



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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# **Being the Church: Wondrous Possibilities**

Dr. Jo Forrest

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Even though we turned the calendar to a new year, the pandemic persists, demanding quarantines. Our weather bites with cold, drawing us inward, and the political climate stings if we step out of a partisan shell.

This continual pressure to retreat feels as though we are being imprisoned, causing too many to lash out. The rampant incivility we witness belies the tensions that simmer within us and that can give way to outright physical hostility on airplanes, in grocery stores, and schools.

Is it safe to venture out?

Rather than nestle inside until it all blows over, as if it will, this is precisely the time to open ourselves to sacred texts and learn from our ancestors. They did not have a rosy path. Rather than recoil from others, we need to recommit to belong to Christ's church, this church.

Over the next several weeks, Louise, Ed, and I will offer a sermon series entitled "Being the Church." What can we learn from our holy scriptures and faith to be the church in this time and place?

To love one another as God loves us raises the bar from the depths we seem to keep falling. Being the church calls us to a high standard.

As the first installment, we turn to the apostle Paul's Letter to the Ephesians.

This is one of several “the captivity letters,” since we believe it was composed while he was imprisoned.

Regardless of his personal sufferings, Paul teaches us how to be the church.

Ephesians is also considered a “circular letter.” Unlike many of Paul’s letters in which he identifies specific people and their particular problems, this letter addresses challenges faced by all churches. Very likely the contents of this letter were copied, with a new “fill-in-the-blank” city name, and circulated throughout a region.

For that reason, Ephesians contains truths that transcend place and time, pertinent for us in Upper Saint Clair today as in that Greek city long ago.

As an aside, when the Bible Read Along resumes in February, we will read all of this brief and rich letter.

Paul opens by describing God’s purpose to redeem humankind through the cross of Christ. God saves all people, both Jew and Gentile, uniting them by God’s spirit. Ethereal ideas consume chapters one through three.

Chapter four turns on the word “therefore,” to describe wondrous possibilities when we bind ourselves to God through the church. Paul gives clear, concise instructions to govern our lives as the body of Christ and influence the world around.

*We've gathered in-person and online,  
seeking to draw closer to you and one another.  
Quiet within us any noise and  
startle us with your truth,  
that we will stretch ourselves,  
trust one another, and follow your  
son, Christ our Savior. Amen.*

### **Ephesians 4**

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, <sup>2</sup>with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, <sup>3</sup>making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

<sup>4</sup>There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, <sup>5</sup>one Lord, one faith, one baptism, <sup>6</sup>one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. <sup>7</sup>And each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. <sup>11</sup>The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, <sup>12</sup>to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, <sup>13</sup>until all of us come to the unity of the faith...

<sup>14</sup>We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful

scheming. <sup>15</sup> But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, <sup>16</sup> from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

Kirston Marshall Angell, walked across a commencement podium in December to receive a Bachelor of Arts diploma in pastoral ministry. At 32 years of age, this older student was "ecstatic," because he graduated summa cum laude, with a perfect 4.0.

For his next challenge, Angell heads to a maximum-security prison in western North Carolina to work with new inmates, ages 18-25, adjusting to life in prison for the first time. "I've grown out of myself," said Angell, "I've learned to set myself aside and favor others. That's what this program (of ministry) has called me to." He knows the struggles all too well to adjust to prison life in that he is serving a 40-year sentence for second-degree murder.

He was one of thirty inmates who began the four-year college degree program by studying Greek, Hebrew, theology, and pastoral care, with the same academic standards placed before anyone.

The director of the program said these student-inmates gained a new perspective on life. "The moment you begin to tell someone that they have value, first in the eyes of God

and in your eyes as well. And, then you tell them, not only do I think you have value, but the people who support this program think you have value — that, in itself, is transformative.”<sup>1</sup>

While behind bars, many of the inmates learned for the first time of God’s love for each of them, of Christ’s death for people, just like them, and of Paul’s mission to share the gospel risking prison and death. Belonging to God through the church freed them from the isolation in which they had lived.

We must imagine Angell and his fellow students studied Paul’s letters. They heard the truth, quite simply, God chose to walk this fragile life in the man we know as Jesus. Jesus gathered people whom others would reject. He fed, healed, and loved without discrimination. He endured suffering, betrayal, even death. And God raised Christ to prove that violence never has the final word.

Paul’s letter continues with “therefore.”

“Therefore,” that vital word, those inmates, and anyone who believes this truth, participate with God in redeeming this world as a part of Christ’s church. They learned first-hand that the church is never defined by a building. The church is the community of people who know and proclaim God’s love,

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<sup>1</sup> Yanot Shimron “24 inmates awarded BA degree in pastoral ministry will serve NC prisons as ministers,” *Religion News Service*, December 20, 2021, <https://religionnews.com/2021/12/20/24-inmates-awarded-ba-degree-in-pastoral-ministry-will-serve-nc-prisons-as-ministers/>

and following Christ's example, to serve others. They learn Christian faith is not a solitary endeavor.

Seven times, Paul's letter reminds his readers of the unity we share with one another in the one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, united across race, tribe, gender, and economic class. United, but not monochromatic. God gives each person unique gifts, some to be apostles, prophets, and some pastors. I'd love to edit his list and add accountants, lawyers, teachers, those to serve in kitchens. All equal in need, to bring the church to life.

We can imagine that prison life inspired Paul's to understand how the gospel can grow, even in the most desperate circumstances. Living for twenty-four hours a day with so others not of his choosing, confined, he could not escape the diversity. He encountered the gamut of spiritually gifted, the obtuse, and even demonic. He could not escape the good and evil within others and himself. <sup>2</sup>

When the trappings of common life are stripped bare and Jesus' saving purpose remains, Paul knew the truth of God's love could withstand anything the Ephesians or other Christians could encounter.

This wondrous possibility of being the church demands effort on our part and some degree of personal sacrifice. Only through living out our commitment with one another, one day

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<sup>2</sup> David C. Duncombe, "Exegesis: Ephesians 4:1-16" *Lectionary Homiletics*, August 2003 – September 2003, p. 2.



at a time, will our gifts blossom. I can become my true self only in relation to you. Together we avoid being, “tossed to and fro” by “people’s trickery” and “deceitful scheming”<sup>3</sup>

The church in Ephesus, and everywhere, pulses with life when we accept the responsibility to nurture our mutual growth of character. Notice not growth in numbers, but growth of character, to be the shining example to the world of what it means to live in unity, with our differences.<sup>4</sup>

We have no evidence of what they might have written in reply to Paul. But we benefit from the legacy of how they grew together. Even though their church was probably as messy and fraught with challenges as in any other church at the time, they carried the gospel message into a hostile world.

They reached across barricades of isolation to include rather than condemn. They employed the diversity of gifts to make everyone stronger, never privileging one person over another. Always knowing that Christ is the head of the church. They spoke the truth in love. Some people can speak the truth without love – wanting to puff up themselves or put another down. Others can lob lies with the deceit of loving.

The late William Sloan Coffin of the Riverside Church in NYC and former chaplain at Yale Divinity School tells the

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<sup>3</sup> Isam E. Ballenger “Ephesians 4:1016,” *Interpretation*, 1997, p 292-295

<sup>4</sup> Ralph Martin, *Interpretation: Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1991), p.47.

story: “I remember being asked by a freshman if he could give me some advice. ‘Go ahead.’ ‘Well, Sir, when you say something that is both true and painful, say it softly.’ Say it in other words to heal and not to hurt. Say it in love.”<sup>5</sup>

We speak the truth to one another because we are bound eternally together in Christ.

In the church we practice, not expecting to get it right every time, but always trying. And we become confident of our gifts and strength in the gospel that we can speak truth in love, outside the church, in a world that sorely needs to be loved.

Today, we stand on the shoulders of those saints and the women and men who felt the call seventy-five years ago to be the church at a time when this community needed to salve the wounds of war and injustice.

Today, we ordain women and men who felt the spirit swirl through them, whom you have called to serve. They are uniquely gifted. Some with deep wisdom of Westminster and others with fresh perspectives. Talented. Prayerful. Playful. Some have yet to graduate from high school. We are privileged several youth will teach us about the future of the church.

We build upon the strength gained by the testing over these past six or seven years, knowing we grew only from the

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<sup>5</sup> William Sloan Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004), p. 152.

## **Being the Church: Wondrous Possibilities**

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diverse talents and tireless commitment of officers who served during tumultuous times and fragile transitions.

Each brought his or her gift. Many withstood the public scrutiny to speak the truth of what happened. We owe deep gratitude for their dedication to their call to serve.

The strength of your love for this congregation and your collective resolve to persevere will continue to bring us into the future.

Kirston Marshall Angell rose far above what he thought possible in his life by accepting the call to serve. For those of us in this community, with such resources, education, and freedom, imagine what wondrous possibilities we might bring to life as these new officers join with those already serving. Imagine. Pray. Challenge us to grow into what God needs this church to be in this time and place.



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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

[www.westminster-church.org](http://www.westminster-church.org)