

**WESTMINSTER**  
PRESBYTERIAN  
**CHURCH**



SERMON

November 3, 2024

**HEART of GENEROSITY:**  
**Live Your Purpose**  
Dr. Jo Forrest



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When the political landscape was in disarray, with rulers vying for power, and the Jerusalem temple lay in shambles from a renovation, King Josiah's work crew found an old scroll hidden in the recesses of a wall.

If you've ever done a renovation of an old home, perhaps you too found relics under floorboards or hidden under decades of plaster.

This was in 7 BCE and marks a seminal moment in the history of scripture and of our faith history.

In the temple walls, these workers found a scroll with the commands God gave to Moses at the time the Israelite people stood on the border to the Promised Land. After generations of captivity in Egypt and wandering in the desert, everyone argued their own ideas of how to live and who should be included.

These commands rise above the arguments to form a community with purpose and meaning.

When King Josiah heard this scroll read, scripture tells us that he "rent" – or tore – his clothing for he realized how far the people had strayed (2 Kings 22).

He restored not only the temple: he also reformed their way of life to be what God desire.<sup>1</sup> No longer would the people give their loyalty and soul – their love – to a political ruler.

The scroll defines who gave the people life, gave them freedom, gave them a purpose – God and God alone. God is both our purpose and our goal.

King Josiah's bravery reshaped the community, their faith, and their politics from these laws from the Book of Deuteronomy.

Before I read the most basic command, please pray with me,

*Dear God,*

*We know what it is like when anxiety swirls around from chaos, and the words thrown at one another,*

*accusations and lies, make us want to close our ears.*

*Breathe your spirit upon our troubled souls. Unstop our ears.*

*Open our minds to these words, that we take heart, learn them, know them, and let our lives always point to you. Amen.*

### **Deuteronomy 6:4-9**

<sup>4</sup>“Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. <sup>5</sup>You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. <sup>6</sup>Keep these words that I am

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<sup>1</sup>Professor Joel M. Lemon of Emory University astonished my doctoral class with the “vexing” history of Hebrew Scriptures. This post from Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, “Seeking the History Behind The Mythtory: The Backstory On That Scroll They, Uh, Found That One Time” published in her blog, *Life is a Sacred Text*, on October 21, 2024, provides a tongue-in-cheek version of the “mythtory” as she calls it of the Book of Deuteronomy.

<https://www.lifeisasacredtext.com/deuthistory/>.

## HEART of GENEROSITY: Live Your Purpose

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commanding you today in your heart. <sup>7</sup> Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. <sup>8</sup> Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, <sup>9</sup> and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

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Place your hand on your heart. Even though you may not feel it, your heart beats. It beats. It beats without your even thinking about it. It pushes oxygenated blood, to animate the rest of your body.

God gives you this heartbeat, out of God's own heart, and only God knows when it will fade. It's up to us to live in gratitude all our days.

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One of the Peloton exercise instructors I frequently turn to on their ap begins by having us place a hand on our heart. Then, one at a time, we roll an arm.

While doing this, he coaches us to know our purpose. He claims motivation only gets you so far in exercise. It's hard to get going with sore muscles, in the wee hours of the morning, or when doing anything else seems better.

When you know your purpose, you can sustain an exercise routine in the face of all the temptations thrown your way.

The instructor then asks us to switch hands and circle our other arm slowly, lovingly. Again, he reminds us our heart is in center of our life. Now, he asks us to consider our *higher* purpose.

That purpose pushes us to reach beyond the routine, to not get distracted by the noise that limits us. When we know and put this purpose in our bodies, we can do anything.

Once you've circled your arms and feel like you can conquer the world, he candidly admits that placing your hand on your heart isolates one shoulder and stabilizes you. Despite his casualness, isn't that the goal, to become stable, confident, to pursue your purpose?

Before our bodies turn to dust, we need to connect with the essence of being alive.

We need to know our heart and our origin. We need to live our purpose. We can make a difference in the world.

From God's generous heart flows the gift of life and God gives us our purpose so we do not squander our days.

Deuteronomy describes how God nestles us within eternity and places the hope for the future in our hands. We receive these commands, "so that you and your children and your



children’s children may fear the Lord your God all the days of your life and keep all his decrees, so that your days may be long.”

Then we hear the foundational command, called “The Shema.” *Shema* is the Hebrew word for “hear.”

“Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God,”

The Shema calls us to obey God alone, not as an abstract dogma, a historical idea, nor as one among a pantheon of rulers or smaller gods to appease.

To pray the Shema commits someone to God’s purposes whatever it might cost. It continues, “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and with all your might.”

“Love God with all your heart and all your soul” demands an undivided loyalty.

It digs deeper. To love God with “all your might” lays claim to all the resources at your disposal. Your “might” includes your voice and influence, your labor, and your wealth.

Respected Hebrew scholar Alan Mintz writes “the Shema demands that no system of value—not just another religion but any ideology, desire for success, or personal happiness—may replace God as the ultimate ground of meaning.” This command shapes one’s thinking and behavior to appreciate all

experienced moments of beauty, good, love, and holiness signal the presence of the one God.<sup>2</sup>

Now that you know what to believe, the Shema tells you how to obey.

Keep the words in your heart. Bind them as a sign on your hand. The force of these verbs imply you are to “tattoo” them on your flesh so that you and your body never forgets.

Fix them on your forehead so others know how you to hold you accountable. Do more than just copy and read the words, recite them to your children, at all places, and at the beginning and end of your day.

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My friends, I stand in awe at how God’s hand moves through us. You’ve heard me remark often at ways our musicians choose just the right hymn/song or anthem from just the simplest sermon title and scripture passage. Truly the spirit guides us.

We often follow the Revised Common Lectionary when selecting texts for worship. This lectionary prescribes readings from Old and New Testaments over a three-year period to ensure we read widely throughout scripture. We

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<sup>2</sup> Alan Mintz, “Prayer and the Prayerbook,” in *Back to the Sources*, ed. Barry W. Holtz (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984), 408–9.

trace its origins to 1969, which revised an even earlier reading cycle.

Even though a group of ministers and theologians placed these scripture readings calendar generations ago, isn't this just what we all need to hear as our world feels as though it breaks apart with people taking sides and demanding our loyalty? These biblical texts were written during times of deep division to remember God's presence within God's people from an earlier time of deep division. Just to drive home the point, today's text from Deuteronomy is paired with a story at the end of Jesus' ministry.

Centuries later after King Josiah finds the scrolls, Jerusalem again boils over with tension. Knowing full well Jesus heads towards a collision with the authorities and the cross, he does not call down divine power to protect himself.

He does not threaten retribution or even make promises to the faithful few.

The Gospel of Mark describes a final encounter with a temple scribe who asks, "what is the greatest commandment?"

Usually, Jesus responds to such an attack with either another question or an answer that keeps us scratching our heads twenty-one centuries later. Not this time. Jesus responds as a faithful Jew and with biting clarity: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and might.

And, then Jesus adds another command contained in Leviticus...”and love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus elevates a command that details the way the people are to live an upright, decent life with their neighbors.

To love your neighbor is far more than to be “nice.” For the people to love their neighbor means they will not steal, lie, slander, defraud, or hate others. They will not seek vengeance. To love means they will not create strife or seek to divide. Even if their neighbor tempts them to bear a grudge, God calls them to grace and dignity.<sup>3</sup>

When faced with the final exam question of his life’s purpose, Jesus loves God. Every aspect of his heart, soul, and might points to God. And his ministry embodied the ways we love the outcast, the foreigner, the marginalized, the one who society labeled as unworthy.

That’s the faith he handed to his followers. That’s the faith he hands to us through his church. This command from long before Christ and from his own lips calls us to live in a way that makes God, above all else, known.

It is up to us for our children and our children’s children to see this lived out today.

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<sup>3</sup>Matthew Myer Bolton, [Politics, the Bible, and the 2024 Election](#), *The Salt Project* podcast “Strange New World,” October 29, 2024.

I believe when we lay to rest someone whom we love, it rattles us to the core. To stand at the lip of a grave or hold a simple box, heavy with ashes, we question the measure of a life – theirs and ours. That’s when we realize the gift given to us by God in Jesus.

On this All Saints’ Day, we remember the people who continue to inspire us, not because they were “stain glass personalities,” rather they are people who carried on faithfully, less than perfect lives, always dependent upon grace – that dose of unmerited divine favor. It all begins with God’s generosity and continues because of our humble willingness to love God.

Nearing the end of a long and distinguished career, the late Reverend K.C. Ptomey, who served at Westminster Presbyterian in Nashville, spoke about the need for people of the church to support it with their might – in the Hebrew tradition that includes financial resources.

After forty-one annual pledge drives, K.C. said in his inimitable plain-spoken and honest style, “I’ve seen everything... house-to-house calls, letters, telephone campaigns, challenges to tithe, banners, posters, fancy stationery, charts, graphs, movies, skits, Bible studies, potluck suppers, lunches, breakfasts, dessert parties, efforts to impart guilt, promises of eternal bliss, threats of hell-fire and damnation.”

He said, “I’ve seen it all. I’ve done it all.”

K.C concludes, “But what a lifetime of ministry has finally taught me is that generosity simply comes out of people who have experienced God’s love, the unmerited grace and goodness of the living God, which is something we can never earn, which is *always out of proportion* to what we deserve.”<sup>4</sup>

Awareness, deep awareness of the abundant and undeserved goodness of God, is the only thing that can elicit abounding generosity in the way we live outside the sanctuary walls, in the way we give to support the ongoing ministry of the church, and in the way we raise our children so they carry on the faith.

Today, hold on to your heart. Let it stabilize you in the source of your life. Write into your heart the command that places you in relationship with your origin, your destiny, and the legacy you leave.

Love with abandon. Make this your purpose. Offer grace. Above and before all else, live your life in ways that makes God known.

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<sup>4</sup> K.C. Ptomey influenced generations of pastors with his sage wisdom. I’d forgotten his advice on stewardship until it was included by Agnes Norfleet in the “Pastor’s Column” from Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church’s weekly email October 24, 2024.





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