

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

September 11, 2022

Made for Joy

Dr. Jo Forrest

© 2022 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 13, 2022

Last week, almost seven million viewers, via tv screens, joined the over twenty-nine thousand tennis fans crowded into Arthur Ashe Stadium to watch one of the GOATS, greatest of all times, play tennis.

Serena Williams, or more commonly known as, Serena, likely played her last tournament match before the largest tennis in-person and on-line community.

I'll admit, I watched. Could not take my eyes off the sheer power she put into overhands, forehands, double backhands, and the poetry of her serves. For three hours she fought and lost.

What happened next remains more memorable than the match point saves.

In defeat, she breaks into the widest smile – and says, “Thank you so much. You guys were amazing in here. I tried.” She looks to the sky, referring to her late father, “Thank you. Daddy! I know you're watching.” Then to the stands, “Thanks Mom...Just everyone that's here that's been on my side so many years. It all started with my parents, and they deserved everything.... And I wouldn't be Serena, there wasn't Venus. So, thank you Venus.”¹

Then the tears begin to fall. Unstoppable.

¹ [Serena Williams' US Open farewell most-watched tennis match in ESPN history, Serena Williams' dream run at US Open ends with third-round loss to Ajla Tomljanović \(espn.com\)](#)

Surprised herself, she immediately wanted everyone to know they were tears of joy. Not anger. She cried of being in a community wanting the best from her and for her.

“I’m just so grateful to every single person that’s ever said, ‘Go, Serena,’ in their life. I’m just so grateful...you got me here.”

The moniker, “greatest of all time,” will fade away as another athlete rises. Whomever steps on her shoulders enters a broader community, because of the barriers erased by this woman of color decades ago. Tennis is no longer isolated to the elite, since someone from as out-of-the-way as Compton found her way in and made room for others.

Joy in life comes being who you are in a community that accepts you for who you are.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus’ inaugural sermon set the stage for all his ministry. He preached he would reunite those long excluded. As he moves towards Jerusalem, he makes good on this promise by eating with those never included at the respectable dinner tables. He showers grace to those long denied a second chance. He sees people for who they are, even though others labeled them “outsiders.” He welcomes them.

Step by step, his gatherings grow larger and always celebratory. To the ire of the religious authorities.

Today's reading picks up on the dusty road, Jesus tells three stories of lost and found. Only the first two are assigned for today, the final story, the prodigal son stands alone.

Before I read the first two, please pray with me.

Dear God, thank you for coming to walk our common lives in Jesus. Settle us now to hear his ancient stories. Send your spirit among us. Spark a new understanding within us. Find us with your love. Teach us to welcome others into this holy community created by and for your son. Amen.

Luke 15:1-10

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him.² And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

³So Jesus told them this parable: ⁴"Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? ⁵And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my lost sheep.'

⁷Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

⁸“Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ ¹⁰Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Through these stories, Jesus challenges every notion of community by pointing to the binaries of those who belong and those excluded. Are you family or not? Do we belong together by some standard that can also exclude others? Do those who claim you... actually want the best for you?

These divisions, created by the establishment had become so entrenched that the people, particularly the religious leaders, no longer saw them as false and damaging. Jesus wants them to see that God craves a broad, diverse community.

Rather than wade into their turf of god-talk, he points to God through metaphor, with familiar terms. A shepherd who loves each and every lamb birthed and tended. A woman who relies upon each coin saved to feed her family.

Jesus wants them to imagine a person who loves those entrusted to them and agonizes over losing even one.

Cleverly, Jesus weaves the characters together so the nature of the one who is lost reveals the nature of God.

A sheep bleats when hungry or just to be ornery. But, when a sheep becomes disconnected from the flock, it hunkers down in silence. So fearful of predators, it secludes itself, immobilizes itself from rescue. Everything depends upon the shepherd. In this story, the shepherd throws caution to the wind to find and reclaim this lost sheep.

Similarly, the lost coin cannot call out or shine brightly on its own, to bring attention to itself. It relies entirely upon someone else to decide its worth and search for it. Through no work on its own, it produces joy in the woman who sought it.

Jesus understands the struggle with being lost, the emptiness of wondering if anyone notices your absence, and the fear of being accepted if you return.

On that dusty road for the religious authorities to hear, he turns towards those they called the “sinners.” Sure, some of these people may have done something wrong, while many were called “sinners” only by becoming what God created them to be, perhaps different from the norm. Regardless of why others labeled them as “sinners,” Jesus wants them to know that God sees them as precious, and God goes to extraordinary lengths to bring them home.

These stories remind us, we did not create our value – God did. Most of the time we forget our value – God never does. God created us to be unique and to thrive in community, to be a part of something larger than ourselves. In each story, Jesus tells of a celebratory party – rejoicing by the one searching.

Joy rests in the heart of the gospel. Joy also offends.

The religious leaders abhor the possibility that those who lie outside of their definition of redeemable might be included in the circles they inhabit and control. Jesus knows this since before he even speaks, they “grumbled.” Their grumbling provoked him to tell these stories that catch them in his snare.

His story begins with a question “which one of you?” In order to be the hero of the story, the one in control, in another word, God, these leaders need to leave their lofty hierarchy for the gritty task of shepherd in remote hills.

In the second story, he disorients them by placing a woman in the role of God willing to pick up a broom for domestic work – no other parable in the New Testament presents God through the metaphor of a woman. Those leaders would never demean themselves as shepherd or woman.

They imagine themselves as the righteous who search and wield control. All the while they are lost just as much as that petulant lamb or the inanimate coin. Imagine the audacity of

Jesus. Those authorities needed to be rescued from their isolation just as much as those they condemned.

His stories disorient them, hoping they realize just how disconnected from the truth they had become. Getting lost makes us face our limits. Getting lost reminds us that we depend upon others. None of us get through this life without the help from someone else.

God rejoices over sinners, not former sinners. In fact, lose the labels. The reunion culminates not in a trial to condemn but a party to celebrate. God doesn't love us because we've picked up ourselves by our bootstraps – that's the opposite of the gospel.

Imagine the audacity of Jesus to say that God rejoices by showering mercy first like a kind-hearted parent caring for a child or with a sweet, saving word, as our old hymn claims, for a “wretch like me.” His church grew not from moral excellence and respectability. It grew from joyous celebrations of those who found their way into it. Sinners. Lost. Those who drifted away.

Moral excellence has its place, but it is decidedly second place. What comes first is the party, the singing, the joy on earth as in heaven.²

² Rejoice with Me: SALT's Commentary for Fourteenth Week after Pentecost
(saltproject.org)

Let me close with a story of a community rejoicing over the return of someone who had been lost to them.

In 2015, Joni Mitchel suffered a debilitating brain aneurysm that left her unable to speak, walk, write, much less play the guitar. At her age, most folks thought this celebrated musician from the 1960's and 70's would just fade away.

Having suffer polio as a child, Mitchel knew the work to recover. She watched videos of herself playing the guitar and learned once again where to place her fingers, how to hold it. She “return(ed) to infancy” to become again.

This summer, at 78 years old, she appeared at the Newport Folk Festival. Encircled by the current masters of the craft including Brandi Carlile, Wynonna Judd, Allison Russell, and Marcus Mumford she tapped the armrest of an upholstered chair, and began to sing, “Rows and flows of angel hair/ And ice cream castles in the air”...at first indiscernible. Then her gravelly voice moved through the rest:

I've looked at clouds from both sides now
From up and down and still somehow
It's cloud illusions I recall
I really don't know clouds at all

And we heard her iconic *Both Sides Now*.

Seated next to her, Brandi Carlile wrote that it felt as though the world stopped. Then you saw the tears fall on Wynonna

and all the other musicians. I defy anyone to watch the YouTube video and maintain a dry eye, witnessing the palpable joy hearing her sing.³

Carlile tweeted, Mitchell has “looked at life from so many sides,” and come “out of the storm singing like a prophet.”

Seeing her onstage reminds us: we've all been counted out or chalked up as lost before. Maybe because of health. Maybe you lost your job or flunked out of school. Maybe you were passed over, divorced, given up on. Maybe COVID did it to you and apathy lingers. Something at some time. You know.

When Joni Mitchell sang the last line, "I really don't know life at all," Carlile heaved a sigh, clutched her hand to her heart, laughed. And laughed. Once you join your community there is no other feeling – joy.

On this Super Sunday, know that God comes looking for you with the reckless persistence of a shepherd or the desperate need of a woman, in the flesh of this church – not the building – the people who seek you to bring everyone joy.

Know that you were made for joy. For us. For yourself. Most of all God.

³ [Joni Mitchell “Both Sides Now” with Brandi Carlile Live at Newport Folk Festival, July 24, 2022 - Bing video, Joni Mitchell's Newport Folk Festival performs after brain aneurysm : NPR](#)

Benediction Charge

I rise early in the morning to write. As the night grows longer and daybreaks later, I notice the night sky blends with opaque clouds. They obscure any light from the heavens. Dark means dark. Get lost in the dark kind of dark.

When morning comes the horizon begins to glow silver-blue-grey, the clouds a bit lighter, brighter. As the sun rises over the hills, the clouds begin to blush. If you hold your breath, they glow vibrant pink.

Never forget, pink is the color of joy.

From the darkness God brings a new day. God starts our day with joy. When you see the morning sky, remember, you were made for joy.



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

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