

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

July 14, 2024

I Am Not Okay

Dr. Jo Forrest

I Am Not Okay

Dr. Jo Forrest

© 2024 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: July 14, 2024

Despite differences – some real and some imaginary – The beliefs formed by science and those shaped by faith agree on at least one fundamental point: space and time had a particular point of beginning and our universe will come to a definitive end.

For scientists and most believers, the beginning of everything started with the Big Bang about fifteen billion years ago. As for the end, in about five billion years from now, the sun will expand into a red giant ball, 10,000,000 times its present volume and incinerate the earth.

John Polkinghorne, who is a particle physicist claims, "It is as sure as can be that humanity, and all forms of carbon-based life, will prove a transient episode in the history of the cosmos."

Polkinghorne is also an Anglican priest, whose search for the *meaning* of creation, turns him from mathematical equations of the heavens to the language of faith in human life.

For believers, what matters is our purpose that connects those endpoints. During this in-between, where we dwell day-to-day, how do our lives matter? ¹

¹ Dan Clendenin, "Everything in Every Way," *Journey with Jesus*, July 7, 2024, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay>

In a brief letter written to a church in Ephesus, Paul attempts to explain by stretching and straining the limits of language. At times, his run-on sentences sound as complex as theoretical physics when he describes God's blessings made known through Christ.

Dear God,

We come before your holy word with questions.

*In the daily grind we sometimes lose sight of you
and our purpose in this grand creation.*

*Send your holy spirit among us and
these holy words that we hear your truth. Amen.*

Ephesians 1:3-10

Blessed be God and our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless in love.

God destined us for adoption as children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of God's own will, to the praise of God's glorious grace freely bestowed on us in the beloved.

In Jesus we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us.

With all wisdom and insight, God has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things, things in heaven and things on earth.

Sometimes a song wafts over the airwaves only to derail you with honesty.

Jelly Roll's music speaks with such clarity for me.

His newest release gets into the fiber of our being by telling the truth we'd often not speak aloud.

I am not okay
I'm barely gettin' by
I'm losin' track of days
And losin' sleep at night

I am not okay
I'm hangin' on the rails

So if I say I am fine
Just know I've learned to hide it well

I know I can't be the only one
Who's holdin' on for dear life...

As I say these words, I hear his gravelly voice and want to sing along. His melody is as captivating as the lyrics.

Is there anyone else among us who struggles with shame? Perhaps you've hidden a secret for so long that if it came to light you wonder if others might consider you a fraud. Maybe you long to do or say something that would exile you from this comfy enclave.

How many of us know the debilitating imposter syndrome, afraid someone will peek under the façade of success? As long as we're making a list of the things we hide under a mask, some might feel abandoned by their spouse or parent? Or, an addiction? Or, a family member enslaved to a substance that eats away at days and years. Or, you're just plain weary from the weight of mortgage payments, tuition bills, an elderly parent's decline, and a career that just doesn't spark anymore.

When we're supposed to be striving, no one wants to be just okay, let alone feel *not okay*.

Jason Bradley DeFord's mom gave him the name "Jelly Roll" because he was so chubby as a toddler and it stuck. As an adult, Jelly Roll credits her with teaching him to become a good storyteller and fostering a love for music even though she suffered from drug addiction and mental health episodes.

He grew up in lower-middle class suburb of Nashville where his dad sold meat and ran a bookie business – they needed that shady side-gig to make ends meet.

When his parents divorced, it fell to Jelly Roll to support his mom. He started dealing drugs and shoplifting. The week his church confirmed him was also his first arrest on drug charges.

Twelve years in and out of the jail system chewed his youth and young adult years until he had an awakening. He describes that moment as a "Damascus Road experience." Sitting in his jail cell, a guard knocked on his door to tell him that he had a daughter and that's when he decided "he wanted to be a good father" because he had a Good Father, in God.

Once released, with no other legitimate qualifications, Jelly Roll turned his storytelling and singing into making music.

In 2023 he received five nominations for the CMA Awards, country music's highest honors, winning Male Vocalist and

New Artist. Don't dismiss him if country's not your thing – he received two Grammy nominations as his music now jumps across genres.

Jelly Roll will tell anyone and everyone, the notion of being okay, or clawing up to okay, is something you don't do alone.

His song continues:

But God knows, I know
When it's all said and done
I'm not okay
But it's all gonna be all right

Jelly Roll's message is not unique. Google the lyrics and you'll find the acronym EWBAITE, shorthand for *Everything Will Be Alright in the End* and title of a song by an artist named Weezer in 2014.

John Lennon wrote, "Everything will be okay in the end. If it's not okay, it's not the end."

This idea is good and true and it's biblical.

Paul wrote to members of a church in Ephesus who were most likely lower- and lower-middle class. Many were enslaved or trapped at the bottom of the economic ladder. They felt the

daily grind, not making ends meet, and wondering the purpose of their lives in God's grand scheme.

With words that flow into endless streams of praise about God, Paul's letter is a resounding song of hope.

He begins in gratitude, reminding them of God's plan for their earthly lives and "in the heavenly places." God laid this plan for them through Christ "before the foundation of the world."

His letter reminds them of who God creates them to be — souls beloved and held, created, fallen, forgiven, redeemed, and guided. God's grace guides them by the grace made known in Christ. God creates a world and plan for everything to be okay, not just in the end, but right here and now.

When the Ephesians accept that they are not okay and cannot be okay without Christ, they begin to see God's hand in their lives. Paul invites them to access this grace by practicing forgiveness.

Forgiveness is the one gift that heals the heart of the recipient and the giver. It brings possibility to otherwise dead-end relationships. When you forgive, you choose the goodness of the other person over their faults. Your willingness to access that strength and compassion often says more about who you

are and wish to be than who they are. Because we all know that people are not their behavior. Fear and unhealed pain cause people to hurt people.

Forgiveness is choosing to see the goodness that lies beyond behavior.

By forgiving, you experience God's goodness flowing generously through you. God doesn't just parcel out forgiveness. God is forgiveness. You experience your own goodness in a way that almost always surprises. It turns out mercy for another is mercy for ourselves.

When you forgive you don't forget the harm or pretend it doesn't matter. You choose to release bitterness and hatred, freeing yourself to move on. You chose new beginnings rather than victimization. You let go of wishing the past was different and walk into the possibility of a different future.

If a scar remains from the original hurt, it becomes a reminder of the scars we have given others; a reminder that we are all in need of mercy and forgiveness.

In a world with so many voices, including our own, tell us that we are not okay, and offer no hope, to forgive moves us from

not-okay to *okay*. With God's help, to forgive moves us further from being okay to helping others find their okay-ness.

Every act of forgiveness creates a new beginning, part of God's plan for gathering up all of creation. We need a dose of humility because we cannot do this alone. We need courage. Creativity. And to trust in what God reveals to us in Jesus – that violence and hatred do not win. Just when we think we've reached the end and it is the grave, God makes it all right with a pure gift.

Jelly Roll now leverages his popularity to advocate for ways to combat drug addiction. In January of this year, he appeared before congress.

It's personal for him. His daughter's mother is now addicted and he fears the day her life may end in overdose. In plain terms he spoke of 190 fentanyl deaths each day – a number that would make national news and outrage if these souls perished in a plane crash. These deaths cross all age and income and racial divides.

Since it's become acceptable to bully and blame drug addicts, he challenged elected officials to care more about human life than ideological partisanship. ²

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xPoFVklcSRI>

Jelly Roll's testimony demanded courage, but his ideas are not original. Perhaps they were inspired by his faith history.

Paul knew the Ephesians were not ones to praise of human institutions or idols or ideas. His writings encouraged their joy in what Christ is doing to redeem aching souls and a suffering world.

Let me close with the final verse of his song...

I know one day, we'll see the other side
And the pain'll wash away
In a holy water tide.

I know I can't be the only one
Who's holdin' on for dear life
But God knows, I know
When it's all said and done.
It's all gonna be alright.



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
412-835-6630
www.westminster-church.org