

Introduction: Liberate Jesus

Who do you say that I am?

–Matthew 16:15

Diana opens by telling the story of hearing Jesus say to her “Get me out of here” while kneeling at the altar during a worship service at the Washington National Cathedral.

“Jesus spoke to me almost a decade ago. It was not completely unusual, as I have heard whispers from the sacred in prayer, walking along the beach, in the wind, or while meditating. Having God or the universe or my own inner voice speak to me in such ways is really no big deal. Until that day at the cathedral, however, I had never heard as out-loud, clear God-voice arising from something other than my own spiritual intuitions, especially one issuing a completely unexpected directive like, ‘Get me out of here’... Truthfully, I did not know how to respond.”

“During the intervening years, millions of Americans have left the church behind, probably many more have left emotionally, and countless others are wondering if they should. One of the most consistent things I hear from those who have left, those doubting their faith, and those just hanging on is that church or Christianity has failed them, wounded them, betrayed them, or maybe just bored them—and they do not want to have much to do with it any longer.”

It is common to hear people say, “I’ve left the church, but I still want to follow Jesus.”

“Ecclesiastically approved theology will not let you separate Jesus from the church. But the millions of those who have done so beg to differ. They are more than content to have fled institutional Christianity, deconstructing their faith and disrupting conventional notions of church. Even while exiting the building, however, some of these religious refugees seem to have heard that same voice I did at the altar, ‘Get me out of here,’ and are trying to free Jesus that he might roam in the world with them.”

There are also, of course, those who continue to stay and work within the church who hear Jesus pleading to be freed from many of the social and cultural restraints often placed on him and his teachings.

The sense that somehow, weather inside the church or out, the person and message of Jesus have become captive to forces that are at odds with what he had to say has become a commonplace in contemporary North American Christianity. From this perspective Jesus needs to be released from this ecclesial and cultural captivity. But what does it really mean to set Jesus free?

The discussions and debates between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith have shaped the conversation about Jesus since the nineteenth century.

“Understanding the Jesus of history has proved helpful (and even life-giving) for me; and I appreciate the theological traditions surrounding the Christ of faith. Yet neither historical scholarship nor conventional doctrine quite captures who Jesus is for me—the skepticism bred by one and the submissiveness inculcated by the other do not fully tell the story of the Jesus I know: the *Jesus of experience*.

Well before I studied Jesus the Jewish peasant or worshipped Christ the King, I *knew* Jesus. Even as a small child, I knew his name. I had a sense of his companionship. I know he was the heart of Christian faith. Although I now understand both history and theology, neither intellectual arguments nor ecclesial authority elucidates the Jesus I have known.”

“I love sharing stories; and I love listening to others’ stories. There is a way—maybe even the way—we can live together in this diverse and divided world—learning from each other’s stories. Even stories of Jesus. My story can never be your story...But my story might inform yours, or be like yours, or maybe even add depth or another dimension to yours. If nothing else, sharing our stories might lead to greater understanding, tolerance, appreciation, and perhaps even celebration of our differences.”

“This is not a story about a fundamentalist, liberal, orthodox, unconventional, demythologized, or liberationist Jesus (even though some of those Jesuses show up in this tale). Instead, this is a story of the Jesus of experience, who shows up consistently and when least expected.

“Your six Jesuses may be different, or they may be the same but in a different order. Perhaps you have known eight or ten Jesuses. Or maybe you have known only one and are looking to know that Jesus more deeply or anew. Whatever the case, you are welcome here—to this story of Jesus, a rediscovery of the Jesus who is liberated from constraint and whose company releases the possibility of peace, healing, and compassion in our lives and for our world.”

Questions for Discussion

- What do you think of Diana’s story about hearing Jesus say “Get me out of here” at the altar of the Washington National Cathedral? Does it resonate with your own experience? Why or why not?
- What is your reaction to those who say, I’ve left the church, but I still want to follow Jesus? Does this make sense to you? Why or why not?
- How do you understand the differences between the Jesus of history, the Christ of faith, and the Jesus of experience? Do these differences matter to you in your own experience?
- Who is Jesus for you? What Jesuses have you known? What is the Jesus story you have to tell?
- What did you learn?