

**The Requiem Service for Jeri Katherine Willen
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
25 August 2023**

John 6:37-40

Welcome to this celebration of the life of Jeri Willen. To start this sermon, let me read a quote from a great author. It reads,

“The Resurrection and its promise of eternal life are the very foundations of Christianity, yet many Christians continue to fear death and many deny its reality. Death is a major focus of all religions and a central problem of philosophy. Many contemporary psychologists believe that death is the major cause of human activity, that humans spend most of their lives trying to avoid death. This viewpoint suggests that all great works of art, literature and music are produced out of a person's knowledge of his or her own mortality.”

This passage comes from Jeri's own master's level dissertation for a degree in Theology she finished in 1998. I completely agree with Jeri that existential anxiety and the fear of death is at the core of all of our fears and anxieties. Many of us have been Christians for decades, we have heard the message of the resurrection numerous times, we have prayed for the salvation of the those who have died at uncountable funerals, we have read many theological books about the Parousia, eternal life, Heaven, and the Communion of Saints. Yet, many of us secretly wonder and doubt. Some attend religious rituals for the same reason we buy life insurance, just in case. Their arguments go like this, “If God is going to save some, then, most likely, these people to be saved will come from church pews. Well, although I don't believe in any of that Hocus Pocus, it hurts nothing if I attend the occasional service. Plus, I really like this new Colombian minister!” (Look and wait until somebody laughs!) Some don't even bother making an attempt to buy life insurance. As the famous philosopher, Charles S. Harris, wrote in 1958 “A man without faith is like a fish without a bicycle,” which became known as “A man needs God like a fish needs a bicycle.” Many simply don't believe in a creator God, eternal life, or a Messiah who died on the cross to save us all from ourselves.

But the fact that some don't believe in eternal life does not mean they are immune to existential anxiety. Just the opposite. Jeri's research speaks of the difference between those who believe life will end at death and those who believe in the continuity of life. Those who believe life ends at death, like the existentialists and nihilists, tend to experience increased amounts of stress, anxiety, hopelessness, purposelessness, and depression. In fact, many of them end their life by suicide. They are perpetually hungry for relevance and purpose. And they spend most of their days looking for something or someone who can satisfy that overwhelming hunger at the center of their hearts.

We have a perfect example of this in the passage today. Days before the Jewish Passover, Jesus and his disciples go to a tall mountain to pray, but soon they were surrounded by thousands of people. Jesus felt compassion and provided a miraculous meal for all of them with just a few loaves and fishes. They all saw this. They watched twelve baskets fill up with the leftovers. They knew the food was a miraculous gift. A bit later, the disciples get on boats and cross the lake to Capernaum, but Jesus says on the mount to pray. As the evening approached and the waters became rough, Jesus walked on water and calmed the storm. In the meantime, the crowds realize he has left them, they take boats and give chase, finding him on the other side, although no one saw him enter a boat. As soon as they see him, they ask, “How did you get here?” Then they ask for another miraculous feeding. They have already seen a miraculous feeding and a miraculous transportation across a large lake without a boat. Yet they say, “What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing?” They still doubt and don’t believe any of his claims. Even after all of that!

They want another miracle of good food. Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty... Everything that the Father gives me will come to me...” And then we have the passage for today. Jesus is saying, “You are looking for assurances, but all I can give you is a relationship. You are looking for an easy way to feed yourselves, but I can give you something much better: the bread of life that will satisfy your hunger and thirst for eternity. You are looking for easy solutions for aging, medical alternatives to death, palliatives to calm your existential anxiety, easy paths for your search for purpose and truth... But I will give you something better. I will give you life that will never end. Faith that will lift you out of any darkness and hopelessness. Grace to forgive your brokenness and give you strength for the journey. Relationships to live your life in community and to find a purpose through serving and sharing life with others. I can give you a relationship and a community, and this is all you need to lead a life filled with love, peace, and joy.”

You may think that after seeing him perform amazing miracles, all his listeners would jump up with joy and accept Jesus, but the opposite is the truth. They were all angry that he refused to give them easy solutions for their immediate problems. In fact, the chapter ends with this sad statement, “Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.” The twelve stayed and even affirmed, “To whom can we go? Only you have the words of eternal life.” Jeri was one of these who believed only Jesus had the words of eternal life. She knew who her Savior was and she knew where she was going after death. This is the reason Jeri was never in denial about her death. I remember being in the hospital when a nurse asked Jeri how she was feeling. She looked at the young nurse, “Oh, just fine. Just dying here.” And she said it with a great sense of humor, without bitterness or anger, without resentment or fear, without hopeless resignation or stoicism. She said it with full conviction that death was just a part of the process of eternal life. She belonged to Jesus and Jesus will never lose anything or anyone the Father gave to him. In her book, Jeri prayed that no one would talk about her

as having “passed away,” as having “flown with the angels to the eternal habitations,” of having “become an angel through death,” of having “gone to heaven to watch over her family and friends,” or as someone “taken to heaven because God felt lonely and needed some company.” She wants you all to know that she lived, she loved, she laughed, she cried, she believed in the power of love, and she trusted deeply in Jesus of Nazareth, her friend and her Savior. She lived and she died, as all humans live and died. But she also believed in the continuity of life and she knew that she would be in God’s presence after her death. There was no denial in her, but her faith was full of the hope of immortality.

Jeri was a brilliant lady who wanted to be a priest, but was told she couldn’t become one because she was a woman. She then chose to practice the priesthood of all believers by graduating with a master’s in psychology and a second master’s in divinity. And then, she ministered without the necessity of ordination. She taught a number of Bible studies, including Education for Ministry, and leading a long-term Bible Study. And she preached the Gospel of Jesus of Nazareth, not from pulpits like this, but from the pulpit of her own life. She loved without distinctions. She served without limitations. She believed in Jesus unquestionably and without reservations. And she blessed all of us in ways that will remain imprinted in our souls forever.

Many of you who knew Jeri are familiar with her love of prayer #63 in the back of the Book of Common Prayer. I believe this prayer summarizes her faith and life beautifully. It reads as follows, “O Lord, support us all the day long, until the shadows lengthen, and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over, and our work is done. Then in thy mercy, grant us a safe lodging, and a holy rest, and peace at the last. Amen.” The shadows have lengthened all the way for Jeri, leading to the glorious sunrise of new life. The evening came and went, and the noise and distractions of the world have been hushed. Her work is now done and the fever of life is over. There is no more that needs to be accomplished here. Her life is full and done. Now she enjoys a holy rest in God’s holy lodging, where she is and will be at peace at last, forever and ever. This was Jerri’s longing and deepest desire, and God has answered her prayer with great love and compassion. Jeri is with God and we who mourn must celebrate her return to the Father’s glory.

Now, as we mourn for Jeri, let us ask ourselves about the quality of our relationship with God and others. If you find yourself isolated from God, perhaps doubting his existence, perhaps unsure of his love, talk to him in the secret of your heart. He is listening, and he is waiting for an invitation to enter your life to change it from the inside out. May he continue to bless you. Amen!