



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

September 12, 2021

Turning Point

Dr. Jo Forrest

© 2021 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: September 21, 2021

Jesus called people to follow him, to abandon an entrenched lifestyle and brave something new. They risked everything.

In today's lectionary reading, we stand with Jesus and his followers at the pivotal point in his ministry. He turns from healing and casting out demons, confronting the evil forces that degrade life, and towards the cross in Jerusalem.

Brutal power ruled the day.

Rarely does Mark offer precise geography so when you hear, "Caesarea Philippi," know that Jesus approaches a Roman settlement with a temple dedicated the Emperor Augustus, who added to his title the phrase, "Son of the Divine."

At this moment, Jesus asks all his followers a question.

Dear God, Our world crescendos with people and ideas demanding our devotion. Silence them. Startle us with the truth revealed by your son that we decide today and every day to follow him. Amen.

Mark 8: 27-38

²⁷ Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?"

²⁸ And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."

²⁹ He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Messiah."

³⁰ And Jesus sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

³¹ Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.

³² He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

³³ But turning and looking at his disciples, Jesus rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

³⁴ He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

³⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. ³⁶ For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?

When you get what you want in your struggle for self
and the world makes you king for a day
Just go to the mirror and look at yourself
and see what that man has to say

For it isn't your father or mother or wife
who judgment upon you must pass
The fellow whose verdict counts the most in your life
is the one staring back from the glass...

This portion of Peter Dale Wimbrow's poem, *The Man in the Glass*, has haunted me since it appeared in a *New York Times* article profiling survivors of the attacks on September 11, 2001.

At that vulnerable time, individuals, companies, and our nation made choices in split seconds and in the days afterward, revealing who we are and what we value.

On this weekend of the twentieth anniversary, I imagine you remember exactly where you were at the moment of the attacks. And likely, you questioned if you were living the life that mattered, knowing that in a moment, you could lose it.

On the morning of 9/11, Jimmy Dunne received a phone call while playing golf to let him know of the attacks. Along with two partners, he ran Sandler O'Neill an investment advisory firm based in the World Trade Center.

By the end of the day, he learned that 66 of the 171 employees on the 104th floor were known to be dead, including his two founding partners.

When I describe Jimmy Dunne, imagine a street savvy, pulled up from the wrong side of New York, kind of a fireplug, James Cagney, who does not mince words, and had to fight for every dime and dollar.

On Sept. 17, 2001 – the day the stock market reopened – CNBC reported that Sandler O'Neill was out of business. Dunne angrily rebutted that assertion two days later on the network, vowing that the firm would rebuild. Two months later, the firm returned to profitability.

Their reputation on Wall Street led to their rebirth.

Other trading firms loaned Sandler O'Neil tech support, risk professionals, and traders to resume business. Imagine your fiercest competitors showing up at your door to help you rebuild.

There is more to their story.

In interviews, Dunne spoke of leading this firm from his and his now deceased partners' faith.

He said, (and I paraphrase) "growing up Catholic, I was concerned with sins of commission. What had I done that I knew was wrong? Good ole guilt. My partner though, a devote Jew, was concerned with sins of omission, what had he not done that could make a difference in the world. Now I needed to do both."

Those 66 men and women who died that day had 76 children.

I quote Dunne, "how we conducted ourselves in those first few hours and days would define who we really were and what we were about... if we were not honorable, then we stood for nothing."

Dunne could count in 1/16^{ths} and measured every penny of the firm. With only an idea, he decided to cover the medical expenses of every family for five years, regardless of the cost to Sandler O'Neill.

The manager who calculated the risk recalls, Dunne did not make the decision because they could cover the costs, only that he wanted to know their exposure. Then Dunne doubled it to ten years, and then expanded it until the children were adults.

In the makeshift conference room, the whiteboard that normally plotted the deals in progress, now held a matrix with their deceased employee's name, family members, date, and location for the funeral. A senior member of the firm, often Dunne, would attend each service.

Then, they decided that any child of the firm whose parent died would receive a full scholarship, regardless of merit or need, for college.

Several years ago, Dunne said, one day "my son will meet the son or daughter of one of our people who died that day, and I will be judged on what that kid tells my son about what Sandler O'Neill did for his family."¹

Earlier this year, Dunne served as the commencement speaker at the University of Notre Dame. "At such moments, there isn't time to reflect and figure out what you believe. All you have is your foundation.... In the days after 9/11, I had convictions to follow, and I know where that foundation was built."²

Dunne relied upon the faith ingrained in him by worship, prayer, and sacraments, his family, and by being a part of his church, something bigger and more enduring than anything another human could construct.

¹ Kevin Truong, "How a bank cared for the children of employees lost in 9/11," *The Christian Science Monitor*, September 15, 2015, <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/USA-Update/2015/0911/How-a-bank-cared-for-the-children-of-employees-lost-in-9-11>. Jimmy Dunne's interview at the Faith & Work Initiative may be viewed via this link <https://faithandwork.princeton.edu/node/221>.

² Jimmy Dunne, "2021 Commencement Address," University of Notre Dame, <https://news.nd.edu/news/jimmy-dunne-2021-commencement-address/>

To choose faith, to walk this way of life, does not come easy, or without risk. This choice may cost everything.

Mark's gospel was written in the shadows of the Roman/Jewish war, 40-50 years after Jesus' death. Clearly Jesus' resurrection had not freed them from Rome tyranny.

Jesus' call to follow him into the life committed to love and justice and inclusion only resulted in thousands of additional deaths.³

So, the writer of Mark's gospel answers the question of "who is he" and opens with the statement "the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God."

The first half of his short story tells us of the people whom he called, whose lives were given back through healing, and justice, who chose to follow him.

At the very center of the Mark's gospel Jesus pivots towards the cross.

Before doing so he ask, "who do others say that I am?" At the time, one's profession and family, along with the court of public opinion determined your identity. So, what others thought was a valid question.

Then, he turns to those who had left their lives for him, asking, "who do you say that I am?" Peter answers for them: the Messiah.

³ Sharon Ringe, Mark 8:27-38: Exegetical Perspective," *Feasting on the Word* ed David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009), p. 68-73.

Was it Peter's tone of voice or a clenched fist that belied his desire to overthrow the Romans in Caesarea Philip? It's where they were headed.

Jesus offers the first of three predictions of his suffering, death, and resurrection, prompting Peter's immediate fury.

By our human reckoning strength is everything, might makes right, and the one who dies with the most toys wins.

But God's spreadsheet measures strength not in terms of brutality but love, not by victory but vulnerability, not in possessions but in sacrifice, by choosing to stand with the weak, the outcast, and speaking for those without voice and walk as a witness to God's love each and every day.

"Who do you say that I am?" is a question Peter and all the others answered by walking with him into the city of Caesar and later to Golgotha.

The writer of Mark's gospel wants those who hear this story of good news to know that Jesus' followers risked everything and willingly paid a price to sustain his ministry.

For us, the call is not quite so risky as those original disciples. We follow in their footsteps and all those over two thousand years, and the past seventy-five years at Westminster.

On this Super Sunday, we open the programs and doors at Westminster, inviting you into the daily path of following Jesus.

You belong to him through this church.

By prayer, faithful worship, serving with others, learning to forgive one another, helping to raise each other's children, seeing the humanity in the enemy and stranger, tending to the broken hearted, and the anxious, you develop the muscle-memory of faith.

Each day that you follow him, he lives within you, strengthening your faith, so if you are ever faced with the decision in ways we witnessed twenty years ago, you know who has already saved your life. And if never face such crisis or and the meantime, your life will teach others about Jesus in ways that words fail.

When my dad was in town this summer, we took your advice and traveled to the Flight 93 Memorial in Shanksville. As we walked through and around the grounds, like the other visitors, we did so in silence.

You know the story. One of the passengers on the flight, Todd Beamer, led others to confront the terrorists and their evil. His wife, Lisa, describes his faith, nurtured as child in church, embedded at Wheaton College as an undergraduate, and matured while teaching Sunday School. On their final phone call, they recited the Lord's Prayer as others on board joined in and Psalm 23 from memory.⁴

Each day we decide who we will follow so that when we look in the mirror, we can see the eyes of our savior reflected.

We gain the whole world through him.

⁴ Mene Ukueberuwa, "Remember Todd Beamer of United 93," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 10, 2021, https://www.wsj.com/articles/flight-93-united-todd-beamer-9-11-september-eleventh-jihadist-terrorist-attack-11631223355?mod=searchresults_pos1&page=1



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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

www.westminster-church.org