

Truth in Advertising
Mark 10:32-45; Isaiah 53:7-12
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights
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I'd like to start the message this morning with an observation. It's not scientific, and I don't really have any proof, but check me out on this: it seems to me that there are two schools of thought when it comes to sharing the Good News of Jesus' love with people in our world. There are two types of evangelism that I've seen – two types, frankly, that I've seen way too often.

The first approach to inviting people to consider an eternal relationship with their creator could be called the “turn or burn, baby” method. Using this approach, the evangelist implores his or her hearers to consider the abject sinfulness of their lives. Listeners are urged to clean up their acts and to become holier people – leave sin behind, straighten up and fly right, and become the kind of people that God can like a little better. In these people's minds, evangelism begins with calling people to repentance, which in their minds seems to mean giving up sin and becoming nice.

The second approach could be referred to as “Jesus is the answer”. In the 1970's gospel singer Andrae Crouch sang this refrain over and over again, and I have known people who have turned to Jesus because they were simply tired of all of the problems in their lives. Their marriages were miserable, or they didn't have any focus, or there was financial difficulty. Whatever the problem was, Jesus had come to make it better. An evangelist who subscribes to this school of thought might say that you should become a Christian because it will help you get rid of, or at least deal with, your problems better.

I am not here to belittle anyone who is talking about a relationship with Christ, but it seems to me that it's time for a little truth in advertising. The way of discipleship, at least as it is described in the Gospel of Mark, has little connection with either the “turn or burn” crowd or the “Jesus is the answer” folks. Today, we join up with Jesus and his disciples as they are on the way to Jerusalem. Most faithful Jewish men in that day and age tried to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover meal. No doubt, that's what the twelve disciples thought was going on, in spite of Jesus' attempts to speak of it in other terms.

This passage from Mark 10 contains the third of Jesus' predictions about his own suffering and death. In Mark 8:31ff, right after Peter's confession that Jesus is in fact the Holy One sent by God, Jesus reveals to his most faithful followers that he will suffer and die. Then in Mark 9:30ff, the group is still basking in the glow of the Transfiguration and the healing of a boy who suffered from seizures. Jesus calls them out of that into a consideration of his impending struggle. In each of these prior circumstances, the disciples don't have a clue. They just can't figure out what Jesus is talking about – how can he be the Messiah and die? That's just crazy talk.

He's back at it today – he's just laid two heavy teachings on them – one about marriage and divorce and sexual ethics and the other about money. And then he says pretty explicitly that when they get to Jerusalem, he will be forced to go through a sham trial, he'll be beaten and killed, and he'll rise on the third day. In spite of the apparently obvious nature of this prediction, James and John start to daydream about how good it's going to be when Jesus starts to act like the king. Despite the fact that the last two times when he's brought this up, he's had to quell any talk about who's going to be in charge when Jesus shakes up Jerusalem, James and John get so wound up in their discussion that it actually seems like a good idea to them to call "dibs" on the best seats in Jesus' kingdom.

These guys don't get it. We know that because Jesus looks at them and says, "You fellas just don't get it, do you?" But then look at what happens next. He doesn't yell at them. He doesn't scold them. He simply goes on to suggest that they really don't know what the kingdom will be like. They can't imagine the crown he'll be wearing – a crown made of thorns, crushed into his skull. They haven't the foggiest notion about what is waiting for Jesus on the hill known as Calvary, where he would be nailed to a tree and hung out to die. And then, gently, he says, "You don't understand anything at all about the cup that I will drink, but you will – because you will share that cup."

And it's not just James and John who don't get it. When the ten other disciples hear that James and John are trying to claim the best spots at the messianic inauguration, they are upset! I suppose you could make the claim that these guys were really looking out for Jesus here and were indignant by the shallow request...but I think that Mark's pretty clear that they were irritated because if Jesus did end up giving James & John the two best seats in the house, where were they supposed to sit?

And again, Jesus sits them down and invites them to a time of teaching wherein he is gentle and patient. He's not belittling them, he's not berating them, and he's not telling them to straighten up and fly right. Instead, he's trying to help them re-shape their expectations. He's hanging in there with them.

Why? Why is he responding like this?

Well, let's be honest. This isn't the first time that the twelve disciples appear to be slow, dimwitted, selfish, ambitious, and thick-headed. But they are following Jesus. They may not grasp all of the details concerning this coming kingdom. But they are following Jesus. They are not following Jesus because they want his help in getting rid of a few bad habits, and they are not following him because it's easier than whatever it was that they used to do before they followed him. But they **are** following Jesus.

And listen to this: if the first readers of Mark's gospel knew anything about following Jesus, it was this: following Jesus can really screw up your life. After all, the book is written by a man who is jail, on death row, for preaching about Jesus. The early Christians in Rome were used as human torches at Nero's garden

parties. So far as we can tell none of the twelve disciples, with the possible exception of John, died of natural causes. And those first Christians who were not killed were treated as outcasts – they were told over and over again that they did not belong with the Jewish believers, and the Gentiles thought they were crazy – they called them cannibals and incestuous. Following Jesus will screw with your head and could really mess up your life.

In the summer of 1993, I took a group of young people from the church in New York on a mission trip to Mexico. Two weeks after that trip, I left the church there and moved to Pittsburgh. About five months later, I got a really thick envelope from one of the kids. I tore open the envelope, expecting to hear sunny news about her life. Instead, I read,

Dear Dave, I just wanted to thank you for totally ruining my senior year of High School. My whole life, I've looked forward to this year, where we'd be on top. My friends and I had all kinds of plans for how we were going to rule the school, and for Prom and Homecoming and parties. But the trip to Mexico changed all that. My friends are materialistic and selfish and thoughtless – they can't get their heads out of their butts to save their lives. The things that they want are so small...of course, all of that was true last year, too – *only I didn't know that last year*. The trip to Mexico really opened my eyes, and showed me that I am materialistic and selfish and thoughtless – and I hate that about myself. Why can't I be lazy and happy like my friends? But no, I have to care now. I have to think about other people. That mission trip really screwed up everything about my senior year....

Do you see? She got it! Yay! She had thought about going to church all her life...but here she was thinking about following Jesus! The good thing is that the letter was ten pages long, and by about page eight or nine, she had gotten past some of the anger and had decided that if she had to choose between being selfish and materialistic and following Jesus, she'd rather be with Jesus...but it was a struggle. Because when she took Jesus seriously, she didn't fit in anywhere.

Beloved, if you are here expecting me to scold you into the Kingdom of God, it's not going to happen. I don't think that the reason that Jesus came was so that you wouldn't drink quite as much, or so you would think about sex a little less often, or write to your grandmother more. If you need to hear someone say that it's time to turn or burn, baby, well, that's not likely to happen here.

And if you are here because your life is miserable and you think that somehow I can help lobby Jesus onto your side so that you have fewer problems – if you think that if you are able to get yourself cleaned up a little bit then Jesus will reward you with a new car, a better boyfriend, or whiter teeth, well, I'm sorry to disappoint you.

Because as far as I can see, Jesus is not primarily interested in having a

group of followers who are holier than everyone else, if by holy we mean people who smoke less, or cuss less, or fornicate less than the general population. Jesus didn't come to make us nicer.

And as far as I can see, Jesus is not primarily interested in having a group of followers who are richer, or better employed, or have fresher breath or fewer neuroses than the general population. He didn't come to make us more socially acceptable.

Jesus came to be the ransom. To give his life so that we might have real life. Jesus came to be God for humanity and to be humanity for God. And in these last few weeks before his death, he is imploring the twelve to stick with him. He's not promising them anything, and he's not threatening them. He's asking them to stay the course because that is the only way that they will be able to become the community that he is calling them to be. For a couple of years, he has taught them "the Kingdom of God is at hand". Now he is equipping them to *be the kingdom!* To enflesh that Kingdom in the world! To be the sign of God's presence in and through creation.

In the Presbyterian Church we are governed by the Bible and a document called *The Book of Order*. In the very beginning of that book, it says this about the church: "The Church of Jesus Christ is the provisional demonstration of what God intends for all of humanity...called to be a sign in and for the world of the new reality which God has made available to people in Jesus Christ." (G-3.0200) In fact, one of the oldest parts of our *Book of Order* says that the church exists in order to be "the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world." (G-1.0200)

I love that! It tells the truth that the only way that your neighbors or mine will know what God is like is if the church demonstrates it. The only way that the world will know of the grace, truth, forgiveness, service, and sacrificial love of the Savior is if somehow the body of Christ – that's us – is able to exhibit that grace, truth, forgiveness, service, and sacrificial love.

When the twelve don't get it – here in Mark chapter ten, or for their whole lives – Jesus doesn't call them morons and tell them to hit the road. No, he calls them together and invites them to try again and to lean on each other and to stick together – because the only way that they'll be able to make it in the world is if they do stick together.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, where he will do something incredibly difficult. It will take everything he has. And he is asking his followers to stay with him when it happens. And to take over for him when he leaves.

Discipleship is hard work, my friends. It would be easy if all we had to do was steal a little less often or budget our money a little better. But it's all of who we are. Discipleship is not a part-time job. The only way for me to give all of who I am is if I can count on you to help me where I am coming up short. I can be forgiving if you forgive me. I can be gracious if you show me grace. I can love

unconditionally if you do that for me. I can give my life away...if you come, too.

More than a hundred years ago, the evangelist Henry Varley said, "The world has yet to see what God can do with a man who is wholly committed to Him." Forty years later, G.K. Chesterton said, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried."

Beloved, we are called to be committed. We are called to live the Christian ideal – that of following Christ. Obviously, Jesus is concerned with your personal life and your habits. Obviously, Jesus is concerned with your lifestyle and choices. But they are not a precondition to becoming disciples – those things are matters for discussion with him once you are on the road. Let us join each other in this holy, wholly difficult task of following the Master as we love and serve those among whom he has placed us. God bless you. Amen.