

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons
Psalm 13; John 1: 43-51
"God Will Overcome"
2nd Sunday after Epiphany
January 18, 2015

On the Sunday following Christmas, our New Testament lesson was from the Prologue to the Gospel according to John where readers are told that "The Word became flesh and lived among us." What follows in John 1 is this gospel writer's account of the first four days of Jesus's ministry. Today's reading begins on day four when Jesus decides to go to Galilee.

Who is your Lord and Savior?

This question is asked of Presbyterian parents who bring their children to receive the Sacrament of Baptism. The question is asked of anyone who is making a public profession of the Christian faith in the Presbyterian Church. Last Sunday, during all three worship services, we were invited to answer the question in reaffirming our and our parents' baptismal vows.

This question, "Who is your Lord and Savior?" is a foundational question for Christ-followers.

And the answer is foundational as well: Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior.

And because both the question and the answer are foundational for faith, it seems right to unpack what it means to say "Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior" in light of the Scripture that we have read today and in the context of this weekend's observance of the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

I must confess right off the bat that I get a kind of knotted-up feeling deep down in the pit of my stomach every time I ask or am asked or hear someone else ask the question, "Who is your Lord and Savior?" or as it is frequently phrased, "Do you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?"

The reason for this is because simply asking the question can send an unintended message, the message being that to hesitate, to resist, to question, to struggle, to doubt when it comes to matters of faith is somehow "bad." And thus to answer, if one is a person (as I am) who has spent a good bit of time hesitating, resisting, questioning, struggling, and doubting, to say simply with no qualifications whatsoever, "Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior" is to be dishonest somehow.

What we read in today's Scripture lesson speaks directly to that knotted-up feeling, you see, don't you, that Nathanael is a skeptic. When Philip comes to Nathanael and says, "You've got to come and meet him. This Jesus. He's something special. He is beyond special even. He's the one that our people have been waiting for to set us free," Nathanael's response is a skeptical, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Note Jesus's response. Jesus doesn't reject the skepticism of Nathanael.

Rather he says, "Now here is a man who is truly honest. Here is a man in whom there is no deceit."

Jesus accepts Nathanael and his skepticism. He *honors* Nathanael's doubt, and in so doing he honors, he doesn't reject, he *honors* the skepticism and doubt in you and in me. Indeed, Nathanael's doubt and skepticism seem to draw Jesus to Nathanael. At first, there is a playful repartee which goes on between them. Nathanael's impressed because Jesus seems to have 20/10 eyesight and can recognize who he is way over yonder under the fig tree which maybe is as far as from the ramp door entrance to this building to the front steps of the library over across Concord Road even though Nathanael can't ever recall their having ever met before.

But Jesus's "knowing" Nathanael goes a lot deeper than exchanging business cards at an after-hours networking meet-and-greet. He *knows* Nathanael. Even though Philip had spoken about how he, Philip, had found Jesus, it was actually the other way around. And John the gospel-writer says it outright: Jesus found Philip. And it is the same for Nathanael. Jesus found Nathanael. Jesus *accepted* Nathanael. And it is the same for you and for me. In the midst of our doubt and skepticism, Jesus finds us. He accepts us. And he means to make us a part of what he promises are "greater things than these."

Might it be, do you suppose, that accepting Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior means nothing more and nothing less than that we receive *his* acceptance and in so doing, we are released to live into the freedom that comes with that acceptance--freedom from shame, freedom from striving to be somebody that we are not and were never meant to be, freedom from worrying about or even caring about the way that other people judge us—trusting that God will make us--yes, skeptical, doubting, imperfect you and me--a part of nothing less than our climbing Jacob's ladder just like the angels and being a part of the peace of heaven being realized right here on earth?

This is good news, my brothers and sisters, on this particular King weekend, observed. In the wake of so much injustice, so much terror, being acted out on the world's stage in these recent months and weeks – racial tension here in the United States, the Charlie Hebdo and other murders in France, the brutality of Boko Haram in Nigeria.

Many of you have seen this photograph which hangs on one wall in my office. The photo was taken by an award-winning photojournalist friend of mine Robert Owen. It is the entrance to an exhibit entitled "Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement" was being shown at a San Antonio museum. In Robert's photo, Dr. King appears to be looking down the hall. At the end of the hall is the silhouette of a janitor, he appears to be African-American, carrying out the day's trash, it appears. Most days that I am in my office, I look at that picture, and it serves as an icon for my prayers as I go about my day's work.

Often my prayers coalesce around the injustice that is conveyed in the picture....the long, long way we have to go before Dr. King's dream of a truly just society is realized, before all people are free at last. Often my prayers as I look at the picture are simply that I will, that we, that the world will not give into despair and to keep holding on the vision of which Dr. King alluded in borrowing from the 19th century Unitarian Universalist minister Theodore Parker whom he quoted when he spoke at the baccalaureate service at Wesleyan University in Connecticut in 1964, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

But on Friday night, I caught a TV news report which is starting to change the way I look at the picture and perhaps even the way I pray in relation to it from here on out.

EULESS, Texas – Being a custodian here at Trinity High School in Euless, Texas isn't exactly the most important job in America – but don't tell that to the custodian.

"If I clean a toilet, and you sit on that toilet, you can rest assured that's the cleanest toilet you'll ever sit on," said Charles Clark.

Clark takes his job that seriously. But his greatest asset has nothing do with his cleaning – it's his counseling.

Not long after he started at Trinity 25 years ago, Charles Clark began pulling kids aside. Kids he thought might be falling through the cracks. Kids he thought might need a little mentoring. Kids like 17-year old Jesse Walehwa.

"Mr. Clark has been looking out for me ever since I been here," Walehwa told me. "I can tell Mr. Clark anything. I know he's going to give me his honest opinion. He's very wise, very loving."

"They've never had a man tell them they love them before," said Clark. "Once they trust you and they know you love them you can get them to buy in what you're selling."

Clark says most of his clients come from the school's counselors.

Peggy McIntyresa is a clinical counselor at Trinity with a Masters in social work – but she says Charles has a better way with certain kids.

"He's worked with a lot of our students here who ended up going to college – ended up doing really well," McIntyre told me. "He gets results, he sure does."

By all accounts, this custodian has helped dozens of kids turn their lives around – not because it was his job, but because it needed to be done. And there's a lesson in there for anyone who feels trapped by their title.

"You going to tell me I don't have a good life?" said Clark. "This custodial thing is working good for me." (1)

Now, the reporter doesn't give us a hint as to how Mr. Clark might answer the question, "Who is my Lord and Savior?" What he does show is what it looks like to live as a free human being who is a part of nothing less than making the peace of heaven real on earth.

And perhaps this, above all, is what we mean when we answer, "Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior."

1. <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/high-school-custodian-provides-unlikely-service/>