

## ***Jesus: Savior and Lord***

United Congregational Church, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

March 20, 2022 – Lent 3

Texts: Luke 6:46-49

I received a wonderful gift this week and I never saw it coming. I received this gift as a result of my desire to help my brother who has long been struggling with his desire to join the Catholic Church. He refers to himself as the most faithful non-Catholic Catholic anyone knows, and I would agree with him. We share prayers every morning by text which he reads either just before or just after he leaves morning mass which he attends every day. It grounds him, he says, and I know it does. Honestly it gives me such pleasure to see faith as important in his life as it is in mine. Anyhow, long story very short, Bill has a friend who thinks he can provide some guidance to Bill about some of the conundrums he has confronted as he has considered making this final step. So, anticipating a hopefully positive outcome in the not too distant future, Bill asked me to help him find his baptismal certificate. He thought it might be in with our mother's remaining things which I have in my house. I looked and it was not there, but I did find a true treasure trove of other really neat stuff which may yet find their way into some future sermon. But that's not my reason for telling this story today.

The gift I received this week was the affirmation that the church where I was baptized and confirmed and even preached my first sermon as a 15 year old still remembers me! Well, the secretary does. Nancy Weslager! Nancy was two or three years ahead of me in Sunday School and I never thought of us as particularly close friends but when Bill called she remembered me

and asked Bill all about me. She was especially excited to hear about Harvard and that I am now a pastor in my own church. So exciting to think one of her friends from that little church had done such an amazing thing! Holy cow! Talk about being humbled! I figured my name, and Bill's would be in the church records – our baptisms, confirmations, etc. carefully noted. And his was, so problem solved for him. As for me, I can't begin to tell you what it meant to me to know that someone from that little church I haven't been near in 46 years still remembers me. That, dear ones, is gift indeed. It is also living proof of the impact church has on our lives and we don't even realize it. Thank you Jesus!

What does this have to do with knowing Jesus as Savior and Lord, you might ask. Simply, it once again illustrates the commonalities of the evolution of my faith and Diana Butler Bass' as we continue our exploration of her book *Freeing Jesus*. In her chapter on Jesus as Savior, Butler Bass makes an observation regarding her own Sunday School experience that totally resonated with me. As a young teenager, she found herself attending a Bible Church, a conservative church that emphasized the inerrancy of Scripture, the reality of sin and the need for sinners to be saved by Jesus. She became active in the church youth group and soon felt inadequate as she often had no clue what her new friends at church were talking about. She writes, "Sometimes I wondered if my Methodist Sunday school education had been totally worthless, for I had no clue what my Bible Church friends were saying."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Diana Butler Bass, *Freeing Jesus*, ©2021, Harper One, p. 79.

I distinctly remember feeling exactly the same way as I began my undergraduate studies in religion at a Lutheran college in the early 1970's. For both Butler Bass and myself we found ourselves embarking on a quest for an adult faith, an adult understanding of who and what Jesus was, relying only on a Sunday school education. And construction paper crafts, finger puppets and flannelgraph bible stories just weren't cutting it for either one of us. For me, I was realizing just how much more there was to learn about the bible and how it came to be, that there even were such people as theologians and biblical scholars who made studying the stories of Jesus their life work. It was thrilling and mind blowing all at the same time!

For Butler Bass, her challenge was more personal. Her search for answers to her own questions about faith brought her, after brief sojourns with a number of different faith communities, to the Scottsdale Bible Church in Scottsdale, AZ. Now a large mega-church with multiple campuses, when Butler Bass began attending it was just a small church close to home where a lot of her friends attended. She liked the sense of belonging she found there and she liked the certainty of the faith they professed. Even so, it wasn't long before she started noticing some pretty basic differences between what she had learned and experienced in the Methodist church of her childhood and this new Bible Church of her teenage and college years. The need to be "saved," to be born again, was foremost. She writes of her friends,

"Jesus was not a tender friend or moral teacher. Instead, he was their Savior and the Savior of the world, the one who would reward them with heaven and punish all who did not believe in him. He died on the cross to cleanse them from

sin, to take their place when God rightly judged them sinners. Jesus saved them from God's eternal wrath."<sup>2</sup> This was in direct contradiction to her experience of Jesus in the Methodist church which she describes as this: "The Methodist pastor who confirmed me talked more about service in this world than being saved in the next. Death, judgment, hell and heaven were minor chords in my childhood church."<sup>3</sup>

The rest of her chapter on Jesus as Savior is excellent, offering helpful insights on a variety of theological points connected to deepening one's understanding of what exactly it means to name Jesus as Savior. It is a rich and compelling conversation but far too long to encapsulate in this sermon. One point she does make, however, is very important for our consideration this morning and that has to do with her explanation of the word which is key to knowing Jesus as Savior and that is "salvation." Jesus, she maintains, did not exist, does not exist, solely to snatch believers away from the depths of hell because they claim him as Savior. Rather, the salvation Jesus offers comes from the original Latin word *salvus* "which originally referred to being made whole, uninjured, safe, or in good health. *Salvus* was not about being taken out of this life; it was about this life being healed."<sup>4</sup> This Jesus is not one-dimensional or demanding or unforgiving to all who refused to comply with the expectations overlaid onto this human-generated idea of being saved from sin. Jesus saves, yes. But the sin he saves us from is not apostasy or heresy or false belief which ends up being whatever the church leaders say it is. Things like, women should

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 74.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 73

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 76

be housewives and subordinate to husbands. Homosexuality or transsexuality are perversion and sin. These beliefs, the so-called Bible Church folks would have us believe, will lead us straight to hell and to believe otherwise is just another sin. We are doubly damned.

Dear ones, this is not Jesus, here in this church. Truth is, there is only one Jesus and two radically different Christian groups are literally battling over who gets Jesus right. For both sides the stakes are the highest they can be – death or life. And that’s the real irony of the whole conversation! To the Christians who see Jesus only as a wholly divine Savior who I their safety net from eternal damnation – John 3:16 Christians – the death they fear leads only to either eternal joy or eternal damnation. Everything in life is about making sure you – YOU – escape damnation and spend eternity in heaven. All the other problems of life – poverty, war, lack of health care, food insecurity, climate change running amok, racism, sexism, the revolving door of the prison system – none of these are problems we should be wasting our time on because as long as we’re saved in the next life, none of that matters. And isn’t it the end times anyway? Isn’t that why things are so bad? This where their Jesus brings them.

That’s why it’s so hard to imagine for us here in this church that there are good people, God-fearing people, who believe only that Jesus Saves and being one of those Saved ones is all that matters. That’s not being Christian to us. That’s not how we measure whether or not we are saved. Actually, I would go so far as to say we don’t even really think that much about being saved. We’re not really heaven oriented I guess you could say. We’re here and now oriented. We’re Matthew 25:34-36 Christians:

“Come you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”

Doing for others because of God’s love for us is how we are saved from the sins of selfishness and ignorance towards the suffering of others. Put another way, we save others from all the evils life can hold in a physical way because our very human Jesus, through the unearned gift of grace, saves us from indifference, saves us from limiting God’s love to only those who think like we do.

And what of Jesus as Lord? Isn’t Lord the same thing as Savior? In the text we read this morning, isn’t Jesus referring to himself as “Lord?” Well, he certainly appears to do that, criticizing those who call him Lord and then don’t do what he tells them to do. Now there’s a concept we can relate to, right? Anyone who’s ever parented a child or supervised another person at work knows how frustrating it is to tell someone what you need them to do only to have them smile at you but not do one thing you asked. Setting aside how reassuring it is to know this happened to Jesus, this text actually reveals this title of “Lord” to be something quite different than what it initially appears to be. Butler Bass notes, “*Kyrios* [Lord] was a startling word to describe a wandering miracle-working rabbi ... [since it] ... is signifying one who holds dominion over the lives and fates of those under his sway.”<sup>5</sup> She continues, “Jesus is Lord’ was subversive and empowering, a form of submission one could choose in a world of

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 122

otherwise little choice, a way of life that resulted in finding oneself by giving oneself totally and unreservedly to this crucified Jewish peasant *kyrios*.”<sup>6</sup>

In other words, the earliest Christians saw the title of “Lord” for Jesus as an act of rebellion against all the forces arrayed against them ranging from the religious authorities to the might of the Roman Empire. The only Lord they truly acknowledged was the one who saw their pain and sought to ease it, who loved them enough to make clear how much God loved them. God loved them! God was not a vengeful God constantly on the warpath against those who had committed some invisible infraction against rules no one understood. God was a God of love who created the world as a place where humans could flourish and be happy if only they could move beyond their own selfish tendencies.

Two different understandings of what it means to claim Jesus as Savior and Lord. Two different approaches to what it means to live a life with Jesus at the center. Is one right and one wrong? Or is God big enough to encompass them both? And if God has enough love for both groups, how do those groups find a way to love each other in spite of their very different understandings of what it means to be saved by God? Jesus saves. That is true, that much we know. But where do we go from here? I would argue that the quest for that answer will determine all our futures. Here’s what Jesus has to say on the subject...

I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them. That one is like a man building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it,

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 122.

because it had been well built. But the one who hears and does not act is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, immediately it fell, and great was the ruin of that house.

A house built on rock. Hmm... that sounds familiar. After all, we are in Stonington. Have you noticed all the rocks right outside our doors, the ledges in the side yard just on the other side of this wall? So, rock we have in abundance. Now what? Thank goodness Jesus not only saves. Jesus guides, especially when we are paying attention. Amen.