

# Pat Conover: Making God Manifest

Sermon for Seekers Church

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Pat Conover

Scriptures: [Proverbs 22:8-9](#); [Mark 7: 24-37](#)

## Making God Manifest

A long time ago, far, far away, in a worldview where the earth is flat and the sky is a bowl of the heavens with holes to let the rainfall, God was very near. God is so close in the sky that if you climb a mountain, or even a tall tree, like the cedars of Lebanon, you feel a lot closer to God. How could anyone from such a distant and weird place be a savior for us?

Besides, who needs salvation anyhow? I am grown up enough in my theology to recognize that atonement is the wrong answer to a dumb question. I recognize that the questions about life after death and questions about the end of the world by supernatural act are distractions from attending to and celebrating the life we have. I realize that I have to do my theological work as a creature and not with the pretension of looking over God's shoulder. I may have something of the image of God in me, but I am not God, and I cannot look over God's shoulder and see creation as God sees it.

If salvation is going to matter, we need to talk about the salvation we need right now, our personal salvation and our common salvation. To approach the Bible and the history of Christian faith with these here-and-now questions honors what the human Jesus brings us as a prophet and a healer. It honors

what Jesus reveals of God, clarifies the meanings of the language "Jesus as my savior," of "incarnation," of "the church as the ongoing 'Body of Christ,'" and of Jesus as the Christ: the "face of God," the "manifestation of God among us," a part of God, a member of the Trinity. When we have weeded our theological garden with the question, "Why does salvation matter?", we can let a lot of biblical and theological distractions become mere footnotes to the history of the development of Christian faith and theology.

When we remember the humility of doing our theology as human creatures, when we give away the pretensions of special revelation and prize what is available to all who seek, when we let the impenetrable mysteries be mysteries, when we trust God to be God and focus on celebrating the life we have been given, and especially when we appreciate the gifts of sensing love, justice, and truth then we are ready to learn from Jesus, ready to be healed by Jesus, and ready to share the work that has been left to us by Jesus. Then we are ready to let Jesus be Jesus and to meet him with the concerns that matter to us.

I had the experience of backing off from Jesus in my youth because the First Presbyterian Church of Tallahassee, where I was baptized in as a teen, was a doctrinal church in which the minister and all the lay assistants told us the official answers to life's important questions, such as the difference between holding hands, kissing, necking, petting, "going too far," and "having intercourse." At most, we were allowed to ask questions about how to interpret and apply the answers. The church forbade even square dancing. On the other hand, it sponsored long hayrides with lots of hay. Mary Gayle Rehbaum and I did some homework to clarify the distinctions of interest to us. The church understood itself to be the custodian of revealed truth and that the primary job of the preacher was to guard against error and heresy.

I was taught that the interesting action of God was in the

past and that I was supposed to learn about that and learn how to apply that. Nevertheless, I was raised in my family to think for myself. I asked two kinds of questions that the First Presbyterian Church of Tallahassee could not answer when I was a teen: Why couldn't the church deal with the hot issue of racial integration? What about all the contradictory stuff in the Bible, when you just picked it up and read it?

Later the church got a pastor who could deal with biblical scholarship and who was willing to take up the race issue. However, by then I was on my questioning path. I studied the Bible in college and in seminary and I learned that it was fine to think about the Bible and ask all the reasonable questions about what it means and how do you know.

I found the study of Hebrew scripture far more interesting than the study of the New Testament. I filled in great big chunks of my ignorance. I learned that a Christianity that tries to ground itself only in the New Testament, as if Hebrew scripture was second rate or only preliminary for the "good stuff," was highly limited and tended to be ugly about Jews. My father was ardent in challenging anti-Semitism and I really wish he had lived long enough so that I could have shared adult conversation with him. To simplify matters, I learned that it really mattered that Jesus was a Jew.

I was bored with my New Testament studies. I learned that it was hard to know very much about Jesus from the New Testament because what we had were gospels written later by authors who were telling stories to fit their purposes. I was not very interested in the theological purposes of the gospel writers with their focus on atonement and their projections about the end of the world. I felt that Jesus lived a long time ago, in a world view far, far, away and that he was, at best, misunderstood by disciples who were answering questions and writing gospels with questions that were not my questions. I settled for knowing that Jesus was a prophet, knowing that Jesus was a healer, and I found that a commitment to truth and

to health can take you a long way in life.

I got back into New Testament scholarship about ten years ago and I have found it to be far more interesting, both in the questions being addressed and in the research being done. There is so much more to work with these days than what was available when I was in my twenties. One big example is the archeological discovery of the city of Sepphoris, which was just a couple of miles from Nazareth. This one discovery broke down a big scholarly tradition of the 1960s. Instead of seeing Galilee as a cultural backwater, an eddy of Jewishness outside of the complex culture of the Roman Empire, we now see Jesus as exposed to the full range of First Century thought. Sure, Jesus was a Jew, but he was not hidden away from the rest of the world. Among other things, this means that it is fully reasonable to ask about how Jesus dealt with life in the midst of empire and suddenly he does not seem so long ago or far away.

[In my last sermon](#), I took you into the break open potential of challenging myths with parables, learning to see what the powers and principalities do not want you to see, learning to see what is life giving even if it is uncomfortable.

Let me show you how it works with the lectionary scripture assigned for today.

Let us start with Proverbs 22: 8-9. Like most of Proverbs, it is a bit of ethical guidance. It says, "Do not mistreat a poor wretch in court." This is just the sort of advice that Jesus would have loved. It goes great with the Sermon on the Mount. It is a great scripture for my work as a policy advocate. There is a world of work to do with the contemporary judicial world in the United States that is so biased against the poor in providing access to justice. Right now, for example, the president is pushing for legislation that would take away the right to overtime pay for 7 million salaried workers.

Did you notice that I was picking up on the proverb as someone who is interested in system change rather than first of all just standing with the poor wretch in court? It can be a whole lot easier to apply an abstract principle like equal justice for all than to take the additional step of reaching for solidarity with those who are denied justice because they are poor. That adds sharing the pain to just doing the right thing.

Now let us turn to the Mark's story of the Syro-Phoenician woman. It begins when she comes to plead with Jesus to cast out a demon from her daughter. Then the story takes an interesting turn. It is unlike most of the healing stories in the synoptic gospels. Jesus responds, "Let the children be satisfied first. It is not right to throw the children's bread to the dogs." The woman is quick. She says, "Even dogs under the table are allowed to eat the scraps." Jesus replies, "For saying that, go, and you will find the demon has left your daughter."

In the Matthew version of this story, the line about letting the children be satisfied first becomes, "My ministry is to the lost sheep of Israel."

There is good reason to think that this is not historical reporting of a real event, at least not as reported here. The focus of the story on the role of Jesus in relationship to the Gentiles is relevant to a big battle in the early church after the death of Jesus. The followers of Jesus in Jerusalem, first led by Peter and then by James the brother of Jesus, opposed Paul and others who were transforming Christianity for a Gentile audience and then providing support for Gentile congregations. Efforts to see this story in such a context are interesting because you can read the story in a couple of different ways as it relates to the post-Jesus ecclesiological fight.

You can also read this story as another healing story, where

faith and persistence in seeking health is rewarded. Such a story might well be an original story on which this ecclesiological fight was hung.

You can read it as a simple story of a woman's faith, or as a story of her courage in approaching a leader of a group she did not belong to, as a story of her caring for her child enough to take a risk, or perhaps as a story of desperation because she felt she had nothing to lose.

You can read this as a triumphalist story of the early church where the whole world is coming to recognize the reputation and importance of Jesus, but I would assess such a reading as, at best, a miserable mistake of the disciples.

I rather like this as a story of a foreign woman teaching Jesus a lesson in humility. It is one of those moments when the grandiose mythologizing of the gospels is punctured.

Here is a parable to tell you what I think is most saving about this story. "The Empire of God is like a lay woman who preached a sermon in a fine established church. She was one of the least prestigious people in the church and she only got to preach because it was Laity Sunday and no one else volunteered. Many of the people in the church did not like her sermon and they got up and walked out on her. The next Sunday none of those who had walked out were allowed to enter the church until they apologized to her and many went away and did not come back.

[Pause]

Jesus is my savior; Jesus is our savior because he can help us look at things we want to avoid. He can help us to go for the deeper truths, the deeper healings, the deeper community. He can help us to go for the solidarity with others that is deeper and richer than justice is but has no hope without a radical commitment to justice, and to what Seekers call the "underbelly" questions that lead to a community that is more

than friendship and good will.

And. "Salvation is like a tick. It waits patiently on its leaf for a lifetime until that which is lifegiving comes along. Then it grabs hold with all its strength, whatever the risk."

Salvation is like a tick.