

Our UCC Faith: Jesus Christ, Human and Divine
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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John 1:1-5; John 2:1-11; Mark 6:30-32

For our friends from St. Peter's and any others who may be visiting today, allow me to set this reflection briefly in context...

I've been leading our congregation through a summer sermon series which focuses on the seven theological points found in the United Church of Christ's Statement of Faith. This is the statement we read together every time we share the Lord's Supper; it reminds us of what we hold in common with one another in the wider church.

So far, we've covered eschatology (a fancy word for beliefs about last things), discipleship and community, and last week - unity within diversity. This Sunday, our focus is on Christology – beliefs about who Jesus Christ is, and was, and will be.

I'm reminded of that church school song we've all learned... Jesus Loves Me... written in 1860 by Anna B. Warner...

*Jesus loves me! This I know,
For the Bible tells me so;
Little ones to Him belong;
They are weak, but He is strong.*

Within the United Church of Christ, there are a variety of views about Jesus. In fact, that's the case with ALL of our theology. Our Pilgrim roots grant us a freedom of conscience which leads us down a variety of theological paths.

So, when we hear the Christ-focused theological statement within our UCC Statement of Faith: *In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior, you have come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the world to yourself...* it can mean different things to different people.

Because I am the pastor, and went to school to contemplate such things and try to explain them in about 12 minutes or so of preaching once a week, I'd like to share with you what Jesus means to me:

The life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth was a profound expression of God's deeply reconciling, self-sacrificing love for the world, and is still guiding humanity today.

Jesus's teaching career, which most scholars believe spanned no more than three years, consistently pointed those who felt oppressed, left behind and shut out to a relationship with their Creator AND their neighbor; including even those who were their oppressors.

*Jesus loves me! This I know,
As He loved so long ago,
Taking children on His knee,
Saying, "Let them come to Me."*

Jesus called broken, imperfect people into ministry in order to heal and transform community. It all began at a wedding, at the urging of his mother, with a miracle which brought more JOY and LAUGHTER than was reasonably expected. The followers of Jesus of Nazareth participated in a counter-cultural movement that included men and women, Jews and Gentiles, the wealthy and the desperately poor. Their work was tremendously important AND personally exhausting, so Jesus taught his followers to rest. Eventually, Jesus was noticed by religious and political authorities for his radical grace, and it was his ultimate undoing.

*Jesus loves me still today,
Walking with me on my way,
Wanting as a friend to give
Light and love to all who live.*

Greed and jealousy drove one of his closest companions to betray him to the Roman Occupiers who knew he could not be controlled, as the religious authorities colluded against him out of their own fear and mistrust. Jesus' public arrest, humiliation and crucifixion became one of the darkest moments of humanity. He broke down barriers which they had erected, and for this he lost his life.

But I don't believe that the God he was so close to that he called Abba, "Daddy" sent him to his death. Some of you may, because that is the traditional understanding for why such a horrific thing happened.

*Jesus loves me! He who died
Heaven's gate to open wide;
He will wash away my sin,
Let His little child come in.*

It's called substitutionary atonement. But it is not, to my reading, the way the New Testament articulates the good news. And it matters.

Substitutionary atonement makes sin, guilt and retribution the central themes of faith. It focuses on what's wrong with us, suggests that we are the ones who are culpable rather than the systems in which we live. And it is so firmly fixed on the individual – *Christ died to save me, a sinner* – that the collective is easily ignored.

Substitutionary atonement gives us a God who can only effect the salvation of sinners through an act of violent retribution. Holiness becomes the central characteristic of God and retribution becomes the central theme in God's dealing with humankind, opening up a vision of eternity in which the bulk of humankind suffer the most bitter torments.

But what if we made resurrection the center of the gospel? What if, at the center of the universe lay not an act of retribution but God's declaration that the cycle of violence and retribution will be broken? That God absorbs whatever evil we can throw, forgiving and creating new life and a renewed world? Would it not change the way we frame faith, the way we speak of ourselves, the way we relate to God and engage with the world?

When we focus on the resurrection, following Christ becomes all about making things right and reconciling with our God and neighbor. Christ entered fully into the bondage of death, turned it inside out by making it a moment of victory, liberating humanity to live lives of love without the fear of death.

Yes, human beings were directly responsible for the violence Jesus suffered. Since they were given free will there was nothing on this world or the next that would stop that tragic chain of events. Yes, the death of Jesus was a sin, one that is still running rampant in our world today... for we still find

ways to kill our prophets. But how do we make a pathway for peace so that innocent people no longer suffer a similar fate?

One of the ways we try to make things right is through the sharing of the Lord's Supper, which retells the story of his betrayal and yet calls us one again to enact his love and grace. So in a moment, when we share together the bread and the cup, I invite you to think about what Jesus means to you.

Yes, Jesus loves me!

Yes, Jesus loves me!

Yes, Jesus loves me!

The Bible tells me so. Amen.