



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

November 12, 2017

**Dedicated**  
Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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*Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord (Joshua 24:14-15).*

This is a day of dedication in the life of the church.

We're baptizing little children in all three services this morning, where parents declare their Christian faith and promise to raise their children in the faith until they're old enough to join the church themselves in confirmation. Baptism is, among other things, a sign of our dedication to the God we know in Jesus Christ. Then again, Westminster members have been asked to offer our pledges of financial support today for the church's work in the coming year, as another sign of our dedication to God. And, of course, it's Veterans Day weekend, where we recognize and express our gratitude for the dedication of some of our members, and so many other people, in service to our country over the years.

This is a day that's all about dedication, so it's appropriate to ask whether and to what extent each of us really is dedicated to serving God, and how our faith might influence every aspect of our lives.

I teach college courses on religion, and a theme that often comes up is whether religion is just a particular compartment of people's lives or a set of commitments and values that shape the whole of life. Every so often we read a description of somebody's faith that says, "This is not just a religion for us; it's a way of life." Whenever I hear that, I

always wonder what the writer thinks a religion is supposed to be. If it's not an entire way of life, then what is it?

There are religion departments in colleges and universities, which can feed the impression that religion is just one department of life among many others, and an increasingly optional one at that. We come to church for an hour or so on Sunday morning—regularly, or at Christmas and Easter, or at some interval in between—which again might feed the notion that religion is only one activity among others, like work or soccer practice or golf, and an activity that involves, by comparison, relatively little time and dedication.

But being a Christian is not primarily about the amount of time a person spends in a building called “church,” though faithful Christians will want to be here too. Christian faith is about the extent to which being part of the church, the body of Christ in this world, shapes every dimension of our lives. If belonging to the church isn't any more central to a person's life than belonging to the Rotary Club, or a country club, or any other kind of club, then it's hard to see how that sort of Christianity has anything to do with the kind of dedication the Bible describes in those who truly decide to follow Jesus.

Jesus meets us by finding us where we are, in the details of everyday life. So he finds Simon and some other fishermen at the water's edge, tired and frustrated after a long night of fruitless fishing. He climbs into a boat and tells the weary men to put out some distance from the shore in order to find a catch. They protest at first, because they're professionals. They do this for a living. They know what they're doing, and they don't expect to get any help from some religious guy who may know a thing or two about God,

but doesn't know much about the ways of world, or even the ways of fish in the sea.

Still, there's something about Jesus that makes them get back in their boats, skeptical as they are, and cast their nets again, if only to humor the rabbi. Then, speaking of humor, a funny thing happens. Their nets start filling up with fish. More and more fish, until the nets begin to break; and when they dump the fish into their boats, the boats themselves begin to sink under the load.

Now you might think that Simon, who will soon, implausibly, be called "Peter," the kind of rock Jesus could build a whole church upon—you might think Simon would simply be grateful, and thank Jesus for the tip, and maybe offer him a job as a kind of human sonar device. But that's not Simon's reaction. Instead, he says, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!"

What's fishing got to do with sinning? Sinning sounds like religion, the sort of thing they talk about in church. Fishing is just business. It's what we do to make a living. That's an altogether separate thing from religion, isn't it?

Maybe not. There's something about Jesus that, when you meet him up close and personal, it's as if he has a claim on your whole life. Not just the hour or so you spend in church, but in the very place where you spend so much time trying to make a living. There's an authority about Jesus. He comes from God, and God is all through him, and when you see that, if you have any sense at all, you'll do what he tells you to do.

To follow Jesus, the Son of God, is to take on a whole new way of life. If we're not willing to do that, then whatever

else we may claim to be, we're not really Christians in any significant sense. As the folksy saying goes, just sitting in church doesn't make you a Christian any more than sitting in a garage makes you a Chevrolet. But if we call ourselves Christians, and mean that we want to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ, then every part of life is shaped and directed by that central dedication.

So, for example, in all the tumult of this world, we no longer live fundamentally in any kind of fear. And we stop being surprised by the bad things that go on around us, because our faith says that the world, and all of us human beings in it, are deeply out of joint. We're bent in the direction of other interests, tempted to serve other gods besides the one true God. That condition of fallenness, of alienation from God and one another, is what we mean by that little word "sin."

Sin is what Simon the fisherman sees in himself that makes him think he's not fit to be in the presence of Jesus. And what Simon says is true enough, as far as it goes: "I am a sinful man." But that's only part of the truth. The other part is that, precisely because he's a sinful man, the very thing he needs is standing right in front of him. What Simon needs is Jesus—which is why Jesus says, "Don't be afraid. From now on, you'll be catching people. Just follow me." So Simon Peter and his friends drop their nets, and follow Jesus, and from that moment on, their lives will be infinitely richer than they ever were before.

We don't need to be afraid if we really have faith in Jesus, because Jesus comes to us as the Word of God, and God is in charge of all creation. God lets bad things happen for a while, apparently because God wants to give us time to see our need and come to God; but in the end God will make

all things new. And in the meantime, God is always at work, bringing good things out of bad, redemption out of every sin and shortcoming, and God expects us to be part of that redeeming work in the world as well.

Yet again last week, somebody with a gun he shouldn't have had shot up a roomful of people, only this time it happened in a church—the way it happened at Emanuel Church in Charleston a couple of years ago. Of course, we need to take reasonable precautions to make our churches as safe as we can, and we're working on that here, but it would be fundamentally faithless to let some evil act deter us from gathering to worship and serve God as disciples and followers of Jesus Christ.

We would do much better to challenge the lobbies' hold on so many of our elected officials, and insist on commonsense measures that may not stop all the violence but would certainly limit some of it. Just five weeks ago, half a sermon here was devoted to the Las Vegas shooting, and I said then, "... there *will* be a next time, because as long as conditions remain the same, the results will be the same." These kinds of things will keep on happening until we change some of the conditions that make them so common in America, uniquely among all the developed nations of the world. Maybe it's time we stopped being surprised and started taking action, and do that as disciples of Jesus, who wants us to look out for one another in this world.

If we really are dedicated to following Jesus—to being Christians in fact, and not in name only—then we need to be faithful to God in every aspect of our lives. God cares about a great many things besides what we call religion, and God's idea of religion is faithfulness throughout the whole range of life.



We've heard a lot in recent weeks about the terrible treatment of women by so many men—especially, but not only, by men who use their power and authority to take advantage of women. Some people have made a point of emphasizing the bad behavior of men from one party or another, but the truth is that women don't care whether the men who harass them are liberal or conservative. What they care about is that those men are jerks, and creeps, and sometimes criminals. In a world filled with so much selective indignation and tribal hypocrisy, the church must be a community that is safe for women and children, as well as for men, and calls everyone to accountability for their actions.

On Veterans' Day weekend, we honor those who serve and have served our country in the military. Part of honoring them is not just saying "Thank you for your service," but seeing that veterans have the resources they need for healing the physical, emotional, and spiritual wounds of war, and supporting them as they return to civilian life. Even issues like stewardship of the environment relate to caring for service members. The Pentagon said, in its *2014 Climate Change Adaptation Roadmap*: "In our defense strategy, we refer to climate change as a 'threat multiplier' because it has the potential to exacerbate many of the challenges we are dealing with today—from infectious disease to terrorism. We are already beginning to see some of these impacts." Caring about our service men and women also means caring about the conditions that are likely to send them into harm's way.

In short, our commitment to Christ has to reach every aspect of our lives, individually and in our life together, if we really mean to be faithful.

So many people are hungry for a community that genuinely tries to be faithful to God, and rises above the food fights and culture wars of our fractious world—a community that lives not in fear and divisiveness, but in faith, hope, and love, and thus reflects the deepest bonds of unity.

That's the kind of church people will come to, including many who have nothing to do with church now, because they don't know that such a community exists. If we dedicate ourselves to becoming that kind of church, those who long for a good word from God will be glad and grateful to discover that they can find it here.



**WESTMINSTER**  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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

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