

Duke Memorial United Methodist Church  
Durham, NC  
10:55 a.m. Sunday, June 26, 2005

Text: Acts 4:1-12    Ephesians 4:11-16    NRSV

Goal: To persuade the congregation to honor Jesus as Lord.

Central thought: When Jesus is at the center of our lives and our church, we honor him as Lord.

"Jesus at the Center"

Opening prayer: O Jesus, our Savior, who loved us enough to die for us, open our hearts to your message, so that we may honor you as the Lord of our lives. Amen.

JESUS IS LORD

Missionaries journeyed to a primitive tribe in the jungles of East Asia to show them the *Jesus* film. Not only had these people never heard of Jesus, they had never seen a motion picture. All at once, in one unforgettable evening, they saw it all -- the gospel in their own language.

Imagine again how it felt to see this good man Jesus heal the sick and teach the children. They saw him being held without a trial and beaten by jeering soldiers. As they watched this, the people became unglued. They stood up and began to shout at the cruel men on the screen. They demanded that this outrage stop.

When nothing happened, they attacked the missionary running the projector. Perhaps he was responsible for this injustice! He was forced to stop the film and explain that the story wasn't over yet. There was more. So they settled back onto the ground.

Then came the crucifixion. Again, the people could not hold back. They began

to weep and wail with such loud grief that once again the film had to be stopped. The missionary again tried to calm them. He explained that the story still wasn't over, that there was more. So they composed themselves and sat down to see what happened next.

Then came the resurrection. Pandemonium broke loose this time, but for a different reason. The gathering spontaneously erupted into a party. The noise now was of jubilation, and it was deafening. The people were dancing and slapping each other on the back. Jesus was alive!

Those people in East Asia came alive in worship! They experienced the power of the life and message of Jesus Christ. The same thing can happen here. Jesus is alive in Durham, too.

When Jesus is at the center of our lives and our church, we honor him as Lord. What changes do you need to make in your life for Jesus to be your Lord? Your Lord all the time.

Some people today select a god as if they're choosing a car. They seek the kind of god who will bring them to a comfortable place, who will reduce risk, and help them achieve their desired future. They seek safe gods. Some people serve a weekend god. What they do in church has no relationship to how they behave during the week. Many people serve a god who won't interfere in their daily routines. A widespread attitude is that what I do in private should be of no concern to God. Wrong! That's not the way it is when Jesus is Lord.

Our scripture lesson today tells about an encounter between Peter and John and the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. The Jewish leaders are upset because Peter and John are preaching about Jesus and his resurrection. Thousands of people are being converted. Then a lame man who went to the Temple every day to beg for alms is

healed in an encounter with Peter and John. Peter tells the Jewish leaders that the lame man was healed by the name of Jesus Christ. Then he continues, “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12)

The Jewish leaders order Peter and John to stop preaching about Jesus. Peter and the other apostles reply, “We must obey God rather than any human authority.” (Acts 5:29)

The first Christian creed was simply “Jesus is Lord!” The early Christians were considered rigid in their devotion to Jesus Christ and their insistence on his uniqueness in God’s plan of salvation. Throughout the New Testament we find a clear witness to Jesus’ identity as God’s unique Son and his absolute authority as the governing Lord of the universe. The early Christians had a clear conviction that Jesus was different from any other person who ever lived. They were so convinced that they were willing to lay down their lives for this man. They were shunned, persecuted, thrown out of the Temple and imprisoned.

In the first century, Lord meant the one who had absolute authority. Caesar was the only person who could be called Lord with a capital “L.” The typical greeting on the street in the Roman empire would include the affirmation, “Caesar is Lord.” The response: “Yes, Caesar is truly Lord.” It was the law. If you refused to voice this greeting, you found yourself at the Coliseum, and it wasn’t to watch a football game.

The Roman historian Eusebius recorded a conversation between Justin, a first-century Christian, and a Roman official named Rusticus. Rusticus said, “To come to the point then, are you a Christian?” Justin replied, “Yes, I am a Christian.”

Rusticus continued, “Let us now come to the pressing matter in hand. Agree together and sacrifice with one accord to the gods.” Justin replied, “No one who is

rightly minded turns from true belief to false.”

Rusticus warned him, “If you do not obey, you shall be punished without mercy.” Justin proclaimed, “If we are punished for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ we hope to be saved. Do what you will. For we are Christians and offer no sacrifice to idols.” Then Rusticus ordered Justin to be executed.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran theologian and pastor who lived in Germany during Adolf Hitler’s rise to power and World War II. He was eventually executed for his faith in a Nazi concentration camp. In a series of lectures titled “Christ the Center,” Bonhoeffer said, “We may have to come face to face with Goethe or Socrates. . . But far more depends upon our confronting Christ -- life or death, salvation or damnation. . . All rests upon the sentence, ‘And there is salvation in no one else.’ (4:12) The encounter with Jesus is fundamentally different from that with Goethe or Socrates. One cannot avoid encounter with the person of Jesus because he is alive. With some care Goethe can be avoided, because he is dead.” People have tried to evade an encounter with Jesus in a thousand ways.

Bonhoeffer is saying that we will encounter Jesus one way or another. What changes do we need to make to put Jesus at the center of our lives, to make him our Lord?

## OUR TURN TO SERVE

When Jesus is at the center of our lives and our church, we honor him as Lord. When Jesus is at the center of our lives, we use all that we have for him. We use our talents, time and money in ways that honor him.

In the apostle Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, he writes that all Christians have spiritual gifts. We all have spiritual gifts and talents. We all have time. We all have money. The question becomes: “What are we going to do with it?” That is the primary

stewardship question.

Paul writes, “We must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.” (Ephesians 4:15-16) When each part of the church is working properly, we grow in Christ. We grow in love. We grow in numbers.

Paul says that the best way for us to fulfill this mission is for everyone to be involved. Paul describes it “each part working properly.”

What does it take for each part to be “working properly”? It takes people who have accepted Jesus as their Savior and Lord. This is first and foremost. It takes people who pray and study the Bible and attend worship services regularly. It takes people who demonstrate they are committed to this mission by sharing their time, talents and financial resources. It takes people who develop relationships with others in the church and who are helping in a significant area of Christian service. When this happens, Jesus is at the center of our church. We fulfill our mission.

When we commissioned Stephen Ministers two weeks ago, Jesus was at the center. We commissioned them to honor and obey Jesus Christ. We commissioned them to minister to others with Christian love. During Vacation Bible School, Jesus was at the center. We taught students how to live with biblical, Christian values – how to honor and obey Jesus. When we commission the youth work team to West Virginia later in this service, Jesus is at the center. We will send them off to honor and obey Jesus and to serve other people in his name.

Winston Churchill became prime minister of Great Britain at a very grave and perilous time. Nazi Germany had conquered most of Europe, and it appeared that they were about to invade England. Churchill’s leadership and courage directed Great Britain to victory in World War II. Later Churchill had this to say about that opportunity:

“There comes a special moment in everyone’s life, a moment for which that person was born. That special opportunity, when he seizes it, will fulfill his mission -- a mission for which he is uniquely qualified. In that moment, he finds greatness. It is his finest hour.”

Have you ever felt that? A time when you used the gifts and abilities God gave you to accomplish something very significant? For us to fulfill our individual missions in life as Christians, Jesus has to be at the center. We have to proclaim, “Jesus is Lord!” and then live it. It is the greatest adventure of life.

In the film *St. John in Exile*, the apostle John has been exiled to the Isle of Patmos. He tells of the faithfulness unto death of his fellow apostles, those earliest believers in Jesus.

“It began with Stephen when Paul, not yet a Christian, had him stoned in the streets of Jerusalem. James was next, beheaded for preaching the risen Christ in the temple. Matthias -- tied to a cross, draped with carrion, eaten by vultures. Thadddeus -- crucified and shot to death with arrows.

“Nathanael was skinned alive and crucified in double agony. Philip was hanged from the column of a Greek temple. Andrew crucified in Egypt. Matthew beheaded in Alexandria. Mark dragged to death behind a chariot. James Alphaeus thrown from Herod’s temple roof. Thomas speared by a mob. Simon the Zealot sawed to pieces alive.

“Peter and Paul were taken to Rome. Paul beheaded on the Appian Way. Peter was forced to watch his beloved wife crucified on Vatican Hill. All through her agony he called out to her, ‘O thou beloved, remember Christ. Remember Christ.’ Peter felt unworthy to die as Jesus had, so he asked to be and was crucified with his head downward.

“Beloved, if someone comes to you and says, ‘I will believe your gospel if you

can give me one proof,' tell them, tell them of these ordinary men who overturned the world and proclaimed to the very end, some from their very own crosses, the life-giving truth of the triumphant, risen Christ."

They proclaimed and lived with Jesus as Lord. What about us? What changes do we need to make for Jesus to be our Lord? Changes in our attitudes? Changes in our relationships? In our use of time, our abilities, our money?

Today I invite you to make Jesus the Lord of your life. It may be the first time for you or you may be reaffirming your commitment.

Jesus tells us "I will never leave you nor forsake you." It is not based on our success or failure. Jesus says, "Nothing can separate you from my love." Embrace all that Jesus Christ has for you. There is salvation in no other name. Live forever in Jesus' name -- but make your decision now.

Come and kneel or stand at the chancel rail and pray to God as we sing our final hymn. Frank and I will be glad to pray with you. Simply kneel beside one of us as we pray.