



Meeting Jesus Again

WHO IS LORD?

Luke 6:46-49

February 6, 2022

During my time as a seminary student in Atlanta, I was exceedingly fortunate to discover a community of colleagues who became a trusted circle of dear friends. In the years since our graduation, we had stayed in touch but only sporadically as our vocational journeys led us to serve congregations literally all over the country. That all changed in March of 2020 when, through the urging of my far wiser spouse, I sent that group a text message suggesting that we gather again, virtually, to reconnect. On many Thursday evenings since late March, we have done just that. The group has been a spiritual lifeline, a source of vocational sustenance—along with the source of lots of raucous laughter and many tender moments over these last two years. Occasionally—or rather regularly—the discussion turns to the state of our profession and the wellbeing of our colleagues. And, each time, together we verbally tally the casualties of these two years. The reality is that *many* of our pastor friends have been part of the great resignation. Some have made the decision to retire early; some have found their way to nonprofits, or academia, or even the business world; and many have resigned with no clear plan for what comes next.

Why? Well, the reasons are as complex as you would expect, but my guess is you could also name many of them. The increased stress of pastoring in a pandemic. Financial concerns and lack of congregational sustainability. The strain of leading in continuous crisis and concomitant criticism. Struggles to connect through screens and across distance. And then, of course, there is the hostility and rancor that dominate discourse in our time. I think it's safe to say that no one responds to a call to ministry hoping to be drawn into intense debate or

caught in the crossfire of conflict, and frankly this has been partly to blame for many of the departures of which I'm aware. As I've discussed this with friends and colleagues, I've heard a phrase repeated so often it's hard to ignore. The phrase is "Preaching Politics." It is most often presented as a complaint or a warning—*We don't like it when you preach politics; we're glad you're here, pastor... Just don't go preaching politics.* Apart from the use of the same language, though, I must say that there is incredible variety about what those words seem to mean, depending on the source of the words. I've heard them from folks on polar opposite sides of hotly debated issues, and I've even heard those words here at Second Church. Can you imagine that?

With that as my background and context this morning, I want to say that this sermon comes with a high-risk warning. I am going to make a bold, controversial political statement this morning. And I'll do it right here early in the sermon in case you'd like to tune out, slip away, or sharpen your axe. Are you ready?

Jesus is Lord. The earliest Christian affirmation, before the council of Nicaea, the formation of the Apostle's Creed, or the conversion of Constantine, consisted of three simple words that put our faith ancestors at odds with the powers of the age and cost many of them their very lives.

Jesus is Lord. Those words constitute a critical challenge to every position we take and perspective we hold.

Jesus is Lord. And if Jesus is Lord, then no one else is Lord, not the emperor in Rome or the chief priests or the gods of Rome or the idols of our own creation.

If Jesus is Lord, then no one else is Lord. Not our political party or chosen ideology, not our financial portfolio or our many possessions, not our desire for comfort and security, not even our future plans or highest aspirations.

Jesus is Lord. It is the most costly and radical political statement we Christians could ever make. It offers us far more freedom and much deeper joy than the false promises of any lesser god. That is, *if* we do more than recite the words or receive the message. If *Jesus is truly Lord*, we will live differently.

And that's precisely what Jesus himself tells his disciples in this morning's text from the Gospel of Luke. In the lessons we've explored the last three weeks, the words we've read are part of a larger set of teachings meant to provide shape and form to the community that Jesus is calling together, a community that is to be set apart from the surrounding world and is to be somehow distinct from the culture outside that community. Here, he highlights the hypocrisy of those who readily call him their Lord but fail to live the truth they speak. Using the vivid image of houses built on different foundations, Jesus contrasts those who act on his teachings with those who merely give pious pronouncements. *Their* faith is like a house of cards always at risk of ruin when the inevitable storms of life approach. *Their* home is not secure, for they have chosen the wrong foundation.

Jesus is Lord. Making that claim, professing that truth, speaking those words, is the beginning of a new life. To honor Jesus Christ as Lord is to reorder your priorities, to reassess your objectives, to reconsider the very trajectory of your life. We do this best when we do it together, becoming part of the community that Jesus intends to shape, leaning on one another as we choose *his* values, his standards whenever they conflict with the ones promoted by any other authority or ideology. We are bold to stand firm and say with one voice: *Jesus is Lord.*

Yes, those words give us that firm foundation on which to build. But we must build. With intention

and focus, brick by brick, we choose the shape of our lives. Discipleship takes form in the daily practices of the followers of Jesus. For us that means choosing forgiveness rather than retribution. It means taking the high road of compassion when it is easier to cast judgment or assign blame. (Let you who are without sin cast that first stone.) It means allowing yourself to be inconvenienced for the good of another, even a stranger. It means considering the lordship of Jesus Christ in every decision you make and each action you take, from the most significant and life-altering to the seemingly most mundane.

In the earliest days of the Christian movement, the followers of Jesus stood out. They stood out first for the strangeness of their gatherings, for everyone was invited regardless of status. They stood out for the depth of their love for one another. The early church father Tertullian, reflecting on the life of the Christian community, said "Those outside the church are always saying, 'See how those Christians love one another? See how they are even willing to die for each other?'" With the words and example of Jesus himself still fresh on their hearts and top of their minds, these disciples, in the words of the Apostle Paul, "were like children of God shining like stars in the midst of a broken and corrupt generation." When we meet Jesus again, we too can shine. We too can be strange, hard to categorize or divide. This is the place where words meet practice, where confessing the lordship of Christ meets choosing that lordship each day. So, I ask you, what does it mean to believe that Jesus Christ is Lord when you are cut off in traffic? What does it mean to believe that Jesus Christ is Lord when you're in line at the grocery store and your four year old won't stop screaming for a candy bar? (I have no experience with that.) What does it mean to believe that Jesus is Lord when you're interacting with a neighbor, a spouse, a child, a stranger, a co-worker, a colleague, an enemy? What does the lordship of Jesus mean about my interactions online, about the words I choose to use, about my willingness to listen to the perspective of another? If Jesus Christ is Lord, what

is my responsibility to care for someone else, to show mercy and grace, to walk lightly on creation, to stretch beyond my comfort zone? What does it mean to say Jesus is Lord when you live in the real world?

I began this morning by suggesting I'd be preaching politics today, and here's what I mean. As individual followers of Jesus, as a congregation, as the Body of Christ, saying Jesus is Lord must change something. It must mean that no one and nothing else has the place of ultimate authority in our lives. And that, my friends, includes our political ideology. Let me speak plainly and personally. One of the most damaging and damning trends in the Christian community over the nearly four decades of my life has been the secularization and politicization of the church. When a word like *evangelical* is only a thin veil for purely political ideology, the church has lost its firm foundation, has weakened its witness, and sold its soul for power and prestige.

I recently read a piece in which a Presbyterian pastor in Washington State was interviewed. He said something that was striking to me because of how utterly unsurprising it was. He said he had heard from many congregants leaving the church because it didn't match their politics, but he has never once heard of someone changing their politics because it didn't match the church's teaching. Just think of that. And before your mind—like my mind—moves in the direction of all those people whose politics you think should change based on the church's teaching, consider for just a moment the possibility that *you* might be one of those people. In fact, may I suggest that if being a reader of scripture, a part of Christian community, and a follower of Jesus does *not* challenge your ideological assumptions (at least occasionally), it's time for some soul searching. When the Church of Jesus Christ can be reduced to the convenient categories of partisan identity, the uniqueness of our voice and the centrality of our mission is compromised. When Christian leaders and congregations trade the clear teachings of Jesus for political power or cultural relevance, we have chosen idol gods. Our decline is deserved.

One of those clear teachings is the command—the mandate—to love our neighbors. Many of you know that, in direct response to that command of Jesus, Second Church has been engaged in working on behalf of our neighbors who live in the Lakeside Pointe apartments at College and 91st streets. *Our neighbors* who live in deplorable and unacceptable conditions. As we've explored how best to serve our neighbors, we've also been asking questions about how a situation like that could happen in our city, and those questions have led us to deeper engagement with community groups working on behalf of tenants and with city leaders who can make meaningful change, including hosting a summit later this spring to explore those issues in depth. Early this week, we received a note from one of those community group leaders. I want to share some of his words because they speak to me of what it looks like when Second Church takes the call of Jesus seriously. It reads, in part, "*Last week, I was telling someone that Second Pres was going to host the summit, and they remarked on the significance of that, observing that if Indianapolis has the equivalent of a protestant cathedral, it's Second Pres. So the impact of having your support...is not lost on us. That's all. Just wanted to make sure you are aware that we are aware of the importance of Second Presbyterian. I am extremely grateful.*"

Today we host the annual meeting for the 184th time in the history of Second Presbyterian Church. And as I read his words, I thought of the countless times over those nearly two centuries when this congregation has made faithful use of its voice and influence to work toward the world God intended for all, beginning right outside our own doors. The examples are literally too numerous to name, and we don't need to commend ourselves this morning. Here's the point. The point is that confessing the lordship of Jesus Christ means living *his* way in this world. The point is that the role of a cathedral is to be a church *for* the city—a church *for* the community. That has *always* been our call.

When the earliest followers of Jesus made the claim, *Jesus is Lord*, they were explicitly rejecting anything

that asks for total devotion. They were explicitly rejecting anyone who requires complete allegiance. They were explicitly rejecting any label that demands to be our primary identity marker, any conviction that requires us to subordinate our faith and our commitment to living as Jesus' disciple.

Jesus is Lord. That claim is costly when so many so-called lords compete for our devotion and attention, when we are tempted to bow down at the altars of self-righteous finger-pointing and the adrenaline rush of permanent outrage. But if we build our lives, and our church, on this truth, I assure you not even the rising waters of deceitful lies or the roaring rivers of rage will be able to shake our firm foundation. Will we be bold enough, in this consequential moment, to stand firm in the face of disruption and distraction, division and duplicity? Will we be bold enough to build a church that points the way to what so many are seeking in our time—transcendent truth, abundant life, deep compassion, broad welcome? Will we be bold enough to build and be that church? The truth is that only God knows, and only time will tell. But of at least this much I am certain: Right here, at Second Presbyterian Church, we have the foundation, the capacity, and the clear God-given call to build that Church, to *be* that Church, to proclaim with one united voice and in many diverse actions, “*Jesus is Lord.*” Amen.