

**WESTMINSTER**  
PRESBYTERIAN  
**CHURCH**



SERMON

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# Day by Day

Dr. Jo Forrest



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Last Sunday, while sitting in Newark Airport waiting for our final flight home, I worshiped along with you via the YouTube recording posted earlier that day. Kristy Berrott, Beth Ketterman, and Rick Ralston graced this pulpit with their personal stories of being held by the church through their trials and tragedies. All sorts of people, who believe in God through Jesus, stood by them, giving what was needed.

My heart swelled as I too understand what it feels to be held in hard and holy moments. Last weekend, we ventured to Scotland to be with our family as we laid my father-in-law, Jack, to rest. Thank you for the time away, the care you extended to my husband, Hamish, and me, and your prayers.

As I prepared to preach at his funeral service, the distance across the Atlantic began to symbolize our vast differences as my anxiety grew. Although I've presided at hundreds of services, I questioned each element in the order of worship. We might share the English language, but I labored over the words, aware of the potential disconnect in meaning and in our rituals. I felt an outsider.

Once in the church, affixing microphones and learning to *mind the steps* so I'd not trip from the pulpit. Through these mundane tasks the parish staff, reminded me, this is what the church does:

We stand with one another in times of sorrow and joy.  
We calm another's fear.

We break bread and honor scripture, so God's word comes alive, yet again.

We tell the story of Christ's resurrection by how we give of ourselves in even the smallest of gestures.

From generation to generation, God's presence transcends any boundary or perceived limit by the generosity we extend to one another.

A cup of tea, a kind word, a bright smile, their calm presence. The people we met gave, what they received from God.

What we held in common, erased any real or perceived barriers between us. We are all just people. Trying to live in God's world. And, we don't do it alone.

When Chris Hestwood introduced the preachers last week, her words could not be truer. At Westminster, pastors come and go, while you remain the body of the church. It's the way you show up for one another, day after day, and year after year, that sustains lives, generations, the community, and that ripples into the wider world.

Today's lectionary reading perhaps marks the first time the church of Jesus Christ became such a place of mutual care and strength.

Just before he ascended to heaven, the risen Christ breathed upon his followers, and sent them out to "be my witnesses in

Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Act 1:8)

After the spirit of Pentecost infuses them with the gift of language, the most tongue-tied disciple, the one least likely to be on the USC debate team, that bumbling fisherman offers the first sermon as told in the book, the Acts of the Apostles.

Peter steps up to preach.

Starting with the prophets of the Hebrew scriptures and moving to his testimony as an eyewitness to the resurrected Christ, Peter tells the story, concluding “the promises are for you, for your children’s children, and for all who are far away.” (Acts 2:39)

Then the spirit does its work. Somehow, somehow, God’s spirit claims the listeners. God’s spirit entices the people to change their hearts and minds. Scripture tells us, “Those who welcomed Peter’s message were baptized and that day about three thousand persons were added.” (Acts 2:41)

Before I read what happens next, please pray with me,

*Dear God, when we are honest, your spirit frightens us. It changes what we once thought of ourselves and one another. It pushes us beyond our comfort. Through it, we see our world with new clarity. As we hear this ancient story, open us to trust that we too may be that vibrant community of life. Amen.*

### **Acts 2:42-47**

<sup>42</sup> They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. <sup>43</sup> Awe came upon everyone because many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. <sup>44</sup> All who believed were together and had all things in common; <sup>45</sup> they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.

<sup>46</sup> *Day by day*, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, <sup>47</sup> praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And *day by day* the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

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If you composed music for a soundtrack, we'd hear something sentimental pushing to the sappy end of the spectrum. Scripture paints a genuine Norman Rockwell portrait of that first church. It does not get more idyllic than this. Actually, the whole image seems far-fetched. A community of 3,000 people, who'd not known one another and came from differing tribes and towns, should have been completely unstable from such ballooning growth.

Yet, they genuinely grew stronger, day by day. They felt the spirit push into their ordinary life. They heard the apostles'



stories of God breaking down any barrier, between people, and experienced it for themselves.

They worshiped together. They heeded Jesus' command to "do this in remembrance of me," and broke bread. The spirit brought them to understand Jesus' gifts and the depth of God's generosity. They grew to trust that God will blast through what they thought was final, even death itself.

They grew to accept God's promises and not the old values. This shared belief created a safe place to be vulnerable. In this humility, awe and wonder gripped them, giving a renewed sense of being alive.

Day by day they forged new habits: they shared what they had for the common good. They gave out of joy, not as a prescribed sacrifice or a membership fee.

Later, the Acts of the Apostles describes some of the deception and nastiness we know to be true about churches. If it were not for infighting and power struggles, the Apostle Paul's letters would be much, much thinner.

Human nature itself did not change, but once those early followers tasted the sweetness of God's generosity and gave of themselves to anyone in need, they never turned back. We do know this to be a true story by their impact: as Jesus asked, the gospel spread to the ends of the earth.

When you see the world through the lens of the resurrection, then day-by-day, you relinquish the world's values about possessions, share what you have in ways to strengthen the community, and impact the wider world.

Last Thursday evening, Hamish and I found our way to an event space in Carnegie, a former sanctuary, where SHIM was hosting its annual benefit.

Arriving at our destination, as Google maps told us, a man standing in his yard, warned us the parking lots were already full. "Park here. In front of my house, you'll be safe."

Trusting him, we nabbed one of the remaining spots on the street.

In his front yard, he displayed an American flag along with a banner supporting Ukraine. I gave him a thumbs up pointing to those and thanked him. Then he asked, "what's this south hill, SHIM, thing?"

I smiled; told him I am honored to serve one of the congregations that founded SHIM 65 years ago to serve residents in the South Hills. I spoke of the garden next to Westminster, raising food for the pantry. He accepted my few sentences and wished us well.

At the benefit, I saw Rob and Beth Wagner among other Westminster members. Rob serves on the SHIM board on

behalf of Westminster, offering his wisdom to them. And he does the heavy labor of coordinating our food drives on their behalf.

Rabbi Aaron Myer from Temple Emmanuel, Father Michael Ackerman from Resurrection Parish, and I represented SHIM's founding congregations. In just a whisper of way that brought the first clergy together, we forgot about our differences to work together. We will continue to do so.

I spoke of the garden next door to us. Members of Westminster and beyond seem to delight in growing bitter and hairy melons, two, not one kind of melon, Asian cabbage and beans, and assorted produce never consumed on our tables.

Because of their work, the immigrants SHIM serve prepare comfort foods from their native lands and can feel more at home alongside of us.

The benefit celebrated the way people give of their time, their passions, and as with any benefit, raised money to further the work. The spirit swirled through the room with joy.

Walking back to our vehicle, in the distance I could see something on the windshield. "No kidding," I thought. "Don't tell me, a ticket."

Instead, stuck under the wiper blade we pulled a cross made from palm leaves and an envelope. Anxiously I opened it to find a simple note from Richard and Barbara, “a little offering for the Lord’s work” and a crisp \$20 note.

A man I’d never met before and may never see again felt the Spirit move through him, inviting him to share something of his for those in need.

My friends, receiving and giving is the foundation of the church. It pulls you closer to God.

For those of you who give, thank you. Thank you for the ACH, credit card, cash, and checks. Because of your generosity, we open these doors seven days a week to the community and seed the gospel.

For those of you who do not give, the next time you use your app to order a \$6 latte, and maybe think to pay it forward to another person, I invite you to consider texting something to the church.

Here, we teach our children what it means to be loved by God. We serve alongside them, modeling what it means to be Christ’s hands and feet so they develop the habit. Here, we buy the bread and fillings to make meals for homeless mothers in West Virginia. Here, a \$6 gift grows day-by-day.

I'm not asking you to stop with your lattes or feel guilty. Enjoy them and all of life. This story invites you to just consider giving a little. Or the next time you pay for the family's dinner at Wendy's with your phone, use the QR code in the bulletin to donate an equivalent amount to the church.

Here, your colleagues in ministry are in the seventh month to settle a refugee family with five kids. Along with all their daily gift of shuttle them to appointments and practical wisdom to navigate SNAP benefits, our ministry invests money so this family take root for our next generations to thrive.

These are not my ideas about giving. They originated from my friend John. He gave odd amounts to the church. One day we'd receive \$52.47, another day \$93.00, or another \$16.75. When I asked him why, at first, he bristled, saying, "that's between God and me." Then he smiled. "Each time I take my wife to dinner, I know how blessed I am, to share this life with her, and to have the money to do so. Whatever the bill is, I send an equal amount to the church." His gaze narrowed and he directed me to "ensure others taste the sweetness of being a part of God's generosity."

John's way is unique. What we know to be true is that those who give never stop. Giving creates joy.

One day you will no longer see yourself, your family, or a world colored by scarcity.

God's spirit will disrupt that. Maybe it's when forgiveness gives you a chance to start again. Or you lay to rest someone you love and know that the love you share does not die; resurrection is true. Maybe it's when you see the world as a gift and give to make it more livable for another, you find yourself closer to God.

I hope you felt the joy of receiving a gift, something you never asked for, never deserved, and never imagined, particularly from God. I hope you know what it feels like to be accepted and loved. To be inspired. To know the limitlessness of this. To feel unmerited grace. I hope God's spirit animates your days. Your habits.

Friends, our steeple soars above us to remind us of our *raison d'eter*, our reason for being, and to ensure Christ's gospel endures. For our children's children, to the ends of the earth.





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2040 Washington Road  
Pittsburgh, PA 15241  
412-835-6630  
[www.westminster-church.org](http://www.westminster-church.org)