

So I've been on a post-Christmas vacation, some of which was study leave, of course...though in truth I actually *enjoy* reading books on Christian theology and spiritual life in general when on vacation. And also, when people find out I'm a minister, the conversation can often turn to church experiences, and too often to church "woes," some hurtful experiences folks have had in churches that now keep them away. We saw a lot of relatives down south, and one of Lynn's cousins, after hearing I needed to lead worship the next day after getting back, suggested this: Why not just tell them it's "Pop Quiz Sunday," and anyone who can't answer the basic questions has to come to Bible Class the next week!

No, I'm not going to do that this morning. The Pop Quiz would probably start with "What was the main point last Sunday's sermon?" And that would be too easy, since I know that Chip invited people to renew their baptism vows, with actual water, easy to remember! The Quiz would have to go a little deeper... like "What are some of the actual baptismal vows?! ...things like resisting evil, washing away old ways and finding new life in Christ's way.

Well, I actually am going to follow up last week's topic, with sharing some of my vacation reading. I came across a book by Rev. Lilian Daniel that became most of my vacation and devotional reading. Some of you know her from the daily devotions of the national UCC. She is quite a good writer, very honest and often witty. What I will share soon is Rev.

Lilian Daniel being very theological, observing and analyzing how people in churches would respond to the question Jesus put to Peter: “Who do you say that I am?”

Now, we just came back from the south, and many churches down there describe who Jesus is with a central emphasis about Jesus saving us from sin and evil, with emphasis on the crucifixion. Large billboards about Jesus saving line the highways. One said “Save me Jesus, Forgive my *sins*.” Another one nearby said “The blood of Jesus saves, and rebukes your *demons*.” For my taste or my experience, it’s too much emphasis on sin and evil to attract people to Jesus; it even seems like fear tactics.

Our gospel reading this morning from gospel of John emphasizes Jesus as a “miracle worker.” Turning water into wine for the wedding at Cana is usually called the first of Jesus’ miracles. We know of other miracles like somehow multiplying loaves and fishes, walking on water, or raising his friend Lazarus from the dead. No one we know of has replicated such big miracles. Preachers usually try to find interpersonal lessons from big miracles, rather than try to explain them (like scientifically) or replicate them.

The point I am trying to make is that like our famous reading on gifts of the Spirit from Paul (1Cor12), there is a diversity of ways that we all experience God’s Spirit. Paul says it is the Same Spirit, yet diverse manifestations of that Spirit in us humans. In similar words, it is the Same Jesus, yet we all **experience Jesus in diverse ways**. Or we could

say, we may **experience Jesus in different ways at different points our life!**

So, on to the writing of Rev. Lilian Daniel, as promised... from her book “When Spiritual but not religious is not enough.” She tells us in one chapter that she is “Inconsistent about Jesus.” She describes HER different experiences of Jesus at different times of her life! She writes: *We can have endless debates about who Jesus is. Is he the Risen Christ who made my forgiveness possible through his blood on the cross? The one who exists outside time and space and was there at the creation of the universe? (John 1). Is he the spiritual teacher who lived a human life from which we can gain wisdom and courage? Is he or best friend? Is he the mysterious peace that passes all human understanding? Can we picture him reigning on the throne of heaven triumphant over evil at the day of reckoning? Or picture him with anger.. anger when he turned over the money changer’s tables? ... or angry at God from the cross? Which image of Jesus gets it right? I don’t want to choose.*

She then goes on to relate the variety of ways she has experienced Jesus in her life. She relates how at age 21 she experienced him as **personal savior** when her father was dying and she was alone and weeping in the chapel of the hospital. *Jesus asked me to surrender to him. I did, and felt a lightness I had never felt before in my life. She experienced him as **Christ the King on the throne of heaven** “who came to my heart when I saw the glaciers in Montana. (awe of*

*the majesty in nature!) And to her, Jesus is also the “**mothering savior,**” the Jesus who said he wanted to gather us up like a hen gathers her chicks. This Jesus “accompanies me on the heart-wrenching work of parenting, ... gathers me up from the crumpled heap of failure that every parent has known, and that only a mothering savior can see.”*

And also he is the “**welcoming Jesus** that make me long to share a table with Jews, Muslims and Buddhists as a foretaste of a heavenly banquet where there will be room for us all. And it is in the **teachings of Jesus** “that I find myself so directly spoken to that I cannot imagine finding a spiritual home where he was not the absolute center of it all.

Some of Rev. Daniel’s examples may seem extraordinary or sound like a Road to Damascus experience (When Paul felt the Risen Christ as bolt of lightning and fell to the ground!). And some sound more like ordinary things we all experience: Jesus as a great teacher, as the one who welcomes all to the table at a good meal, or as the one who gives us awe and wonder when viewing the mountains, the glaciers, the oceans!

So the challenge comes to us all: Will we follow Jesus and focus on Jesus, pray in Jesus name, which is to pray in Jesus Spirit... so that we also experience the saving and healing presence of Jesus in many different ways. Amen.