

**WESTMINSTER**  
PRESBYTERIAN  
**CHURCH**



SERMON

Ash Wednesday - February 14, 2024

# No Greater Love

Dr. Jo Forrest



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God teaches us how to live and how to love by becoming like us.

Jesus had a mom, just like you and me. I imagine that at family dinners, Joseph had him rolling his divine eyes at bad dad jokes. Scripture indicates that just like God, Jesus had a good sense of humor.

He likely had the scars of skinned knees from playing with cousins and calloused hands from chores with his dad. Jesus grew into himself, embodying all of our humanity and God's desire for us to learn how to love.

After a long ministry with men and women whom he loves and who love him, he speaks to them one last time. You see, the next day, Jesus will surrender to authorities and fulfill all of God's promises.

In John's gospel he's not afraid but his friends are.

He knows God promises his fleshy body, made of the dust of the ground, will die, and be raised. He's told all his followers this many times.

At this last supper he begins by saying, “do not let your hearts be troubled. God’s home has room for all.”

Listen to more of what Jesus says:

**John 15:9-17 (The Message, adapted)**

“I’ve loved you the way God has loved me. Make yourselves at home in my love. If you keep my commands, you’ll remain intimately at home in my love. That’s what I’ve done—kept my God’s commands and showed you how to make a home in that love.

(Jesus alludes to all the things they’ve done over the past three years to confront bullies, to include those people who had long been told they don’t belong, to give generously so others are not hungry or sick. By living in a body like ours he taught us how to love.)

“I’ve told you these things for a purpose: that you feel the joy I feel. This is my command: Love one another the way I loved you. This is the very best way to live. No one has greater love

than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends when you do the things I command you.

“You didn't choose me, remember; I chose you, and put you in the world to teach others how to love. It's hard and holy work, but whenever you ask God for help when you do this work, God will give you.

“And remember my command: Love one another.”

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God makes love a relationship instead of an idea. When words fail, and they will, people will remember what you did, how you behaved, and then how they felt because of you.

This year with Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day crashing into one another today, rather than rely on flimsy Hallmark cards or melting Sarris candy, Ash Wednesday invites us to learn how to love tenderly and fiercely in the face of what will happen to all of us.

We are creatures made of dust. We will die. No number of roses will change that.

The poet Mary Oliver wrote: “To live in this world, you must be able to do three things:

to love what is mortal;

to hold it against your bones knowing our own life depends on it;

and, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go.”

As I grow older more and more friends and family members die, people in this congregation will die. All this causes me to question if I have the courage and desire each day to love fully and fiercely someone, whose body, like mine, is beginning to fail with age and disease.

And yet this crashing together of Valentine’s Day and Ash Wednesday tells us that love does not so much save us from death. Just the opposite, to know that we will all die makes how we live – by loving without reservation – more urgent.

Our experience of loving – loving everyone as Jesus shows us - teaches us that all creatures are precious and beloved by



God. The more we practice loving someone, the easier it becomes. We never drain our capacity. When we do as Jesus commands, we find just the opposite of scarcity. Love develops muscle memory and strengthens us to love even more. It overflows.

Ash Wednesday begins the Lenten journey, the forty days, not counting Sundays, when we consider if we are living and loving as Jesus commanded.

Forget the valentines. Do the hard and joyous work to accept everyone, seek justice, and be open to God's presence. Practice the kind of love that gives and forgives so we can reconcile with those we've hurt and who hurt us.

What do you need to do to love more? Do more "liking" on social media. And let go of the snarky comments.

Spend more time with someone who needs help, who just had surgery, who seems lonely or lost. That means you'll spend less time scrolling on your phone or rehashing with the gang someone's embarrassing gaff.

You know the unhealthy things you do to yourself and others. Rather than think you need to give them up, try doing what is good first, then you just don't have time for the destructive things.

You also get that jolt of joy Jesus promised.

When we are really honest with ourselves, we must admit that our lives do not really belong to us. This fleeting time we enjoy in human form and not merely dust is all that really belongs to us.

So, it is how we use our time that determines what kind of people we are. When we follow Jesus in this life, he makes us feel more at home in this world. He was so sure, he laid down his life to show us. There is no greater love than to live as he taught.

I am convinced that the truest act of courage, the strongest act of giving ourselves for others is the way this dusty, mortal body can make a difference. He promises us room in God's home when someone lays our dust into the ground after our life ends.





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