

Don't Give Up

**Delivered at Washington Community Fellowship
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(Audio version available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DMQSiRFaM6g>)

It is indeed my privilege to be back here in our nation's capital and particularly in this pulpit, where so often the Word of God has gone forth in power and where the cause of racial justice is no stranger. As you are probably aware, I experienced some of the highlights of my ministry here in Washington, DC. And I anticipate that this morning will be another of those highlights.

I've chosen as my text for this morning's message, a verse from Galatians chapter 6 and verse 9. "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up." Perhaps this verse is still more familiar to some of you as it is to me in the poetic phrasing of the King James Version: "And let us not be weary in well-doing: for in due season we shall reap if we faint not."

As you know, I literally gave my life in the cause of racial justice. And it is my understanding that this same passion is alive and well here at Washington Community Fellowship. Looking back at the gains we made, I cannot help but be encouraged and discouraged at the same time. We changed some fundamental laws. We re-oriented the prejudice of many. Yes, we cut down the lynching tree, but its roots ran deep. And from those deep roots have grown up new shoots of oppression and marginalization. So that the legal status we gained did not ultimately result in the equality we dreamed of nor the integration we imagined. So, there is still a long way to go in the struggle of all God's children in this great nation to set sail on ship of unity upon the sea of equality.

I would have hoped that by now, we would be further along this path. But I learned a long time ago that you cannot become weary in well-doing, because you reap a harvest only if you work until the harvest. You reap a harvest only if you wait until the harvest.

I understand that this church was founded with the vision to be a church for all peoples. I saw it on your sign as I entered this morning. Perhaps you too wish that you were further along that path. If so it seems we have something in common. In spite of all the good

we've done, we've still got a long way to go. And we can get there, but only if we do not become weary in well-doing.

I said in 1956, the same year your pastor was born, that 11:00 on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in America. I suppose I thought that when the secular forces of segregation relinquished their grip, that somehow the Church of Jesus Christ would rise up and take the lead in bringing all people together beneath the cross of Christ. But it seems my suppositions were too optimistic. A half century later 11:00 on Sunday morning is still the most segregated hour in America. You can walk up and down these streets and see white people and black people living side by side. And, yet, on the Lord's Day they go their separate ways. And God in heaven sheds a tear.

By our social progress we have made of this community a neighborhood, thank God. But we have not yet made of it a brotherhood. This is the work that remains. It is the work of God. And it is, therefore, the work of the church.

Not every church knows that. Not every church recognizes that fact. But this one does, and so you must fulfill your destiny and make this a model home of racial harmony. You must fulfill your destiny, which is the true integration of all peoples under this roof in a body that is neither white nor black nor Asian nor Hispanic but "all of the above." For this is the unfinished symphony of God's creative work in this place.

And that, my friends, is where we engage today's text. "Let us" it says, "not be weary in well-doing, for in due season we shall reap if we faint not." We find here two conditions and one promise. We would all like to claim the promise, we would all like to win the prize, we would all like to reap the harvest. But we must pay attention to the conditions.

The first condition is that we are engaged in well-doing. Well-doing not only means that you are working toward the right goal but that you have the right strategy. If you want to go to Baltimore you'd better head north. If you go a different direction, if you adopt a different strategy, you will find yourself in a very different destination.

What is the well-doing that you should be doing here at Washington Community Fellowship? If you want to know I'll tell you, but if I tell you, I can do nothing less than tell you the truth, because to tell you anything else would be a disservice to our common calling. The well-doing that you must be doing is to reach out to all people in the name of Jesus, for few will come to you. But if you are to be a model home of God's great human

diversity, you must make a special effort to reach out to people of color, to welcome them as sisters and brothers and as full partners in this great enterprise to which God has called us.

I'm speaking from experience now. It's not so hard to find the white person who will help us. Oh, but it's harder to find the white person who will listen to us. And, if my memory serves me correctly, it's right near impossible to find the white person who will follow our advice.

I hope you're hearing me today. I hope you won't turn a deaf ear. Because for this to be a church for all peoples, it must be a church which belongs to all peoples. This cannot be a home in which people of color are merely welcomed. It must also be their home to which they can welcome others.

This is not an easy thing for white folks to do. It swims against the strong current of history. It kicks against the goads of paternalism, which is the benevolent face of superiority. But making this a home in which everyone can take off their shoes is not simply a matter of moral disposition. It is also a matter of overcoming ignorance.

I don't mean to say that white folks are less smart than others. And particularly in this setting in which there are so many highly intelligent and highly educated individuals. It's just that the majority culture has a very difficult time knowing what they don't know. It's always hard to know what you don't know. The Russians do not know why they seem peculiar to the Japanese, because for the Russians, being Russian is normal. The Japanese do not know what makes them peculiar to the Argentinians, because for the Japanese being Japanese is normal. And if you are White in America you probably don't know what makes you peculiar to people of other ethnicities. Because being White in America is just normal.

When you are a member of the dominant culture, it is very hard to know what you don't know. But in a church in which the majority culture is dominant, it's important to find out what you don't know. Because if you don't discover it you'll never understand why your normality doesn't feel so normal to others.

You see, if some people have to give up much more than others for the privilege of participating in this church for all peoples, they will in all probability gravitate to a church where they don't have to pay extra to belong. So, you must foster an environment

in which others free to tell you what you don't know. And this must be an ongoing, constant conversation, not an occasional one, if you want to create a church for all peoples.

The well-doing that you must be doing is the creation of a church that is truly for all peoples. And it will not be easy. It will, in fact, be painful. It will be tiring. Sometimes you will take one step forward and two steps back. And that's why Paul's second condition is so important. The first condition is that you are engaged in well-doing. But the second and equally significant condition is this: You must not become so weary in well-doing that you give up. Because you only reap the harvest if you don't give up.

I know all about not giving up. People sometimes think that the civil rights movement was a constant stream of victorious confrontations and dramatic speeches. And the further into history those days recede, the more grotesque that caricature becomes.

Oh, yes, everyone remembers the high points, like the day I stood before a quarter of a million souls on the National Mall. As I came to the end of my speech there, I tried to tell the nation about a dream I had. But I must confess to you this morning that since that sweltering August afternoon in 1963, my dream has often turned into a nightmare.

I've seen it shattered. I saw it shattered one night on Highway 80 in Alabama when Mrs. Viola Liuzzo was shot down. I had a nightmare and saw my dream shattered one night in Marion, Alabama, when Jimmie Lee Jackson was shot down. I saw my dream shattered one night in Selma when Reverend Reeb was clubbed to the ground by a vicious racist and later died.

And oh, I continued to see it shattered as I walk through the Harlems of our nation and saw sometimes ten and fifteen Black folks trying to live in one or two rooms. I've seen my dream shattered as I've walked the streets of Chicago and the hills of Appalachia, filled with young men and young women, with a sense of utter hopelessness because they couldn't find any jobs. And they saw life as a long and desolate corridor with no exit signs.

And, of course, you know the fate that befell me as well. I could see it coming. I had a premonition. I knew that someone would stop me. But, still, I did not give up. I kept on keeping on long enough for the train of racial justice to pull out of the station. And once

in motion, no one could stop that train, because God, not Martin Luther King, was the engineer.

So yes, the dream has often been shattered, and I have had my nightmarish experiences, but I tell you this morning once more that I haven't lost the faith. And you cannot lose it either. You have a God-given dream, and you must stick to the dream that God has given you, no matter how dark the night might seem, no matter the opposition, no matter the obstacles, no matter the difficulty. "Let us not be weary in well-doing..."

That doesn't mean it won't be hard. That doesn't mean you won't be tempted to say, "Why don't I just go over here to this other church where everybody looks like me and they do things the 'right way?'"

But I'm here to tell you today that if you do the will of God, God will certainly do his will through you. There's only one thing that can stop you. Opposition cannot stop you. Obstacles cannot stop you. Defections cannot stop you. Meager resources cannot stop you. Even the very gates of hell cannot stop you. There's only one thing that can stop you – and that's if you give up.

Some of you have been around here for a long time. Maybe you're getting discouraged, because this church is not there yet. Maybe it's all seemed like planting and cultivating and watering. You haven't seen the harvest. But God has your breakthrough planned, God will bring your harvest about – at the proper time, in due season. If you keep on doing what God has called you to do, you will reap a great harvest.

Some of you have come along more recently. You need to appreciate the groundwork that others have laid. It's okay to be a little impatient. That keeps you moving in the right direction. But you need to appreciate the fact that despite whatever mistakes have been made along the way, these veterans have weathered the storms; they've stuck it out. Others have fallen by the wayside. Others have given up. Others have moved on. But these folks are still here.

I've seen it in my own ministry. Those who were for us turned against us. Those who had decided to help us later decided to oppose us. The media giveth and the media taketh away. The government giveth and the government taketh away. So many people gave up. But those of us who stuck it out, we saw the harvest.

I don't believe that it was any special genius on our part that won that battle. It was simply that we didn't give up, and God brought the harvest. And now this great work of racial reconciliation is going on right here in this place. There may not be a million faces staring back at me today. There may not be an array of microphones into which I'm speaking. There may not be a worldwide television audience following these proceedings. But I know that taking all the lofty rhetoric that attracts the crowds and applying those truths to a particular people in a particular place is just as critical to the cause of Christian racial reconciliation in the twenty-first century as was the igniting of the civil rights movement in the twentieth century.

This is your moment. This is your calling. This is your destiny. This is your harvest to claim, and claim it you will – if you don't give up. When you give up you forfeit the harvest. When you give up you squander your investment. When you give up you abandon the dream. When you give up you never reach the promised land. And when you give up, you may never know just how close you were to victory.

Recently a group of miners in West Virginia met their deaths in a tragic accident. This week, however, we learned a fact that compounded that tragedy. According to news reports, we now know that breathable air was only about 2,000 feet away and that the trapped miners could have made their way there by following a conveyor belt. They had no way of knowing this fact, and their training told them to barricade themselves and wait for rescue. And, so, twelve miners died a short walk from safety.

So, my friends, I encourage you to not be weary in well-doing. I entreat you to not give up. Victory may be closer than you think. Keep on doing the right thing. Few churches are willing to even try what you're doing. And some of them will give up. Which makes it all the more imperative that you keep the faith. That you stay true to the dream. For in due season you will reap if you faint not.

I still have a dream this morning that one day all people everywhere will recognize that out of one blood God made all people to dwell upon the face of the earth. And it can happen if you don't give up.

I still have a dream this morning that one day Sunday morning at 11:00 will be the most integrated hour of the week. Do you believe it? It can happen if you don't give up.

I still have a dream this morning that the Church of Jesus Christ will be the locomotive and not the caboose in the great train of God's justice. And it can happen if you don't give up.

I still have a dream this morning that this congregation will be a model home for Christian racial reconciliation. And it will be, but only if you don't give up.

I still have a dream this morning that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill will be made low; the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places straight; and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

I still have a dream this morning that truth will reign supreme and that all of God's children will come together in a church for all peoples. And when this day comes the morning stars will sing together and the sons of God will shout for joy.

And that's why I beseech you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, whatever you do, don't give up. Let us not become weary in well-doing. For in due season you will reap if you faint not. God bless you.

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