



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

January 30, 2022

Being the Church: Cast Your Concerns

Dr. Jo Forrest

© 2022 by Dr. Jo Forrest and Westminster Presbyterian Church.

All rights reserved.

No part of this sermon may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: February 3, 2022

The *WSJ* publishes a single frame comic, “Pepper...and Salt.” Friday’s version illustrates my trepidation today. A woman calmly sits on the sofa in front of the TV, asking her husband, drawn in a fetal position on the floor; “If the news bothers you so much, turn it off.” Funny. Not funny.

Last week we witnessed the horror of police officers shot in various cities and too many killed in the line of duty.

A suburban mom threatened to bring loaded guns to her child’s school in anger over mask mandates.

We marked Holocaust Remembrance Day in the shadow of the synagogue hostage crisis, reminding us of persistent antisemitism. Trading texts with one of my friends who serves a large synagogue, he confided his wife wants him to leave congregational ministry for the sake of his family, even though being a rabbi has been his life-long passion.

Then on Friday, I read in the news that the head of Pittsburgh Public Schools claimed, “this is not who we are,” in defense of increased violence and a student’s death.

We know all too well that when someone says, “this is not who we are,” we need to face who we are becoming. We might choose to change the narrative, the ethos, and ourselves, with a sober reality check.

Through our sermon series entitled *Being the Church*, Louise, Ed, and I will look with clear eyes at the world today

alongside the transformative power of the gospel. If we want to say, “this is not who we are” when verbal and physical violence engulfs us, how does being the church change the trajectory?

Today, let’s turn to the wisdom of those early Christians whose belief in Christ literally changed the world one person at a time.

Decades after the death and resurrection of Jesus, his followers suffered for the command to love God and neighbor, full stop. No discrimination of insider or outsider. No litmus test of worth. The radical believe that all people are beloved children subverted Rome’s tightly held hierarchy and control.

Those early Christians suffered to be the church.

First Peter is a letter written under the name of one of Jesus’ first disciple to instruct the church of how to live in a hostile world. If anyone suffered to be a follower of Jesus, it was Peter. If anyone knows the privilege of being a part of his church, it was Peter.

Dear God, We know your truth came to life in Jesus, who taught us the way to love you and all those whom you love. Calm our weary hearts with these words of scripture. Steady us in the truth that we too can live as examples of his love when we remain close. Amen.

1 Peter 4:12-5:11 (selected verses)

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed.

¹⁴ If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you...

And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for
"God opposes the proud,
but gives grace to the humble."

⁶ Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that God may exalt you in due time. ⁷ Cast all your anxiety on God, because God cares for you.

⁸ Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. ⁹ Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering.

¹⁰ And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to eternal glory in Christ, will restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. ¹¹ To God be the power forever and ever. Amen.

Early one morning during my first year at Divinity School, I left the parking garage at one end of the University of Chicago for the long walk across campus.

Unlike a seminary, the University of Chicago is purely secular, hosting professional schools of all sorts. Incoming freshmen for the small college within the university take pride in wearing t-shirts that claim this is “where fun comes to die.” The Divinity School echoes this sentiment and, with so many faith traditions, ensures the only thing sacred is the quest for an original idea to argue.

My small cohort of first-year ministry students were to begin an intro class on preaching that day. I was anxious. Proclaiming the gospel. Crafting the sermon. Standing up in front of people to persuade them to follow Jesus. Did I mention I was terrified?

Although I’d spent years in public speaking, I’d argued in those presentation from data to change business practices. Maybe I spoke uncomfortable truths, but I had facts and logic that could produce tangible benefits. Preaching carries far greater weight – the gospel changes lives.

As I left the garage, I literally walked across the letters scrawled on the sidewalk; “Cast all your anxiety on God. God care for you.” (1 Pt 5:7) I stopped, was startled, comforted.

Then, I continued on my way, past the library.

Would I be able to do the academic research and then stand in front of my fellow students who'd studied religion and theater and spent evenings in story telling workshops? I admired all of them. They spoke with such passion. Many were preacher's kids and had forgotten more than I will ever know. (To this day, I honestly believe several of them are becoming the greatest preachers I will ever know.)

As I passed under the gates immortalized in the movie, *When Harry Met Sally*, again I walked across a scripture verse. In the short distance from the garage to the gates, I'd wrapped myself in fear, completely forgetting; "Cast all your anxiety on God. God cares for you."

A smile drifted across my face. Who at UofC would write this? Finally, I looked up.

On that beautiful, spring day, other students, particularly the undergraduates lingered in the sun, flirting, talking, with seemingly not a care in the world.

As I continued, I wondered what icebreaker I would tell while standing in the pulpit of the chapel. The further I walked, the more I doubted my pithy idea of what to say and even if this whole endeavor were foolish. Just before I saw the chapel, there it was again; "Cast all your anxiety on God. God cares for you."

I promise you I never did that day. I held on to that anxiety for dear life.

Despite knowing that some brave soul risked public ridicule by writing a Bible verse all over campus, I was trembling to speak in a safe place. Despite the gospel shouting to just let go, I feared losing control. Despite being baptized into Christ's body, a community, I thought I had to do it on my own. Despite the reminder that God cares for me, I felt alone.

Carrying around anxiety distorts our ability to be...to be fully present in the moment, to be creative, to take risks, to try something new. It is magnified when change is foisted upon us by a pandemic or partisan bickering.

When we carry around anxiety, it tends to leak out in ways that harm. Too often when we reach our wits end, we take it out on someone who has little recourse to defend themselves.

Flight attendants. Grocery clerks. Bus drivers have been at the receiving end of too much nastiness. Strangers to us, but not to God. Or we let a loved one bear the brunt of our emotions expecting forgiveness.

Our anxiety stems from a desire to maintain control.

Peter speaks directly to a church already ostracized for their faith and facing physical persecution. They are anxious of how they are perceived and could be treated.

Contrary to the human impulse to amass power, Peter calls them to humble themselves. Humble themselves. During first century, humility was not considered a virtue. Like today, humility is anathema in a culture that celebrates those with birthrights, wealth, with the capacity to control their own destiny, implying their ability to coerce others – bully others.

Peter calls them to cast their anxiety on God. Remember, Caesar is not in control, or you: God is in control.

Peter tells them to put any fears back into the “mighty hand of God,” who may “restore, support, and strengthen.”¹

The church is the body of Christ. Being the church, we relinquish the desire for control and hand our lives over to God. Steadied by God, we become who God needs us to become and reach into another’s loneliness and hardship.

We want to be in control of the narrative, so some people tell bold faced lies...and get away with it. Even if we don’t buy into their lies, we feel the ground beneath us shift with instability. We want to be in control of our freedom and so we lash out when others ask, we respect distances and another’s health.

We cannot control anyone but ourselves. And in giving our lives back to God, Christ meets us with the love and grace to stand against all of what might threaten. In this freedom, we

¹ Pheme Perkins *Interpretation: First and Second Peter, James, and Jude*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995) p. 73-75.

join our voices to advocate for the poor, the outsider, the refugee, the truth. Each of us can set aside the anxiety and find our own way to speak in a world that sorely needs this gospel.

Elizabeth Gilbert, author of *Eat, Pray, Love*, wrote in her blog several years ago of being on a crowded city bus in Manhattan, at the end of a long day. The bus was barely moving. It was cold and rainy outside so no one wanted to get off and walk, even though they might have gotten home more quickly.

Everyone on the bus seemed depressed and in a foul mood. No one was talking to or even looking at anyone else – just staying in their miserable little bubbles, “hating their life that day,” she wrote.

“When the bus reached 10th Ave.,” Gilbert says, “The bus driver made a surprising announcement. ‘Ladies and gentlemen, we are now nearing the Hudson River. I’m going to ask you to do me a favor. When you get off the bus, I’m going to hold out my hand. As you walk past me, I want you to drop your troubles into the palm of my hand. I’ll take your troubles for you, and when I drive past the river, I’ll throw them in.’”

Gilbert says people started looking at one another for the first time, tentatively smiling and shaking their heads at his humor.

“The reason I want to do this,” the driver continued, “Is because you all seem like you’ve had a bad day, and I don’t want you taking all your worries and sorrows home to your friends and families, because they deserve better than that, don’t they? So, you just leave your troubles here with me to dispose of, and you all go have a wonderful night, OK?”

Imagine the gruff exterior of New Yorkers actually softening at the idea. “The whole bus — the whole grumpy lot of us,” Gilbert says, “Broke into laughter. (Some of us, myself included, might have even shed a tear or two.)

And one by one, as we filed off the bus, we dropped our troubles into the palm of this good man’s hand, and we stepped off the bus with smiles on our faces.” And when the bus got to the Hudson, the driver pulled over, leaned out the window, stretched out his hand, and let it all drop into the water.²

Being the church calls us to stand in the midst of the storm as the safe harbor for all people, to relieve the anxiety of everyone thinking they need to go it alone. Being the church calls us to be humble, to know we are not in control, God is, and to the glory of all who rely upon Jesus in this life and the life to come.

² “Dear Ones, A Story....,” Elizabeth Gilbert, last modified October 23, 2014, <https://www.elizabethgilbert.com/dear-ones-a-story-years-ago-i-was-on-the-midtown-cross-town-bus-in-nyc-in/>



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
412-835-6630

www.westminster-church.org