getting people to the front, etc., so that this method side of the meeting easily becomes its predominating feature. The impartation of real spiritual capital is decidedly secondary. It is not unfair to say that "conversion" in Mr. Sunday's meeting is not so much based upon a perception of spiritual truth as upon admiration for the evangelist's past-mastership in handling his enterprise. As a result, we have the backsliders, who have hardly gone far enough forward to warrant so serious a characterization as backslider. But they put their hand to the plow and have turned back, and the heart of the church is grieved.¹

The formation of spiritual capital is addressed in the 11th chapter of Luke's gospel. In this chapter Luke moves from lessons on loving God and loving neighbors to focus on the spiritual life of the disciples. This passage flows from a request that comes to Jesus from the disciples that he teaches

them to pray. This is a request which emerges from the experiences the disciples have had with Jesus on their journeys together. They have seen in Jesus a kind of spiritual grounding that they have never before witnessed in anyone.

The disciples have also noticed that prayer is an important part of this spiritual grounding. Jesus is praying when the Spirit descends on him after his baptism. Jesus spends the night in prayer before naming his disciples. The transfiguration takes place while Jesus is praying. The disciples have seen that in prayer Jesus opens himself to the power and will of God. When the disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray they are asking him to share with them the spiritual capital which sustains his life.

The apostle Paul is also concerned with the issue of spiritual capital in the second chapter of Colossians. Paul is writing to a people who are confronted with teachers who package their message in a very attractive way. These are false teachers who try to seduce the people through the power of their personal charisma and cleverly constructed philosophies. Paul wants his people to know that they will never receive spiritual capital from these teachers who are nothing more than masters of method. Paul points out that Christ is the one true source of spiritual capital. It is in Christ that they receive a new spiritual identity. It is in Christ that they are empowered to love God and neighbor. It is in Christ that they learn how to pray.

Jesus' response to the request of the disciples places the practice of prayer squarely in the context of a community of faith. The language is that of corporate prayer:

Give us each day our daily bread.

And forgive us our sins as we forgive...

And do not bring us to the time of trial.

(Luke 11:3-4)

Luke makes it clear that prayer is something to be learned and practiced together. As we pray and sing and listen together spiritual capital is generated.

Last week I quoted an 18th century Scottish pastor named John Brown, who was part of the Seceder movement. Brown was best known for the annotated Psalter that he composed for use in worship. The Scots had a long tradition of singing the Psalms in worship. They learned it from John Knox who learned it from John Calvin. John Calvin believed that singing the Psalms, which were in fact prayers to God, was the most effective way to learn to pray. Brown built on this understanding by offering notes in the margins of the Psalter to guide the thoughts of worshipers as they sang these prayers. Shelly Sanders Zuckerman describes the purpose of Brown's work in these words:

Brown's annotated Psalter was an expression of pastoral concern for lay piety among the Scottish Presbyterians. Brown annotated the psalms in their metrical form as they were used in worship so that every member of his congregation could take the notes to heart through the treasured words that were part of their very identity. Every parishioner could apply the notes directly and personally. They are a guide and a stimulus to faith of the head, heart, and life. Guided by Brown's annotations, as the singer sings he or she is instructed in a theological interpretation of the psalm and is exercised in the athletics of faith, shaping up into a spiritually fit Christian, ready at any time to die."²

Brown believed that what happens in worship week after week changes people. This is where authentic spiritual capital is imparted.

Endnotes

1. Hugh T. Morrison, *The Christian Century*, December 21, 1911, page 10.
2. Shelly Sanders Zuckerman, "Spiritual Formation Through Psalm-Singing Worship," *Call to Worship: Liturgy, Music, Preaching, and the Arts*, Volume 40.1, page 67.