

Freeing Jesus

United Congregational Church, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

March 6, 2022 – Lent 2

Texts: Matthew 16:13-15

[Read excerpt from Freeing Jesus by Diana Butler Bass, pages xiii-xix.]

Thus begins the introduction to the extraordinary book *Freeing Jesus* by Diana Butler Bass. Her honesty about her personal questions, interactions, and memories of her relationship with Jesus are revealed in these intriguing opening paragraphs. I read this book when it first came out about a year ago and right then and there, I knew it would be the perfect framework to use for both a Lenten sermon series and a Lenten book study and here we are, one year later. This book is a gentle, yet powerful exploration of what Butler Bass came to see as the essential question for herself and, I would argue, for all of us who claim the identity of Christian to answer thoughtfully, prayerfully and by doing the work it takes to reclaim the Jesus of scripture and history and the Christ of faith from the layers of meaning lacquered on to him by so many others over the span of two thousand years.

Just who is Jesus anyway? And what might it mean to set Jesus free from all the meanings, all those layers of lacquer applied by everyone from the Apostle Paul to Franklin Graham, Jr. and everyone in between? And all of these questions, I would argue, go back to the original question Jesus himself posed to the disciples as they were walking along that dusty road to Caesarea Philippi. Jesus asked them, “who do people say the Son of Man is?” So, of course, right there, we’re confused. Who is this “Son of

Man” Jesus is talking about? It sounds like he’s talking about himself but is he talking about himself? What’s going on here? Essentially, this phrase “Son of Man” is a sort of literary device Jesus uses to refer to himself. New Testament scholars argue about whether he actually referred to himself this way or if it is yet another example of a phrase from the Old Testament being inserted into Jesus’ mouth to skew a Hebrew concept through a Christian lens. This phrase, “son of man” is used in the Old Testament repeatedly and has one of three meanings: As a form of address; as a way of contrasting the splendor of God with the lowliness of man; or as an indication of a person who will come as a part of the end times. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Son_of_man) In this particular instance in Matthew, it seems to me that if Jesus actually said this, it would simply be a way of referring to himself that hints at his unique relationship with God.

Back to the question Jesus asks, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” And the disciples tell him what they’ve heard – that he’s John the Baptist or Elijah or Jeremiah or one of the other prophets.” Jesus doesn’t really react to their answers, at least we can’t tell that he does from this account. What we do know is that he then asked the disciples THE question: “But who do you say that I am?” Yikes! I’m thinking they weren’t expecting him to ask that question. It must have felt almost like a test! Have you been paying attention to what you’ve been seeing and hearing, Jesus is asking? Can you connect the dots, he wants to know? We ended our reading of this text with the question, but the story does continue on with Simon Peter – ever the showoff – immediately has an answer. “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God!” he proclaims. Jesus praises him for this answer so we can almost

see Peter smiling smugly while the other disciples roll their eyes. I admit, if I were Jesus, I would have asked Simon Peter a follow-up question: “And what does *that* mean, Peter?” But, Jesus doesn’t so we’re left wondering what Peter’s answer means for ourselves.

Dear ones, this is the challenge, the task, of the Lenten journey I am hoping we can take together over these next five weeks. Using Butler Bass’ book as a rough structure for us to follow in this work, let’s explore who Jesus has meant to us at various points in our lives, who Jesus is to us right now in this moment, and who Jesus might be to us in the future. We should stop right here to recognize that literally thousands and thousands of books have been written by people for thousands of years seeking to answer the basic question of who Jesus was. That part of this quest is not new. What is new about Butler Bass’ approach is that she urges us and gives us the structure for exploring what she calls “the Jesus Christ of experience.”¹ What she means by this is that Jesus can best be known through one’s experiences of Jesus on a personal level. In other words, who is Jesus to you as a person? This is a genuine question that requires intentional thought and reflection. It is not asking you to recite who is the Jesus you have read about in Scriptures or sung about in hymns or learned about in Sunday School or heard about in sermons. Butler Bass is asking who is Jesus to you, personally?

Thought of in a different way, how have you experienced Jesus in your life? This does, of course, presuppose that you have had experiences of Jesus even if you’re not used to thinking about them in that way. Many of you may not be used to thinking about your experiences of Jesus as opposed to what other people have

¹ Diana Butler Bass, *Freeing Jesus*, ©2021, Harper One Publishers, p. xxi

taught you to think about Jesus. And this is exactly what Butler Bass is inviting us to do as she guides us on this adventure intent on “freeing Jesus.” She is urging us to recall and reclaim our own personal relationship with Jesus by re-remembering, putting back together, who Jesus is and has been to us on our journey through life. She reminds us that “Jesus goes with us in and through change, growing with us as we grow, a surprising companion who never ceases to be who we need at any given time, showing up recognized but ever new.”² This will certainly be a new way of reflecting on how we know Jesus and I suspect it will be challenging for some. But I am confident it will be well worth the time we will spend together on this text. Fortunately, Butler Bass suggests a structure she used for exploring her experience of Jesus as friend, teacher, Savior, Lord, Way and Presence. She is quick to point out that this is not an exhaustive list and that her six ways of experiencing Jesus may not be the same as yours or that you may have four ways or eight or ten.

The thing is, the specifics of your list of personal Jesus experiences don’t matter at this point as we begin this Lenten journey together. What does matter is your willingness to take the time and make the effort to get to know the Jesus of Christianity as your Jesus, “the Jesus of experience who shows up consistently and when least expected. Freeing Jesus means finding Jesus along the way”³ as life unfolds. I can’t think of any better way to spend our time together during this Lenten season. I hope you feel the same. Amen.

² Ibid. p. xxvi

³ Ibid. p. xxvii

