

“Freeing Jesus”
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, April 18, 2021

1 John 3:1-7

One of the first hymns many children learned in Sunday School was the hymn, ‘Jesus Loves Me’. “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong, they are weak but he is strong. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. The bible tells me so.” These words hold a soft spot in our hearts for this was for many of us, the way we first met Jesus. As someone who loved us, would look after us, and protect us.

You would have to look long and hard to find anything comparable to this when we turn to the more formal language of our church that describes Jesus. Our credal statements feel more chiseled in stone, creating distance, and not closeness, from Jesus. It just doesn’t get us to the same place as the words of Jesus Loves Me. Our hearts certainly don’t go all soft when we hear this from the Apostles Creed: “I believe in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead.” Even the United Church’s more contemporary ‘A New Creed’ posits Jesus in a very ‘formal’ identity that in no way promotes accessibility – “to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen, our judge and our hope.” The institutional church holds up this theologically sound bio of Jesus as the cornerstone of Christianity. And yet, what do most people think of when they explain who Jesus is for them? You would probably go to the ‘Jesus Loves Me’ story rather than a recitation of the Apostles Creed. The ‘Jesus Loves Me’ Jesus will find you in any corner or crevice you find yourself in. The credal Jesus? Harder to relate to that’s for sure.

Most scholars place this First Letter of John sometime after the writing of the Gospel of John, putting its date at approximately the years 100-110.¹ It wasn’t written by John but by someone in the faith community, an elder. It is in the form of an essay, rather than a letter. The writer is saying that while *they* might know about God, and who Jesus is, the world does not. He says, “The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.”

‘The world does not know him.’ The world does not know Jesus. Some days I think that we hardly know Jesus ourselves. Our theology hovers over ancient descriptions, in formal language. We’ve put Jesus as the centerpiece of the church and we’ve surrounded him with centuries of theological discourse and tradition. The church is no longer at the center of community the way it once was. As Diana Butler Bass observed, “One of the main tenets of faith is that the church is the body of Christ and that Jesus cannot really be known (at least fully) outside of the life of the church. Ecclesiastically approved theology will not let you separate Jesus and the church.”² But then Diana goes on to say that where once Jesus and the Church were inseparable, now the people who have been leaving the church in droves are taking Jesus

¹ The Jewish Annotated New Testament, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 518.

² Diana Butler Bass, *Freeing Jesus: Rediscovering Jesus as Friend, Teacher, Savior, Lord, Way, and Presence* (New York: HarperOne, 2021), xv.

with them. And leaving the church behind. In a current world that vaguely knows what Christianity stands for, perhaps this is a time for us to also better know Jesus. In case someone asks us.

Our text says, “Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.” (1 John 3:2) ‘We will see him as he is.’ There are many ways that we have each seen Jesus in our lives. I turn to another hymn that lists many of them: How sweet the name of Jesus sounds in a believer’s ears – Jesus, my Shepherd, brother, friend, prophet, priest, and King, my Lord, my Life, my Way.

Butler Bass notes, “Christians turn Jesus into a static figure, the one who is “the same yesterday and today and forever,”³ this scripture phrase coming from Romans 13:8. While church dogmatics tend to keep Jesus in a space of never changing, the same yesterday, today and forever, in reality, Jesus is restless to move and draw near to us. To be that presence in our lives in this moment, whether that be as prophet, friend or saviour. To a world that does not know him, I too add my voice, asking, “Who are you, Jesus?” My life breaks open and you enter in, in the way that I need you. As a child, to know that I am loved. In my growing up, as a teacher. In my brokenness, as my healer. In moments of wilderness, my path. In moments of fear, my Shepherd. In moments of dying, my Saviour. Butler Bass captures my wanting to know more about who Jesus is when she says, “Our frame is so narrow and Jesus’ is so wide.”⁴

The first letter of John says that “The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.” (1 John 3:2b) And the way the world will know about Jesus is when they see Jesus in us. But first, *we* need to see him. Not just as a doctrinal statement recited in a creed, but in a living presence that enters in, wherever you are in your faith journey – as prophet, as friend, as saviour, as the Risen Lord.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

³ Bass, *Freeing Jesus*, 248.

⁴ Bass, *Freeing Jesus*, 266.