

John 3:14 – 21

“Claiming Jesus” a sermon preached by Rev. Wendy Vander Hart, Associate Conference Minister
Trinitarian Congregational Church, UCC
January 26, 2020

Grace and peace be to you from Jesus Christ the head of the church. I bring you greetings, blessings and all manner of good wishes from the 64 churches of the Metropolitan Boston Association of MA Conference, UCC.

I want to thank Bob, Gail and church leaders for the invitation to be here and preach this morning, and then delight with you and the rest of the Association as we install Gail this afternoon as a Pastor and Teacher among you. It is good to be in this space to worship God and lift up our covenant connections as the body of Christ. Thank you church for sharing Bob with the wider church as he is serving on our Committee on Ministerial Standing. Gail – and church leaders- we are in the Nominating season – stay tuned! Bless you pastors in your ministry to these good people and in the community. And bless you congregation for the ways in which you live the love and justice of Jesus here in Concord.

I celebrate who you are in the present and I am praying for your future. Before we move to the scripture text would you help me celebrate who you are in the present by thanking someone next to you for being part of this ministry? Reach out to someone and say “thanks for being part of this ministry!”

The topic for this sermon is “Claiming Jesus.” Imagine with me for a moment that you are a thirteen year old youth just finishing up your Confirmation classes. You are one of three in the class and you happen to be three and four years younger than the other two students. You are also the child of the pastor feeling the teenage angst of diving deep into your faith with someone who knows you too well. Imagine coming to the end of the “coursework” and learning that you have what you perceive to be a looming hurdle ahead of you. You have to meet with the Elders, all by yourself and give testimony to your Christian faith. Now mind you the Elders are familiar beloved people but in your adolescent brain they will be sitting in judgment of your responses to their questions.

The day arrives, and you are invited into the room and offered a seat on the green couch. The Elders ask their questions but then comes the one you have dreaded, the one question on which you are sure hinged God’s judgment of you, your father’s acceptance and your very salvation – do you accept Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior?

Of course, you know the answer should be yes! But your juvenile participation has never made room for doubts and asking your own questions about the expansiveness of God and can there really be only ONE way to be in full relationship to God. Throughout the Confirmation class you have held your cards close not disclosing the depth of your wondering and doubting, your believing and questioning.

So, you say yes, because it is the right thing to do in that moment. You can’t even imagine what would happen if you said “No,” or “I don’t know” in that moment. You imagine there would be whispers about the preacher’s kid and how that would reflect on your father. But mostly you fear the rejection of God and eternal damnation – so you say yes, with tears flowing, you say yes and hold those doubts all the way until you are in seminary in the process of becoming a Pastor. And even after being ordained and serving a church and leading Bible Study and being with people in all kinds of life circumstances, you still wonder about this Jesus and what you can claim about his claim on your life.

What can you claim about this Jesus? What is your testimony when asked, who is this Jesus that has inspired you to be part of a faith community, give your time, energy and even money to be part of it?

Some people simply answer the claim of Jesus on their life by quoting scripture. This is a provocative scripture this John 3:16. Maybe you are used to seeing it like this (reveal the sign) in the end zone or sideline or on a bumper sticker. Maybe at some point in your life you memorized it or maybe this is the first time you have ever heard it. *For God so loved the world that God gave God's only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*

This scripture verse has become what some term “bedsheet theology.” For those who have taken this verse to the airwaves in public places John 3:16 has become a kind of trademark for fundamentalist Christians -- a way to reduce and simplify one version of the Christian gospel to a quick sound bite. In one sense, this use is justified. It has a summarizing quality to it and in fact the protestant reformer Martin Luther called the verse “the Gospel in miniature.”

John 3:16 may be the most famous Bible verse in the world but that doesn't mean it's easy to understand. The contrast of saving the world and condemning the world is confusing in this scripture. There sure have been a lot of Christians across the last two millennia who seem to think that condemnation is where it's at when it comes to preaching, teaching, and evangelizing. Not a few Christians in North America seem convinced that a major part of their vocation as believers is to wag judgmental fingers in the faces of all kinds of people. After all, what are all those placards and protest signs paraded in front of socio-political opponents on a range of “culture war” issues if not a message of condemnation?

And when the finger-wagging happens – it gets attached to Jesus and pretty soon there is a whole generation of people who unfairly equate Jesus with judgment, exclusion and condemnation.

I appreciate the words of Professor Sarah Henrich about this scripture. She writes, “The single most important thing to notice about this verse is that *God loved the world*. God deeply loved the world that God created, and God longs for this creation to live. God's way of loving the world was to send the Son to save it. Jesus is God's expression of love and longing. The light comes to find us, to illuminate our path for our sake, because God wants us. God reaches out through the Son with the sheer purpose of sharing everlasting life with us.”¹

God loved the world in this way – a generous pouring out of love that knows no bounds and is available to us for the grasping. Being in relationship to God through Jesus is *more about* embracing love than proving we are worthy.

Imagine with me again that you are that teenage preacher's child who became a Pastor. You eventually have figured out the most precious gift that Jesus gives – a way to live. It is a way to live that may have eternal consequences but you figured out that the next life is in God's hands and will take care of itself. You realize that Jesus is looking less to *what* you believe and more about *how* you believe. So, you consider that the Jesus way is the way you want to live your life not for some heavenly reward but because it is just and holy and hopeful and loving and in the manner God has loved. You realize the pattern of Jesus' life could be your pattern- an expression of gratitude for so expansive a love as God demonstrated in the life, death and resurrection of that Beloved one. You turn away from the practices of *avoiding* talk of Jesus and wholly embrace that Jesus is the pattern of your life.

¹ Sarah Henrich, workingpreacher.org, March 22, 2009

And because you have claimed Jesus as the pattern of your life, you want the communities you serve to embrace Jesus too. You find that in your position on staff when the MA Conference of the UCC is discussing a new mission and purpose in closer relationship with two other Conferences in CT and RI that you are arguing for a clearer expression of the Jesus we follow. You plead that Jesus be front and center, unmistakable in that mission and purpose because the Jesus so often expressed in Christian circles is not the Jesus you have come to know. You have come to know the Jesus who includes, has special care for those who are poor and destitute, the Jesus who is demanding but forgiving, relentless but takes time apart, critical but gentle, the Jesus who cares about today as much as tomorrow, the Jesus who is both personal Savior and provider of a way to live. You surprise yourself at the campaign you are waging for the focus to be on Jesus in this new mission/purpose and receive the thanks of millennial members of the Board of Directors for claiming Jesus so forthrightly.

You are surprised because never could you have imagined the confirmand in 1976 would be so confident in 2020 in claiming Jesus. And you know that the thirteen year old on the green couch has been redeemed by her Redeemer. And you rejoice!

My friends, *God loved the world in this way -God gave God's only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have life.* May it be so. Amen.