



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

August 8, 2021

# **My Favorite Bible Collective**

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: August 12, 2021

Recently an online ad popped up on my screen, pitching a coffee mug with the drawing of two crows and the caption, “attempted murder.”

What humor and play on words. A collective of crows, three or more, is called a murder.

The animal kingdom cleverly names groups of animals by their common behaviors and attributes. Until I moved to Mt. Lebanon, I’d not understood why a collective of chipmunks is called a scurry.

More than a couple of lions, a pride. We have packs, herds, schools, swarms, and my favorite, a group of hippos is called a bloat.

Groups of people bear names to convey their purpose.

Our scriptures are filled with stories of exiles, tribes, enslaved, foreigners, immigrants, armies, or merchants, from what they hold in common.

Among all the ways we are known to gather, my favorite is the church.

Today’s scripture reading comes from Paul’s letter to the early church in in the Greek town of Corinth. Like the city, the church was vibrant with diversity; culturally, economically, with Jews and Gentiles, educated, and laborers.

Filled with energy and newness in their common bonds, not surprisingly, the church quickly became very, very messy, prompting Paul to write not only one, but several lengthy letters.

He bluntly tells them to stop suing each other in court, refrain from inappropriate sexual relationships. He admonishes women and men to assume respectable and respecting behavior. He scolded their table fellowship, instead imploring them to be hospitable and share.

Paul's letter crescendos with rhetoric and tells a funny story, twisting a common Greco-Roman image of the body, to pierce their toxic ideas.

Imagine being in the house-church in Corinth, as this letter is read.

Please pray with me. *Living and loving God, you have made yourself known to us in many and various ways. We're grateful today for scripture. Open our eyes to read it, our ears to hear it, our minds to understand it, our hearts to feel it, and then spark our imaginations to act on it. Amen.*

### **1 Corinthians 12**

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body.

<sup>16</sup>And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. <sup>17</sup>If the whole

body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?

...God has so arranged the body...that there may be no dissension...members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.... strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

In my early 20's I was sent to Atlanta with many other young adults for the grand finale of my training with IBM – Sales School. Imagine, a bunch of fiercely competitive, high energy, rather glib, budding sales reps from across the country thrown together for two weeks.

We had all been charged by our managers with: “don't return unless you are ranked #1.”

In Atlanta, we were steeped in scripts and skills, heard success stories from those who had “rung the bell,” and we practiced, and we practiced prescribed methodologies to remove any of our unique sales approaches.

In the olden days, IBM could feel like a religion. It demanded unwavering loyalty to “Big Blue” and promised rewards if you preformed.

We were housed in apartments with two to three other sales reps, shared meals and cars, and engaged in all the ways 20-somethings entertain themselves while away from home.

I recall laying on the living room floor Sunday afternoon and almost dreaded the final week. I had reached my capacity and was convinced my body simply could not have any more fun.

I remember that single moment most from the entire two weeks.

They had done all they could to mold us into the “standard issue” IBM rep.

We were trained to tell the storyline, to be Lone Rangers, out in front of the competition. Within the company, we were ranked according to our value.

I have some great friends to this day from my time at IBM, but none from that class. Nothing we did inspired enduring connections, even the fun, we were focused on the #1 ranking.

Nehemiah tells a different story of community. After a long exile in Babylon, the Israelites had returned to Jerusalem, only to find the temple destroyed.

Although they rebuilt it physically, they lived among a culture that continued to challenge their Jewish faith.

How do you remember who you are? You tell stories of who you belong to. You share the memories of what sustained you in the tough times. You notice the gifts you share.

Ages ago, God had given the Israelites life-sustaining gifts: land, security, abundance, and diversity of tribes, families, professions, cultures.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann has said that the memory of those gifts and God's covenant relationship was the glue that bound the Israelites together.<sup>1</sup>

But, when they were in exile, no longer worshiping together or reading scripture, they forgot these gifts.

So, when they finished rebuilding the walls and temple, everyone in Jerusalem, "all the men and women," a Hebrew phrase meaning "as one person" gathered.

Ezra opened his scroll and began to read of God covenanting with Abraham and Sarah, God liberating the Israelites from slavery, God giving Moses the laws, all gifts to create enduring community in which everyone cares for the welfare of one another.

As Ezra read these stories, the priests stopped to translate, not only the words from Hebrew into Aramaic, but also interpreted the meaning for that time and place, revealing a truth that transcended the decades.

In hearing the stories, these former exiles discovered they were a part of God's story and those gifts from long ago were for them.

All those archaic names, reminders of the people from different families and trades—42,000 listed, who came together "as one body" then rejoiced and cared for each other.

God's word can do all that. Scriptures give us a lens to look at this world and our lives through God's eyes. A community

---

<sup>1</sup> David Jones. *Everything Depends On Remembering*, [http://day1.org/1710-everything\\_depends\\_on\\_remembering](http://day1.org/1710-everything_depends_on_remembering). Accessed July 15, 2021.

that shares these stories belongs to God. Each person receives their value when they might otherwise feel alone and abandoned.

Another personal story. Decades later, I returned to Atlanta for class. This time the class was with my cohort at Emory.

Imagine a collection of ten ministers from different states, denominations, and churches: an African American granddaughter of a slave sat next to a white guy whose father had participated in the Ku Klux Klan, a Korean ministering in a Muslim community, a lawyer turned activist, just to name a few.

Another played semi-pro, ultimate Frisbee as a way to travel Europe. Who knew you could do that?

We joined Luke Timothy Johnson, a New Testament scholar, to sit in a room for an entire week reading scripture together...every day, all day.

We read aloud a sentence or even a phrase and stopped. We shared impressions, questioned translations and interpretation, argued over meaning, and encountered the text through another's point of view.

It was as if, we read scripture through a kaleidoscope. A kaleidoscope looks like a telescope but has crystals and a mirror such that the image changes as you slowly turn the cylinder.

This kaleidoscope view of scripture revealed depth and meaning of these familiar stories – bringing them to life with each small turn.



Confident we all belonged to God through the spirit and scripture, and no one was looking to be #1, not even the scholar, it became safe to be vulnerable. We shared our experiences of growing close to Jesus, personal stories of love, loss, and ministry.

Imagine the conversations about the stories of slavery with descendants from a KKK member and those enslaved. Whose story would be privileged?

The wounds from battles fought with and through scripture over inclusion of women and gays remained raw.

And we read stories of the power the holy spirit transforming people into a church and felt the same power among us within that stifling conference room.

We saw through any of the labels assigned to one another, which too often, are all we can see, and instead glimpsed the divine image in the other.

I experienced how personal stories and the biblical stories showed us the face of God in one other, not despite our differences but only because of our differences.

To this day, I can send a text, usually a ministry question of “now what?” and receive a reply within the hour.

I feel their commitment to me and to the body of the wider church.

Just a few years after Jesus dismantled boundaries and hierarchies and distinctions, Paul needed to stop the people in the churches who were already thinking once again that some of them were better than others.

Cleverly, Paul employs a metaphor for parts of the human body to represent the community. Greco Roman orators of the time argued diversity in the body reflects the diversity in society and that some people, just as some parts of the body were more highly prized...and those with less appealing functions were inferior and shameful.

Usually, this metaphor reinforced hierarchy and discrimination. Paul as the master, in a surprising twist, with talking feet and self-deprecating ears, turns upside down what was commonly thought – there are no members in the body more valued than others nor do any members carry shame.

All are essential and part of God's divine plan.

All the members were baptized into the body of the church. All members received the same spirit. All members' gifts were needed for this community to thrive.

As someone has said, "there are many things we can do on our own, but being a Christian is not one of them."

By virtue of your presence this morning, you grasp this truth. We need one another at Westminster, particularly as we navigate our way forward.

We come together, in-person and online. In Upper St Clair, California, Florida, and in cottages. Cradle Presbyterians, Methodists, Catholics, theological mutts, and those who rarely professed a faith, all belong here.

People across tribe and profession, regardless of hometown, are gifted with a sense of belonging in the church, unlike any other club or collective.

We need such diversity to continue Christ's work.

In a world that

ranks people,

looks aside when facts are corrupted,

separates people along partisan lines,

and vaccinated from anti-vaxers,

proclaims scarcity instead of the apparent abundance

all to fuel racial strife,

in such a world, we need this community that seeks both our individual welfare and the good of others.

We need to belong to God and one another through the church.

We will know we are part of the church when we see ourselves in scripture and when we involve the Bible in the decisions we make about public and private issues instead of being led by fear, or cultural whims, or some celebrities' preferences.

In the church...

We accept one everyone in love.

We sense the drumbeat of prophets as viscerally now as in ancient of days to seek justice, without exception. From that conviction we act.

We inspire wonder and meaning to confess our sin, sing our praise, and worship with each other here and in our homes.

We create a safe harbor to nurture the faith of our children and our children's children so that the stories live on.

We do all this as a church and then we take our unique gifts out into the world to live as examples of what God intends in those other groups.

No other collective cares so deeply. No other collective celebrates your gifts and needs your presence.

All praise to you, Jesus. All honor and praise to you.



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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

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