

“The once and future church”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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*James 2:1-10, 14-17*

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

As most of you know I have just returned from paternity leave, caring for our baby Emerson, while my wife Jenna returned to work. It was a wonderful, joyous, and simultaneously *terrifying* experience. I had a dream once, a dream of what paternity leave would be. I would take Emerson for long walks through the woods and read to him great tomes of philosophy and religion, as Mozart played in the background. I knew there would be diapers and feedings of course. But I figured that in between there would be naps, and cuddles, and giggles, and father imparting all the finer things of life to his son.

Instead, I got poop. And oh yes, more poop. Explosive, runny, radioactive green poop. And there were no naps! Because the moment I laid down with him in bed, or dared—God forbid—to put him down in the crib, he screamed like bloody murder. No, we wanted to walk in maddening circles around the living room until daddy lost all sense of time and purpose.

I’ll be honest: it was hard. There was a lot of crying, mostly mine.

Awhile ago, I heard about a volunteer firefighter who had just become a new dad; people were inspired by all the fires he was putting out, despite having a little one at home. Well, they *were* inspired until they realized that this new dad had become so desperate to get out of the house and escape his newborn that he had started setting the fires himself. He was burning houses just to get away from his child. I never thought I would understand this man; *I now understand this man.*

Which brings me to the church. Because I am sure that there is someone somewhere who has at least considered arson in order to avoid going to church. Like my paternity leave, church isn’t always what we expected or wanted. Sometimes this is the fault of our expectations. But often it’s the fault of the church—not this church, of course, but you know, other churches...

It lets us down. The sermon’s boring; the worship is spiritless and rote; the faith lacks action and courage; the people aren’t very loving. At first, it seems great, but then we discover that it’s a church pretending to be perfect, meant for people pretending to be perfect. Eventually, the church turns its back on us, shutting us out because our marriage failed, our addiction flared up again, our child came out as gay, or we started asking the wrong questions. For most, though, it’s just that the church doesn’t feel relevant or important any more, not when it’s competing with countless entertainments, busy lives, work, and weekend vacations. Those of us left worry: “What hope is left for the church?”

In our reading today, James speaks to a church still young and struggling with its identity, facing similar change and threat. He writes, because he knows the people worry for the future, and in their worry, sometimes sacrifice what is most important to the gospel. Some have started prioritizing the wealthy and powerful, in hopes of securing the church's future. They're avoiding controversial acts of justice and compassion, not wanting to risk ill attention or the loss of members. They minimize the demands on their followers, content to profess the name of Jesus without ever changing how they live, or do business, or love one another. They've turned the church into a comfortable, insulated institution, and for James, it is "dead."

I understand the temptation to make it easier. I can't tell you how many times I wanted to call Jenna and say, "Please come home!" I'm glad that I never did. Because that meant I had to figure out for myself what it means to be a father. And I'm a better dad for it, a better husband too. I didn't know it was possible, but I love Emerson even more now. I know him better. I know the difference between his cry when he's hungry and his cry when he's tired. I know how to make him smile or laugh. And yeah, I know his diapers, and his spit up, and his sleepless nights. I know him, and he knows me. I found in me a love that passes understanding, a love that's stronger than even the breaking point of patience.

It wasn't what I expected, but it was what I needed.

See, that's the thing. You'd think that by making it easier you'd make it better. But in truth, it's the hard stuff, the real stuff, that saves us. And I think the same is true for the church.

James insists that it's not a pretty church, or a wealthy church, or a comfortable church that enacts the grace of God; it's a scarred, messy church of wounded and left-behind people, struggling honestly together to believe in God's love and to let that love carry them out into the world to make it a better place. It's a church that gives the best seat to the poor person in rags. It's a church full of refugees and immigrants, children playing and shouting, women and people of color leading, LGBTQ persons celebrating their identities. It's a church that wants to know the real you, every bit of you, all the parts you've been so afraid to show. It's a church whose actions reflect its faith.

It's not about being saved by works. It's about being saved by grace—a grace so powerful, that when we believe in it, when we accept, we are changed, called, empowered to act upon that grace, to love our neighbor.

James shouts to his brothers and sisters: please do not sell out. Take the harder path.

It's like this wonderful ad I saw for the US Navy: "This is not a game, or part time in your uncle's shop, and it's bigger than any state championship. It's nothing like fireworks on the Fourth of July or two days with your varsity football team or the first time you stayed out all night. Out here, it's not where the sea takes you but who it makes you." I love this commercial because it's so counterintuitive. The Navy isn't trying to get you by being as easy and fun as possible. It's trying to get you by making it sound difficult. While the rest of the world advertises vacations and escapes from life, the Navy is inviting you to slog through grease and water and fear to find your purpose and truly, for once, live your life.

And I think in the process the Navy has stumbled upon a fundamental human need. We don't need easy; we need real.

For more than 40 years, we've thought that we needed to make church easier and more entertaining and socially acceptable, when in reality what we needed to do was make it harder. Instead of asking less of people, we should have asked more.

I don't want a facsimile of what I can get anywhere else. I want something difficult, and amazing, and world-changing. I want something worth living for. I want what the disciples had—a Messiah that knocked down temples and raised up the dead. I want the church that marched for equal rights, facing down dogs and hoses, because Christ led them. I want the church that has so much joy, and grief, inside of it that its worship sings, not sputters. I want the church that will break open my mind and show me ideas, and questions, and dreams that waken me to the mystery that is God. I want the church that welcomes and embraces all, and when you're in a dark pit, jumps down in with you. I want the church that doesn't wait behind its walls but breaks through those doors in a fervor of faith and love, meeting people where they are.

Research shows that Millennials aren't departing the church because they don't believe in God; they're departing because they're not sure the church believes in God. They're out there, still searching for the God who said to Pharaoh, "Let my people go." For the God who ate with tax collectors and sex workers and poor fishermen. For the God who died on a cross so that we might live, and who loved us so that we might love.

The theologian G.K. Chesterton once said, "We do not want, as the newspapers say, a church that will move with the world. We want a church that will move the world."

I have seen such a church right here at Westminster—not always, but just in the last month, I heard Kim Patch preach about she and her daughter going to their first Pride parade. It was a courageous, vulnerable sermon that risked much, and asked us to risk more, for the sake of the gospel of love. I heard Shavonn Lynch call on us to be a church of justice and inclusion, as she told the story of marching with hundreds of other Presbyterians to address the disparities in mass incarceration. I have also heard Shavonn bravely share with us the doubts and the fears she has experienced as she pursues a call to ministry. I have seen her show her wounds and tears, like Jesus to the disciples, and say, "Peace."

I ask you: dream with us. Choose the hard path. And together, God will lead us into the once and future church—maybe not the one we expected, but the one we need. **Amen.**