

Jesus Uncensored Sermon Series:
“SAVIOR”

2 Timothy 1:8-12 – Sixth Sunday of Lent

Dr. Andrew Wolfe, Trinity United Methodist Church
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2 Timothy 1: 8-12: Do not be ashamed then of testifying to our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel in the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not in virtue of our works but in virtue of his own purpose and the grace which he gave us in Christ Jesus ages ago, and now has manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. For this gospel I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, and therefore I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me.

There is a new film out on Jesus. This one by an Iranian director, Nader Talebzadeh (Ta-leb-za-dah), who says it is the first film giving an Islamic view of Jesus. Nader's intention, he says, is to try to bridge the gap between Islam and Christianity. Islam holds Jesus in high esteem. In fact, the movie follows the traditional story of Jesus as recounted in the Gospels. The only difference is that when it comes to the crucifixion, the Gospels are wrong, Nader says. In his movie, God saves Jesus from crucifixion and takes him straight to heaven. The person crucified was not Jesus but Judas.

American author and pundit, Gore Vidal, wrote a novel with the same plot twist. *In Live from Golgatha*, Gore's fictionalized account, Jesus tricks the Romans by switching places with Judas, and then Jesus escapes into the future.

Michael Baigent, a historian whose theories were popularized in the novel *The DeVinci Code* claims, with no real evidence, that there was a secret deal between Pilate and Jesus in which Pilate actually saves Jesus life. Baigent argues that Pilate needed to appease the crowd that was calling for Jesus' death, but Pilate had incentive to let Jesus live because he had urged his followers to pay their taxes to Rome. So Pilate rigged the crucifixion. Jesus was drugged so that he would appear to die, but actually survived and was quickly removed from the scene. Actually to Egypt and later to France.

Evidently, this whole idea of Jesus dying on the cross seems hard for many people to swallow. Jesus was a great teacher, maybe even a prophet, a nice guy, but the idea that he died a brutal death, that he was executed as a common criminal, seems preposterous, even unnecessary to our modern sensibilities. Paul writes to Timothy that, “We are not to be ashamed then of testifying to our Lord, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not in virtue of our works but in virtue of his own purpose and the grace which he...manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality.” From the very beginning, Christians have called Jesus, Savior.

We Christians have a big problem. How do we sell this image of a bloody Savior to a world that doesn't particularly think it needs a savior? In fact, we are a little embarrassed by the whole idea of a crucified Savior. In a lot of modern expressions of Christian faith, the tactic is to

evade the image. It is not to deny that Jesus died, and why he died, but it is kind of shoved into the closet out of sight because it makes us a bit uncomfortable.

Several years ago there was an interview with the pastor of the fastest growing church in America. This church pioneered efforts to the un-churched by holding seeker services. His goal was to make people who haven't attended church for a long time comfortable. It has been hugely successful. It has worked.

But if you attend its services, the church building resembles a corporate office park complete with a pond and a fountain but no Christian symbols – no cross anywhere so as not to intimidate visitors. The person doing the interview remarked that the church looked like a large theater – there was nothing identifiably Christian in view. Asked to comment, the pastor said, “Well, we don't believe that any one symbol can convey the meaning of Christian faith.”

Really?! Did Paul get it wrong when he wrote, “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” (1 Cor. 2:2) Is the cross somehow optional?

Bishop Willimon, in a piece he wrote about seeker services, asks the question, “When in these services do we pull out the cross? When we are touting all the benefits of choosing Jesus, do we also say to them, ‘By the way, Jesus said that to follow him was to take up their own cross.’”

The cross is a hard sell to a culture that is looking for success more than it is seeking salvation. In fact, the crucifixion seems fairly useless to a lot of the proclamation of Jesus today: if what we are looking for from Jesus is 10 easy steps to success; if our biggest problem is losing ten pounds or getting out of debt; if the only guilt we have is that we do not have a house as big as our neighbors. Do we really need a crucified Savior for any of these? Then, what we are looking for is a mentor to show us the ropes, maybe. Or a coach who can challenge us to be all we can be. Or a spiritual advisors who can help us unleash our own inner selves. That's what we are looking for. Dr. Phil or Oprah fits the bill for us. But a crucified Savior? What's the point? What the use? Who needs it?

In Dostoyevsky's novel, *The Idiot*, two of the characters are passing through a room with pictures on the wall. One of the pictures represented Jesus just taken from the cross. One of the men hardly notices the picture and seemed anxious to move on. But the other stopped beneath it and said, "I like looking at that picture," "That picture! That picture!" cried the Prince. "Why, a man's faith might be ruined by looking at that picture!" "So it is!" said his friend.

The truth is, that to need a Savior, we have to believe: that we need saving from something, that we by ourselves can't achieve fulfillment, that we aren't self actualizing individuals who just need to be free to be me. To need a Savior, we have to believe that there is something tragically amiss in our world...and in our lives – something beyond our ability to rectify. This image of a crucified Savior might ruin our faith...in ourselves.

One of the most compelling, and maybe even devastating, films I have seen lately is *Atonement*. *Atonement* is told in three acts. The film opens on an idyllic day in the English countryside where 13-year-old Briony is putting the finishing touches to a play she has written when she see something she misunderstands. It involves Briony's older sister Cecilia and Robbie Turner, son of the Tallis' housekeeper. The two are deeply in love with each other. There is a

discrepancy between what Briony think she sees and what really happens, but her accusation leads to Robbie's arrest even though the viewer knows he is innocent.

Act two moves ahead to 1940. Robbie has been paroled into the army. Before being shipped out to France, he meets up again with Cecilia who has been working as a nurse. Briony has also become a nurse working at the same hospital as Cecilia. Briony has become a nurse as penance. She has grown to understand that what she did was wrong and has ruined the lives of Robby and her sister. In one scene, we see Briony scrubbing hard to remove a stain from a piece of clothing. "No matter how hard I word, I can't make up for what I did," she says. She works and works to try to undo the wrong she committed – the mistake she made which has caused so much suffering. She goes to see her sister and Robby, trying to put things right. But there is no reconciliation, too much harm has been done. Redemption isn't that easy.

In the third act, Briony is now much older and is dying. We see how she is still trying to come to terms with the grief she created so long ago. There has been no end to the guilt that has defined her life. Her one wrong has ruined not only the lives of Robbie and Cecilia, but her own life as well. No matter how hard she has tried to scrub away what happened, atonement is beyond her reach, beyond her own abilities to achieve.

Despite our best efforts, our brave posturing, our denials, there is in life a tragic element that we can't compensate for on our own. There is a brokenness to life that we experience in a variety of ways. The biblical word for sin is "amartia," which means simply "missing the mark." That's as apt a description as any. We miss the mark in our lives, and we know it.

Sometimes we miss the mark through ignorance. We do things which cause harm without not knowing any better. Sometimes we know better and do it anyway (as we have learned from yet another fallen political figure this week). Sometimes we experience this brokenness as guilt or shame. We hurt ourselves and others.

Sometimes it is the feeling of loneliness, isolation – not being at home with ourselves or at home within life. Sometime it is the experience of despair – the feeling that we don't matter, nothing matters. We are not at one with anything. Meaning and peace escape us.

This brokenness is not easily mended. We cannot save ourselves from it without becoming more mired in it. Sometimes we try to make amends for the hurt we have caused by the "virtue of our works" only to find like Briony that no matter how hard we work we can't make up for what we did. The guilt and alienation are still there. Sometimes we try to dull the pain of our despair in life by our addictions, or fill the emptiness with things, only to find it is still there. That's because the roots of our brokenness go deep in our separation from God.

The story of The Fall is the bible's way of saying we were created by God, for God, but that relationship is fractured precisely because we think we don't need God. We buy into the myth that we can live life alone, on our own terms. There is nothing from which we can't save ourselves. We are our own lights. But as Briony discovered, what we think we see is often very different from reality. That's because our vision is always one-sided, distorted by our own self-interest.

The religious establishment of the day thought they were doing a good thing, the right

thing is seeking to be rid of Jesus. Which is why we can't mend the brokenness by ourselves. Our perspective is always limited, always tinted, always bias in our favor, or always clouded by our guilt.

There has to be another actor, someone outside ourselves to reach across the chasm created by our separation. Someone who will not let our sins be final. Someone who will not let us languish in our loneliness. Someone who can love us back into life, no matter how far we have lost ourselves.

There is another film with the title, *Second Best*, which stars William Hurt as a middle-aged Welsh postmaster. The postmaster has been left alone in the world. His parents are dead and he has never married. He decides he would like to adopt a child so that he can have a family. So he enters this complicated process of adoption, and makes a connection with a troubled 10-year-old who sees the postmaster as a way of getting back in touch with his ex-convict father. The boy worships his father, and longs for the day when they can be together again.

The postmaster tries over and over to reach out to the boy who pushes him away. One day the boy's father unexpectedly shows up. But rather than the strong, adventurous, liberator the boy had imaged, he arrives a broken man. He is ravaged by the last stages of AIDS, unable to care for himself. Out of compassion, the postmaster takes him in to die. The boy is torn by his disillusionment, his shame, as he begins to understand the truth about both his parents. They have abandoned him for their own pursuits.

Devastated by the image of his father, the boy runs away from the postmaster's home in the middle of the night, taking a shovel with him. He heads out into the hill, digs a hole in the ground, wraps himself in a sleeping bag and crawls in. The postmaster discovers the boy is missing and goes looking for him. When he finds him, the boy is unresponsive – will not, cannot move from his grave-like hole. So the postmaster picks up the shovel and widens the hole, making room for himself. He crawls into the hole next to the boy.

In the morning, both wake up. The postmaster tells the boy that he loves him deeply, but that the boy is free to refuse his love. But he will not be the boy's second best. In the end, as they are walking back to the village, the boy reaches up and takes the man's hand.

No matter how deep the hole we dig for ourselves, Jesus comes to join us. On the cross, Jesus enters fully into our pain, our alienation. He takes our brokenness unto his broken body. He takes everything we can throw at him. He endures our rejection and refuses to take that rejection as final. This bloody Savior hangs on a cross wounded, naked, exposed to our contempt, and yet, his love for us does not stop. It does not cease to be love. Even when we are at our worst, God's love and compassion are present with us. Even into that dark hole of death he comes, so that we will know that nothing in life or death can ever separate us from his love.

In the center of this church, there is a cross. We don't hide it away, for if there were no cross, we would have nothing to say to the world that it couldn't hear elsewhere. And, even worse, we would cheat the world of the one thing it most needs to hear. That through the cross, Christ is indeed the Savior who has abolished death and brought life.