



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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# **Being the Church: The Enduring Promise**

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Grace and peace to you, my friends. On this anniversary Sunday, we reflect why the church came into being and how to be the church going forward.

As we approach the two-year mark of this pandemic, among the many tragedies we all experienced in one degree or another, is the feeling of loneliness. Maybe the visceral sense is not as sharp as during the initial months when quarantines severed so many social bonds as we literally retreated from one another. The delivery of vaccines remedied some of the need for distance, but loneliness' influence remains.

When we venture out, the prolonged period of isolating seems to have stunted our social graces. Rather than be embarrassed with faltering conversation, the awkwardness of handshake or fist bump with casual acquaintances, or risk the slap felt from a differing partisan loyalty, it is safer for the ego to embrace a good book.

We no longer encounter that office worker we'd grown to appreciate when we ran into them at the coffee shop. Who knows if or when we might see them again? The same holds with the check-out clerk of the grocery or the parent at one of your kid's practices.

FOMO – we all have some degree of the fear-of-missing-out and it stings more when we realize we have missed out.

A recent study from Harvard University, “Loneliness in America,” documented 61% of young people reported *miserable* degrees of loneliness. At the height of the pandemic, more than half of this cohort could not recall anyone in the past few weeks who had taken more than a few minutes to ask how they were in a way that made them feel as though the person “genuinely cared.”

It is not just the young. Loneliness pervades all economic and demographic groups, all age groups, ethnic, and income and education levels. We’ve always known that seniors are burdened with loneliness as spouses and friends die and health limits their activities.

The pandemic magnified the experience of loneliness. Now we face a reckoning with the toxic behaviors that grew from loneliness and are not going away; tribalism, social media hostility, and the rise of hate groups.

The researchers write “Loneliness is a bellwether not only of our country’s emotional and physical health but also our moral health.” Taking on loneliness means facing the intense focus on the self that our culture condones at the expense of the common good.

They claim the pandemic spotlighted the downside of building a self and that we have collectively

(f)ailed to prepare young people for gratifying relationships, a vital buffer against loneliness.

Learning how to love may be the most important thing

that we can do, yet in families and in schools we do almost nothing to prepare young people for the subtle, tender, generous, courageous, and tough-minded work of learning how to love and to develop mature relationships.”<sup>1</sup>

The depth of loneliness and our collective future brings us to why God created the church. To understand our unique gift, we look to the moment in the Gospel of John when the disciples fear of loneliness escalated to crisis.

Jesus called men and women and connected with them, intimately. He understood their needs. He performed signs to reunite the sick into community. He included at meals with people who would have never been seated at the same table. He was only distant when he retreated to pray with God, modeling intimacy.

On the night of the last supper, this collection of disparate and desperate men and women, crammed into an upper room. All of them are far from home. Their hearts are racing and minds’ questioning. What will happen to us?

Before the meal, Jesus stripped to the waist, and knelt to wash their feet.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Weissbound, Milena Batanova, Virginia Lovinson, and Eric Torres, “Loneliness in America” Making Caring Common, [www.makingcaringcommon.com](http://www.makingcaringcommon.com), accessed January 21, 2022.

Imagine your feet are still dripping wet and tingling from his touch.

A half-naked, Jesus, aware of his mortal demise and confident of their future, settles back to the table with an enduring promise for them and us.

*“Eternal God, Wash away our dust and fear. Gather us into your strong arms and stoop down to speak to us this day. Silence in us all the noise. Startle us with the enduring promise Jesus gave and his disciples bequeathed to us. Bless our thoughts so we will bravely walk forward. Amen.”*

### **John 14 (selected verses)**

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. <sup>2</sup> In God’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? <sup>3</sup> And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.

<sup>12</sup> Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these...<sup>13</sup> I will do whatever you ask in my name.

<sup>15</sup> “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

<sup>16</sup> And I will ask God to give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.

<sup>17</sup> This is the Spirit of truth... You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.<sup>18</sup> “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. <sup>19</sup> In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live.

<sup>27</sup> Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

We all know what happened next. Judas' betrayal. The rest of them abandoned Jesus. Most of them did not even stick around for his death.

Their worst fears came true. And then promise unfolded. In the utter emptiness of their hearts God's spirit took hold. In their despair and loneliness. They gathered again in a room, securing themselves from soldiers, he was present.

From an upper room filled with despair to another with an aching loneliness, the church came to life. The risen Christ made good on his promise that he would not leave them orphaned. He appeared again and again. His wounds told the story of love conquering death. Then he breathed his spirit upon them.

In the words of scholar Marianne Thompson, the gospel of John's most profound contribution to Christian thought summons followers to "believe in a life shaped not by Jesus' absence, but by the unending presence of God."<sup>2</sup>

Emboldened by that promise coming true, those once frightened disciples left their confinement to begin the work of being the church, sharing the promise with all people. The spirit breathed upon them gave them the visceral connection with God and confidence that they could do the works of Jesus – even greater works.

Do you wonder what they asked for? That night? A week later? Years later? Amidst rubble, they saw possibilities. All evidence indicates they asked for the strength to welcome others into their community. They risked ridicule to share the good news. With God's spirit these loners built a beloved community from the power bequeathed to them. They embraced, and probably struggled to do so, others unlike themselves. They learned not to judge but to love.

We rest on the legacy of their belief and bravery. Christianity spread like wildfire when no one would have thought grace and love could vanquish Caesar's grip. By calling on Jesus, they interlocked themselves into a force of good and trusted Jesus to fill the chasm of loneliness with new life.

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<sup>2</sup> Marianne Meye Thompson, "His Own Received Him Not: Jesus Washes the Feet of His Disciples," in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, ed. Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hayes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmann, 2003), 273.



Our brokenness is not what defines us. Rather it is the spirit's presence among us that refuses to allow us to be separated from one another and from God.

The church began in loneliness. Before miraculously unfolded, Jesus promised them a future when they were most vulnerable. That is true about this church. As I read through the sermons the first minister, John Galbreath, preached in the early years, Westminster began as a community to heal the wounds of war.

He spoke frequently of the grief they all carried from so much death. John Galbreath served as a chaplain in the Pacific during WWII. He knew loneliness was one of the greatest costs of war.

In 1947, Galbreath preached "Christ and the Lonely" for the first time. He preached of Jesus' promise to not leave us orphans another seven times over his career. I'd like to lift up an excerpt:

The sunsets of the Pacific are unspeakably beautiful. They have browns and golds and violets that even our sunsets never seem to attain. Looking out over the blue haze on the desert, it would occur to me that the sun that was dipping down behind the sea was the same sun that would rise in a few hours on my beloved ones at home. When there was so little that we could share in experience or environment, yet the sun and moon stood to bind us together. God is like that. When time and space have separated us from

loved one, yet God stands present with each, the one experience we can share.

Westminster became the safe place for those uprooting families and settling here for the first time. As cornfields gave way to suburbs, 172 souls with little connection to one another felt they belonged to one another and to Christ through this church. To serve the needs in this community. To accompany one another in life and into death.

Friends, in this time and place, we are called to trust God's presence in each of us and the space between us. In a world of hurt, we were given the gifts to be the church so we can teach what Jesus and even the academics prescribe the "subtle, tender, generous, courageous, and tough-minded work of learning how to love."<sup>3</sup> In the process, we may find ourselves a little less lonely in this life and into the next.

Our young people need this. We need this. We become the church needed for this time and place when we gather at Jesus' table and trust the promise: we are not alone.

Let me close with another excerpt from his sermon:

God is a presence, closer to me than my hands and feet – and equally close to those I love, drawing us together with a bond that can't be broken, even by death itself. When the time comes, that a loved one enters that new experience of life that is beyond our

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<sup>3</sup> "Loneliness in America."

horizons – in the glory of God, we even then can walk together, for God has broken down the cold wall that would keep apart two who love one another.

Believe the promise, my friends.



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