

“Who is your Lord?”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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*Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7 and Matthew 4:1-11*

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

First, let's name that elephant in the room. As most of you already know (and I want to thank you for all the loving messages), I will be concluding my time as your pastor. My last Sunday will be June 11. There are copies of my letter in the narthex if you didn't get one. I'm not being called to another church. I'm not leaving because of any discontent with Westminster. I love this church. I love you. I am being called by God to care for my family. This summer, we'll be moving in with my Dad in Cincinnati, to help care for him and to be closer to our families. It's going to be a chance for Jenna to pursue full-time ministry and for me to explore a different part of serving God. I am going to miss you. We've got a little more than three months to minister together, to say goodbye, to prepare a healthy transition, and to process what we're feeling. There's a prayer guide in the narthex to help us do that.

But right now, I'm still your pastor, and I've got a sermon to preach. This Lent, we are tackling some of the same questions our Confirmation students are exploring—the questions they're going to be asked if they decide to be confirmed in the faith. Today we are asking, “Who is your Lord?” The answer is what assures us that we're going to be OK.

Pastors can change. All kinds of things can change. We can grieve. We can feel angry. We can be disappointed. And it's OK, because one thing doesn't change: God remains with us, to guide us, to inspire us, to raise up life and hope where there seemed to be none.

*Who is your Lord?* That feels like an odd question. We don't have lords. So try out: *Who is your boss?* You might say, “Man, I don't have a boss; I do what I want.” But everybody's got a boss. I'm not just talking about parents or the boss at your job. I'm talking about whoever, or whatever, commands your loyalty, your trust, your desire, your service. Doesn't have to be a bad thing. Might be your family, your career, your church. Might be a sports team or the school you went to or a band you love. Might be a politician or a political party or a social cause.

Money is a lord. The desire to have nice things, go on vacations, and be financially secure can totally boss us around. Anger is a lord. Fear is a lord. Racism is a lord. Food, or alcohol, or drugs, or body image can be a lord. Do you have to wear a certain kind of shoe? You got a boss. Would you walk out if I said something that challenges your political beliefs? You got a boss. Do you hear a voice buried deep in your psyche that tears you down every day, and do you believe what it says? You got a boss.

Oh these bosses today might be a little more subtle, but their grip on our lives is as powerful as the Roman emperor was in Jesus' time. The Roman emperor commanded vast armies and a sprawling empire. Eventually Romans even came to regard the emperor as a god to be worshiped and called “Lord.” Walk through the ruins of Ephesus, and you'll find the remains of a huge

statue of Emperor Trajan and an inscription on a fountain reading, “I am the ruler of the world. The world is under my foot.”

You see, that’s the thing about these bosses—when they are given absolute power over your life, they will hurt you, oppress you, use you.

I think maybe this is why the Israelites recorded a story in which God tells Adam not to eat from the tree. God gives Adam and Eve a whole garden with everything they could ever want. God asks just one thing: don’t eat from this one tree. There’s been a lot of debate trying to understand why. But I think one of the reasons is simply that there needs to be something that is off limits, something to remind us, and anyone who would lord it over us, that we and they are not in charge. God is Lord, not us. The serpent tells them that God doesn’t want them to become like God. Well, maybe we’re not ready to be God. Because what’s the very next thing that happens after all this? Cain, the child of Adam and Eve, uses his new power to kill his brother, Abel, because he was jealous. Because envy and violence were his lord. Because, for him, nothing was off limits.

Maybe this was in the mind of Jesus when he went into the wilderness and confronted three temptations, three possible lords: self-sufficiency (*just turn these stones to bread, and prove that you don’t need God or anyone else; you can take care of yourself*), pride (*just throw yourself off this ledge and God will save you, proving how special you are*), and power (*just fall down and worship me, and I’ll give you all the kingdoms of the world*). Each time, Jesus refuses: “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God... Do not put the Lord your God to the test... Worship the Lord your God, and serve only God.”

Now God is a boss too. But God’s a different kind of boss. And this is where even Scripture gets it wrong sometimes. Yes, I did say that. I believe, with our Confessions, that Scripture is the authoritative word of God. But I also believe that as God was inspiring all this truth, people sometimes got in the way, and so did all their little lords. It’s why there’s slavery and genocide and oppression of women in the Bible. It’s why we read certain Scripture texts that want to make God more like the bosses of the world: jealous, violent, vengeful. But that’s not the boss we meet in Jesus.

The boss we meet in Jesus gets down on his knees and washes the feet of his disciples. This boss inserts his body between a woman condemned to stoning and the men who would condemn her. This boss feeds the hungry, eats with the outcast, and heals the wounded. This boss challenges authority and sacrifices life and power for the sake of others. This boss just wants you to be your fullest, best, most loving God-created self you can be.

Philippians says that Christ “emptied” and “humbled” himself, taking the form of a servant, and even gave up his life for us (2:7-8). All so that we would know the kind of Lord we have.

When Philippians says, “Jesus Christ is Lord” (2:11), it’s saying something countercultural. Why do you think they killed Jesus? Because he was nice? No! Because he was dangerous. They were calling him what they were supposed to call the emperor.

To claim Jesus Christ is Lord means that God claims your whole life. This isn't a Sunday-morning God. This is an everyday God. This God is lord over your life when you're at school, when you're at work, when you're at home, when you're shopping, when you're voting. Whenever you are questioning what is right, God alone is Lord over your decisions—the God, 1 John tells us, who is Love, the God who is Truth and Justice.

This can be big. Like when the Nazis were telling the German people that Hitler was Lord, and a lot of Christians went along with it, but some said no; they wrote the Barmen Declaration, saying that only Christ is Lord, and they would not follow Hitler. Some of them died for that. Or like South Africa, when many Christians made racism a lord, and insisted on the apartheid or separation of black and white people, but some Christians refused and wrote the Belhar Confession; they said only Christ is Lord, and Christ desires the unity and equality of his people.

But it can be small too. Just our daily choices. Does this serve God? Does this help me love God and my neighbor?

This doesn't mean we don't get to enjoy nice things or relish a good meal or love our families or care about our jobs or value a political leader. It just means they're not our boss. It means we care about them, enjoy them, fight for them, in so much as God is in them. But if our job asks us to hurt someone, to make certain moral compromises, we don't do it, because that job isn't our boss; God is. If our family abuses us, we don't take it, because they're not our boss; God is. If our government does something unjust, we work for change, because this nation isn't our boss; God is. If our church tries to use us, shame us, hate us, twist God for us, we stand up, because the church isn't our boss; God is.

Now, here's the thing about our Lord. God is merciful. So if you mess up and prioritize the wrong thing, *which you will*, God will forgive you. Because the lordship of Christ isn't just about our choices. It's about Christ's choice—his choice to love us, to save us. And because God is an everyday God, God doesn't just save the religious part of us. God saves and loves all of us.

So who is your Lord? Jesus Christ. The only one who doesn't want it is the only one who deserves it. **Amen.**