

## What is the Alternative?

Installation of Jeremy Jinkins as Senior Pastor of the Westfield Presbyterian Church

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**Text: Philippians 1: 1-11:**

***“Paul and Timothy, servants (douloi) of Christ Jesus,  
To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the Overseers (Episcopois) and  
Deacons (Diakonois): Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.  
I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all,  
making my prayer with joy, thankful for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until  
now, to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to feel this way about you all,  
because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my  
imprisonment and in the explanation and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness,  
how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. And it is my prayer that your love  
may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve  
what is excellent, and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruits of  
goodness which come through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.”***

Anne Lamott tells of hearing her preacher, Veronica, say “the world sometimes feels like the waiting room of the emergency ward and that we who are more or less OK for now need to take the tenderest possible care of the more wounded in the waiting room, until the healer comes. You sit with people, she said, you bring them juice and graham crackers.”<sup>1</sup>

That’s not an altogether bad analysis of what we often have to offer as church in this enormous emergency waiting room we all inhabit. But I wonder if it is enough. Might we offer an alternative?

I think back historically to well-known metaphors of the church, “an army terrible with banners,” for instance, was a favorite of C. S. Lewis. Scary, but impressive. Or, of course, St. Paul’s “Body of Christ,” or from the Revelation of St. John, “the Bride of Christ.” Or, remember the Anglican poet, George Herbert’s images of the Church, our Mother, beautiful and elegant, whether dressed in finest gowns or clad in rags; or when Herbert speaks of the Church as a sanctuary, “double-moated” with God’s grace for the protection of sinners. Or, maybe, best of all the metaphors I’ve ever heard, that by Carlyle Marney, of the church as a “womb” where God’s children are formed and from which they are called forth.

It seems to me that one of the gifts of the installation of a new minister is that it provides a moment in which the church can stop, and pause, and take stock of who it is, and why it is, and where it is.

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Lamott, *Travelling Mercies* (New York: Anchor, 1999), 106.

The world around us needs a place where the wounded are not shot because of their wounds, where the sick are cared for, nursed back to health, where the aged are not disrespected and the young are not treated as commodities to be traded, where busyness is not worshiped and where all that robs us of our humanity is not justified. It seems to me that the world around us needs an alternative to the ways and means of the world that we know for a fact will destroy us in the end.

A long time ago, Loren Mead wrote a very small book. The title of the book was: "The Whole Truth About Everything Related to the Church in Twelve Pages, If You Don't Count the Preface and Conclusion." The first chapter of the book is titled: "Nothing Works." The second chapter is titled: "Everything Could Work a Little Better." I don't really think we can fix everything we would like to about the church. In fact, I suspect we would only end up making things worse. But I do think we could make a small, humble contribution to the church's life and ministry by focusing on just one thing. And it is something revealed in our everyday talk about the church.

This is it: *When we talk about church as something we attend rather than who and what and why we are, we miss the chance to embrace our vocation as a people of God.* We miss an opportunity to discern how we might provide an alternative to the soul-depleting treadmill of the world.

Let me say that again, please: *When we talk about church as something we attend rather than who and what and why we are, we miss the chance to embrace our vocation as a people of God.* Let's think for a few moments about what an alternative might look like.

The late Prescott Williams, once professor, dean and president of Austin Seminary, has said that the central business of the New Testament is not about salvation, but vocation. We don't just come to church to get our salvation tickets stamped; we respond to a common calling into a particular kind of community. Christ has little to say about being saved, except when he warns us against being preoccupied with saving our own lives. His emphasis is entirely on our being called. But, notice this, being called is never a professional matter. Not in the New Testament. Nor is it just something reserved for a special class of Christians. In the New Testament there is no concept of calling as a career move. Calling is always and inevitably a matter of following Jesus, personally, individually, and as a community of saints.

The genius of the Reformed movement is that we do not have clergy, a fact that almost no Presbyterians seem to aware of. We are all laity. We are *laos tou Theou*: a people of God. We are a single body, called to follow Jesus. And this single body has members with a variety of gifts. Some are gifted with teaching and preaching, of shepherding, caring for persons and overseeing the various ministries of the community. Those gifts are at the very heart of pastoral ministry. In the history of our church, we've called these members "teaching elders."

Other members are particularly gifted at providing care to individuals, while still others have a gift for making sure things work right. In the early church there was a mess of names we used to designate the ways in which members met the needs in and out of the community:

*episcopois* (overseers), and *diakonois* (deacons) in the Philippi, and there were also elders, prophets, interpreters, and those gifted with discernment in other places. But here's the point.

Whatever the ways, historically, we organized ourselves to be church together, in the New Testament we resisted orders and caste systems and classes among us in the interest of being *a community of the called* and *being a called community*. And we did not believe, certainly, that those chosen as teaching elders or overseers were our vicarious Christians, that they would, because of their professional training and experience, follow Jesus for us while the rest of us went about the business of living according to whatever standards of behavior that might be dominating our society or culture at that time.

What does any of this have to do with providing an alternative to what we once called worldliness? Just this.

The church's distinctive calling reflects who we believe God is and what we believe is the character of God. The church, no less than humanity itself, is created in the image and likeness of the God Whose very Being is in Communion. The God who, as Creative Source of All Being (Father or Parent) pours out without restraint an ever-flowing flood of life and love, which is received in joy and humility by the Imageless Image of God (Christ or the Son) who returns in gratitude and thanksgiving the life and love to God the Source; and Life and Love Eternal (the Spirit) who flows from Source to Image and from Image to Source and spills out purposefully creating all that is in love: this Being of Beings is God. And this God created us to live and love in communion, to flourish in relationship, to grow and mature in the knowledge and love of God, to give without thought of receiving, to receive in gratitude all that is given.

We were created by God the Communal God, the Trinity, and we come to our full humanity in and through community, a life for others. To exist for the self is to disintegrate, even if we exist for the self in the midst of a crowd.

In Scotland, there's a tradition of "preaching points" around the country, places marked long ago, sometimes by a stone cross, where, from time to time, an itinerate preacher would come, and people would gather to hear the Word preached. There are still a few vestiges of this tradition in Scotland. But the Church of Scotland has made a crucial distinction between assembling at a "preaching point" and being a "congregation." A crowd may gather to hear a sermon, but that doesn't make a crowd a church. What makes a church a church is its calling, to be a community in which God shapes and nurtures humanity reflecting the Spirit of Christ. And when we are church, when we reflect the God Whose Being is in Communion, when we provide a real alternative to the machinations and devices of society that chew us up and spit us out, miracles happen, people are changed, people are transformed.

I don't remember when it was that I first read David Brooks. It was certainly a long time ago. And over the years one has seen a struggle of the soul lived out in his columns and especially his books. This struggle of the soul has been nowhere more apparent than in his most recent book, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life*.

Brooks tells the story of a growing dissatisfaction with himself and the life he led. He describes it as climbing the first mountain. “People climbing that first mountain spend a lot of time,” he writes, “thinking about reputation management. They are always keeping score. How do I measure up? Where do I rank? As the psychologist James Hollis puts it, at that stage we have a tendency to think, I am what the world says I am.”

Brooks disarmingly tells at least part of his own adventures and tragic losses in climbing the first mountain, the ambition it required, the sacrifices he made, and the question with which it ultimately confronted him, “Is this all there is?” As the personal aspects of his life crashed around him, he searched for an alternative, a life that offers more than what the world offers. He found this alternative in a church.

I’m not sure I have ever read a more poignant passage than the paragraph with which Brooks begins this book. I’d like to share it with you. Brooks writes:

“Every once in a while, I meet a person who radiates joy. These are people who seem to glow with an inner light. They are kind, tranquil, delighted by small pleasures, and grateful for large ones. These people are not perfect. They get exhausted and stressed. They make errors of judgment. But they live for others, and not for themselves. They’ve made unshakable commitments to family, ... a community, a faith. They know why they were put on this earth and derive deep satisfaction from doing what they have been called to do. Life isn’t easy for these people. They’ve taken on the burdens of others. But they have a serenity about them, a settled resolve. They are interested in you, make you feel cherished and known, and take delight in your good. .... When you meet these people, you realize that joy is not just a feeling, it can be an outlook. There are temporary highs we all get after we win some victory, and then there is also this other kind of permanent joy that animates people who are not obsessed with themselves but have given themselves away.”<sup>i</sup>

Today we celebrate your calling of a new Senior Minister to provide oversight, and teaching, and preaching, and pastoral care, to lead in organizing your life together so that this church can, in a variety of ways, reflect the life and love of the God who calls us all. But this new minister will fulfill his calling among you best, to the exact extent, to which you fulfill your calling as church, as a community, as a people of God, as a womb where God’s sort of people are called into existence, where God’s children play and grow together, where they enjoy and provide a vital alternative to the world around us, for the sake of that world and all the people in it.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> David Brooks, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life* (New York: Random House, 2019), xi.