



Many Blessings

May 12, 2021

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Yes, my email was hacked, or more precisely “spoofed.” Many of you received a strange request from me last week by email labeled either “Many Blessings” or “Serving Christ Together.” It used my name and title; it typically included your name as well. The sending email address looked rather like the Presbytery’s email, except that it ended in *gmail.com*. If one replied to the initial inquiry about handling a “discreet” matter, they were eventually asked to purchase Target or eBay gift cards for people with cancer. The holder of the gift cards would be asked to scratch off the information on the back and send a photo of them to “me”, so the purchases could be made online. It ended with a promise of reimbursement. Instead, the hacker would buy hundreds or thousands of dollars of Target products online (or sell the cards) and leave the card purchaser high and dry. Many blessings indeed!

It’s becoming a common scam. The week before, a bishop in one of our Lutheran synods was spoofed in the same way. Our Synod of Lakes & Prairies staff have started including a message at the bottom of their emails indicating that they do not ask for gift cards by email. Other presbyteries have been targeted. We have worked with our computer consultants, but there is little we can do except raise awareness that the Presbytery will never ask you to buy gift cards or share personal financial information by email. Please call us if you get anything suspicious.

It’s offensive that criminals prey upon our best impulses for charity and do so in the name of the Lord, as we “serve Christ together.” Then again, that’s rather the nature of financial crime, yes?

I also took personal offense at the use of my name, particularly when the message was riddled with grammatical errors and unnecessary capitalization. It warmed my heart when Rev. Keith Jones of Lisbon Presbyterian Church left a voicemail message to warn that I’d been hacked, messages having been sent to him and to the main church address: “I received an email yesterday supposedly from you, but it doesn’t match your email address, so it’s a scam. It says, ‘Good afternoon Keith! Do you have a moment I ...’ with no period, so I know it’s not you.” The failure of the sender to use proper punctuation tipped him off that it wasn’t from me. My soul sings!

Though it is the connectional nature of our church that puts us at risk of cybercrime, I am also heartened by the number of you who took the time to respond directly to me with a willingness to offer help. Though we don’t have an initiative right now to help cancer patients or veterans with their Target purchases, many of you were ready to drop what you had going in order to respond the plea.

Thank you for your Spirit-inspired charity, but be safe. We have converted so much of our contact to 1’s and 0’s, that it’s easy to be targeted. Whether it’s a request from the Presbytery or another online or telephone solicitation, double-check the source. Those who are on the up-and-up won’t mind confirming who they are. Instead, let’s use our connectional nature for its full benefit and security, so that God’s mission in the world can be fulfilled.