

# Christ the Lord Episcopal Church      Pinole CA

## Third Sunday after Pentecost

June 21, 2020

### “Jackie and the Penguins”

Rev. Dr. Lois Williams

Good morning everyone, and Happy Father’s Day to all those dads out there, and good to see all your smiling faces. So we have some scripture that sounds rather rebellious today. Son against father, mother against daughter and so forth. We are asked to lose our life in order to gain it, and Jesus tells us, his teachings will not bring peace to your household. Welcome to the good news of the Gospel in 2020.

We are living in a time of chaos, with no peace, and with many families struggling, maybe not so different from those first disciples. You can hear all about our current strife on the news of course, so, today, I am going to do something different. I am not going to preach, instead I am going to share a story of how one needs to die to material things if they are getting in the way of your spiritual journey, how living a Christian life with or without church attendance can affect family relationships, and how society in and of itself needs to continue through the chaos to get to that promised peace that Jesus eventually does give to the disciples.

As a sidebar, you’ll find attached to the sermon or an email the story of Jackie, and the Youtube video if you want experience it yourself. For those of you who need footnotes, one of the hidden messages is mindfulness, so we don’t miss what is in front of us. Enough said, enjoy the journey, reread if you need to, ponder the Gospel set within it and realize the Gospel is also set in our hearts. This is the story of Jackie and the penguins.

What I knew about Jackie was that she was 58 years old, African American with a rather large frame, needed continuous oxygen and was terminally ill with chronic lung disease that she had suffered with for over 10 years.

She shared with me that she had almost finished her bachelor's degree, however she had received an offer to become a chef and left school to cook professionally. Interestingly enough, Jackie was so good at her job she began a small side business of catering to the local churches, community and family events. However, due to those years of breathing the cooking grease fumes which are toxic with continued exposure, issues around her weight, and standing all day, Jackie slowly became ill.

By the time Jackie noticed she was seriously ill, she really was seriously ill. Jackie expressed that as a black woman, she had spoken to the doctors about her issues for a long time, but no one had taken her seriously. They felt she was looking to make a disability claim, which of course after years with lack of treatment and little to no health education to improve her situation, she did become disabled and hence became hospice-bound.

Jackie admitted she loved her work, and she also loved fine things. She was single, as she said, men only wanted one thing and it wasn't permanence. She did regret not giving marriage a try. But in charge of her own money, Jackie struggled to help her family and also collected beautiful furniture. She had a hand-crafted bar with four matching stools, beautiful reclining chair, and this was in her very small one bedroom apartment when I met her. She explained she had needed to downsize due to her illness, now being on a fixed income, and having multiple health expenses. She went on to say she also had many other fine items and artwork in storage, which her family was overtly fighting over as part of their inheritance, even before she was gone.

When it came to Jackie's family, she explained they were Baptist. She described them as "Bible-quoting, Black Gospel-singing Christians", and then she would pause. She looked straight at me and said, "Christian charlatans". She explained that her sister emails her a Bible quote every day, and is Holier than most, active in every event their church has, but Jackie said, "she judges me. She judges everything I do. And as far as I am concerned, that is not Christian. You can not force me to read scripture and then not help me when I am struggling."

Jackie told me that our previous discussions about God's acceptance of all people, the love and forgiveness given through Jesus, and trying to make peace with her Christian family had made her think a lot. She had come to a place of no regrets and acceptance that God would either send her a miracle or the eternal healing that comes with death. Little did she know she would in a way get both.

One day, I asked Jackie, if she could do anything at all before she died, what would it be. The question was meant to be one to bring into meditation or into a life reflection. Jackie simply responded she wanted to spend a day with a penguin. I thought it rather odd that a black, middle-aged woman born and raised in and around San Francisco and Oakland, with her background would have any interest in penguins.

So I asked her why. This was in 2019 and she explained she had watched a program with Morgan Freeman who explained penguins mated for life, had homosexual couples that raised orphans, or helped hatch deserted eggs, and they were community focused. They were also a bird God gave wings to, that swam instead of flying. She thought the set-up of the penguin would be the perfect example of a Christian community. I was so surprised at the depth of thought surrounding the meaning of a penguin to this woman.

So I worked with the social worker and we found the Dream Foundation who wanted to send Jackie with her family to Monterey Bay Aquarium for the weekend to have a private session with the penguins. However, by the time their offer came through, Jackie was in a wheelchair, dependent on oxygen, and too anxious about her health to sleep over in a strange place.

Jackie was devastated by the fact that due to her health, she had to decline their offer. Her family in the meantime became angry at me for getting her hopes up and, in a way, began judging and blaming both me and Jackie for even considering such a silly idea. What Jackie wasn't saying, and what I could clearly feel in the air during our visits, was that feeling that the white community had again let her down. God was dangling a prize she could not reach. And rather than her family being supportive, they were tearing her down.

After many, many phone calls between the social worker and myself, we finally arranged for Jackie to go to San Francisco to the California Academy of Science where she could have a private day tour. She could spend as much time with the penguins as she would like. And of course by now very anxious, and wanting to call it off several times due to the extent of her illness, Jackie finally accepted.

By now her family was in chaos about whether this adventure was a good idea, who would be responsible, and a million reasons why Jackie shouldn't go. However, Jackie decided to take me and her hospice volunteer as family, and her two nephews to carry things and wheel her chair.

I can not tell you the immense joy the trip brought to everyone there. The simple pleasure of watching someone commune with nature still brings me to tears. To see the joy the penguins brought her and her two nephews (who filmed everything) is indescribable. The family put the story on Youtube, which is why more than a year later I am able, with their permission, to share this story.

What we didn't find out until later was that by the end of the trip Jackie's oxygen tanks were empty, but she never noticed. She kept repeating, "I finally feel alive." She could not believe such wonderful things were on display. All of God's creations. Butterflies landed in her hair, the penguins came right up to check her out, she was given a tour of the exotic gems stored in the private area in back of the museum, and she thoroughly enjoyed the various tanks of fish.

She realized that she had been so caught up in her day-to-day life of working for money to spend on collecting things, that she hadn't spent time resting her soul and enjoying the amazing world God has created. She thought it a shame that she had to be at the end of her life to receive such joy in life. She felt ashamed she had not noticed the glory of God in the simple things, and that such places to visit were only 20 minutes away from where she had always lived. She had fallen prey to the social pressures of daily work and getting nowhere fast.

The next day was Jackie's birthday and her family came over. I too was invited. During her party she made it clear that God was in the details, and quoting scripture did not make you as Christian as living in love – she forgave her family,

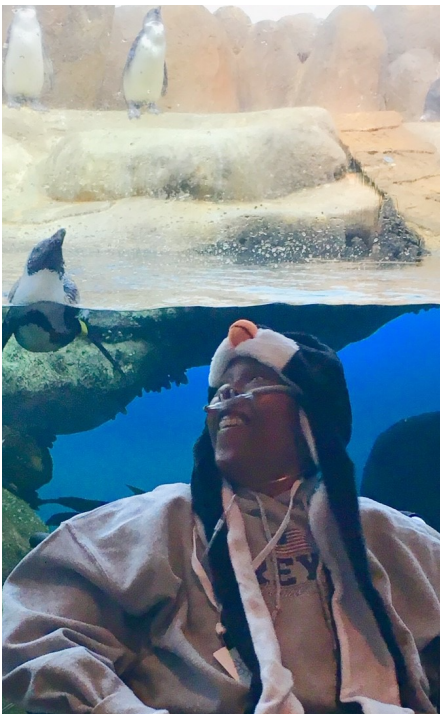
and they were speechless. The party ended and people went home, as Jackie prepared for bed.

Jackie joined the angels that night, and God, through the social worker and the chaplain, had not let her down.

I don't need to review our scriptures for you to make your own connections. I invite you to sit with our readings and prayers, remember the story, and see where your focus is. Are you actually noticing what is available right in front of you? Are you focused on collecting things you can not take with you past the grave?

In my living room, on the corner of the love seat, sits a stuffed penguin which I named Jackie. It was given to me by Jackie from the Cal Academy gift store. Every time I see it, I am reminded of those odd, funny little creatures God has dressed in a tuxedo, that mate for life and accept homosexuals as an important part of their community. Realizing they were created to fly but instead swim, as they enjoy God's creations of ice, water and soil, simply being co-creators with God of their own little world. Perfect examples of what life could be.

**Amen**



*“For one whole day I forgot I was sick, dying, I was just like everybody else. I didn’t even notice the wheelchair, I was happy, I was young again. Thank you Dream Foundation and thank you Sutter Team.”* Jacqueline D. Preyer

To enjoy the California Academy of Sciences journey with Jackie, see <https://youtu.be/wDO7gJGH9pM>