

October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2023

## Philippians 2:1-13 “Bendable Poseable Jesus”

This text from Philippians 2 is known as “The Christ Hymn.” Scholars say that it’s the earliest confessional statement that we have in the New Testament, because remember – the epistles ... the letters to the churches like Philippians and Romans and Ephesians - were written *before* the gospels. Earlier this year I preached a series of sermons that covered the confession of faith that we use in our church tradition. It’s what we read together for our call to worship at the beginning of the service. This confession of faith is different than a creed. Creeds have been used to demonstrate what a church *believes*. We don’t use creeds because we don’t think “belief” is the most important thing for Christians to do. We use the word “confess” because it’s more focused on actions. The first thing we confess in our affirmation of faith concerns Jesus: “We confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and proclaim him Lord and Savior of the world. In Christ's name and by his grace we accept our mission of witness and service to *all* people.” And “all” means ... ? It’s not what we believe that’s most important, it’s who we are and what we *do*. This Christ hymn is the Philippians’ confession of faith. It’s what they affirm about their relationship to and connection with Jesus. What I want to know and what I want us to consider this morning is, “to *which* Jesus do we confess?”

This past summer, Larry Love, pastor of the Woodland Christian Church, retired after thirty-four years of ministry in the same congregation. I don’t know if he holds the record in our Region though. He did serve eight more years than Wendel Pew did here at FCC Chico which is quite a feat, and there are no other ministers currently serving in our region who have led a congregation that long. There were a lot of folks there for Larry’s last Sunday including representatives from both the General and Regional Church as well as folks like me – friends and colleagues who love him and have worked with him over the years. Ted Firch who recently retired from First Christian Church in Sacramento

was there waiting to induct his friend into the “league of retired ministers.” The members of this unofficial league all have little “minister emeritus” pins that they can clip on their lapel. And then after receiving these pins, they try to see how long they can go before they’re out there doing some kind of ministry again. By the way, I want to thank Tom and Jerry ... not the cartoon cat and mouse, but two of our retired Disciples of Christ ministers here at First Christian Church who, along with “semi-retired” UCC Minister Georgeanne Bennett, helped cover the pulpit this past summer while I was away on Sabbatical. Our retired ministers are a treasure and I feel very fortunate to have supportive partners in ministry here in Chico. I’m also thankful for all of our home-grown lay preachers who helped this summer, but I’m going to save the spotlight for you all next week!

Larry did a lot of reminiscing and reflecting on his years serving the Woodland church. Like many clergy persons, Larry has a collection of toys that he’s gathered over the course of his ministry. For some reason, folks like to give ministers toys to remind us to take our ministry seriously, yes, but that we also need to have fun too. I brought a few of my toys this morning to share with you. I have my purple gorilla to remind me of the unseen pastoral authority that I wield even when I don’t think it’s there. I have a puffin that was given to me as a “thank you” for successfully putting a ban on smoking at the Virginia Region’s church camp. I have several goats of course because ... you know ... goats. Briony got me this “Multiple Man” action figure to remind me that I can’t be everywhere and do everything at once. Sometimes ministers buy our own toys like Rev. Lovejoy here. Rev. Lovejoy reminds me to maintain appropriate boundaries so I don’t burn out. During his last sermon, Larry shared a toy that someone gave him, and he encouraged other ministers to buy one for themselves. Meet Bendable Posable Jesus of Nazareth.

Bendable Poseable Jesus of Nazareth can be twisted into all sorts of different positions. He can be whatever I want him to be which, when you think about it, isn’t really a good thing. I’m not supposed to mold

Jesus into the image of what *I* think he should be. Jesus is supposed to mold *me* into his image which is why Larry thinks all pastors should have this toy. One of the things I learned over the summer through the many books I read and the churches I visited is that Jesus often gets bent into all sorts of different roles and positions. There's "Jesus Meek and Mild," "There's Mighty Warrior Jesus." There's "Peace and Justice" Jesus. There's "Ah-nuld Jesus" ... that's the Jesus who told his disciples "I'll be back." There's "Story-Teller Jesus," "Contemplative Philosopher Jesus," and "Jesus the Radical Rabbi." There's also "Angry Jesus" from the story of the cleansing of the Jerusalem temple. There's "Paul's Buddy Jesus." There's "Anti-Rome" Jesus. There's "Anti-Pharisee Jesus." There's "Friend of the Pharisees" Jesus. There's "Jesus the Risen Christ," "Jesus the Cosmic Christ," "Jesus the Prophesied Messiah." "Jesus the Family Guy" which includes, "Jesus the Carpenter," "Jesus - Mary and Joseph's Son," "Jesus, Elizabeth's Nephew and John's Cousin." There's "Transfigured Jesus," "Healer Jesus," and "He Who Calms the Storm Jesus." There's even "Foodie Jesus" who provides loaves and fishes for big crowds and for his disciples on the beach. He also turned water into wine at a wedding feast and prepared the last Passover meal with his disciples.

These are all aspects of Jesus that we can read about in the New Testament. So when we consider Jesus who is portrayed in the scriptures, we aren't bending or manipulating Jesus into something he *wasn't* because it's all right here in the Bible. Maybe we'll bend him into *one* of those roles and try to *keep* him there when it's convenient for us, but these are all legitimate aspects of Jesus. Where we get into trouble is when we pull Jesus *out* of the Bible and try to fit him into our current cultural context. This is when we make up our own versions of Jesus like, "Free Market Jesus" who teaches that only the "deserving poor" should receive help. Or "Champion of a Political Ideology Jesus" who turns a blind eye to the horrible and unethical deeds of our elected officials so long as they support our favorite social or political agendas. There's also "NRA Jesus" who encourages us to take up arms against our enemies who then conveniently become Jesus' enemies too. Or

maybe it's the other way around. You won't find these versions of Jesus in the Bible, but somehow we manage to bend Jesus into whatever role suits our interests best. Or to paraphrase Anne Lamott, "You can safely assume you've created Christ in your own image when it turns out that Christ hates all the same people you do."

This is where Larry said we need to exercise caution. He said that instead of trying to shape Jesus into *our* liking, we should work hard to bend ourselves ... our thinking, our actions ... to the teaching and example of Jesus. Instead of getting Jesus on board with our agenda, we ought to learn his agenda and get on board with him. Jesus' agenda can be challenging though. It can cause us to give up some of our cherished notions which is always unnerving. This is where Larry pointed out the warning on the package of this toy – "Choking hazard." He said, "This is a reminder that some of the things Jesus said and did are hard to swallow." And this is true, right? Again, Jesus comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. We've just got to remember that in the same way we can't put God in a box, we can't put Jesus in one either. Jesus was a multi-faceted person who fulfilled many different roles for many different people and occasions. And you know I cannot pass up the opportunity to point out that this Jesus toy is lily white! Hooray that the manufacturers at least acknowledged that he was from Nazareth. They just didn't bother to acknowledge that people from Nazareth past and present are, for the most part, brown. Ah well. It's still a great toy and I will display it and treasure it in the same way that Larry did.

For today let's consider the example of Jesus who the church in Philippi confessed as being fully human and fully divine. According to this passage, Jesus was the one who manifests God in human flesh. He's fully human yet also fully divine. But he did not regard this equality with God as something to be exploited. He instead humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, and not just any death, but a traitor's death ... one who defied the power of Rome's kingdom in favor of God's reign. The result of this? He was executed on a cross, but he was also exulted ... lifted up so that at his name, every knee would bow

and every tongue would confess that he is Lord ... a title reserved exclusively for Caesar. It's Jesus who is now Lord and Savior of the world which is the phrase we use in our confession of faith. Paul told the members of the church in Philippi to make his joy complete by having the same mind and having the same love ... and being in accord with Christ and one another. "Let the same mind be in us that was in Christ Jesus."

Two thousand years later, the church still struggles with the idea of being "of the same mind" about *anything* because we want others to see Jesus through *our* filters. We feel this deep need to emphasize *one* aspect of Jesus that justifies what we do and how we believe, and yet we ignore the other aspects that make us feel uncomfortable. For example, we want to lift up Jesus, the mild-mannered teacher but dismiss Jesus, the contrarian prophet who compared hypocritical religious leaders to a "brood of vipers." And we can flip that the other way around too. We venerate the contrarian Jesus and downplay the peaceful teacher. Listen, I know how frustrating it is to be labeled or put in a box based on one facet of my personality or vocation. It's frustrating for anyone, right? You can't assume that just because a person supports "issue x" automatically means they support "issue y." "Oh, you support housing first? Well then you must support decriminalizing drugs too!" Not necessarily. My dad used to have a saying about people who assume that's probably inappropriate to share in church. We like to put others in boxes and bend people into what we think they are or should be. We do this with Jesus too, which is why I now have this toy to remind me to be open to God molding me into the image of Christ.

With that - I believe this admonition of Paul to the church in Philippi is appropriate for the church in all times and all places including here at First Christian Church, Chico: "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. *Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.*" Easy to say but not always easy to do because in order to have the "same mind" as Christ, we need to know the *fullness* of Christ, not just our favorite *aspect* of Christ.