

“The Jesus Problem”

Luke 9:57-62

June 27, 2010

Like most of you, I get a lot of email every week – religious warm fuzzies, political rants, some really funny jokes, and my personal favorite...web links to strange news. Let me tell you, in 2010, there's a lot of it out there. One email sent me to a story about a shop owner in Tokyo who got unusually fed up with people window-shopping. He got fed up with people wandering into his store, looking around to see what was there, touching all of his merchandise, trying it on, and then wandering back out. And so he put up a sign in the front window that said that if you are *just browsing*, you are NOT welcome and you are prohibited from entering. He was serious.

One day a woman came in, saw a jacket that she really liked, tried it on, held it up and looked at it for several minutes, hung it back up on the rack and began to head for the exit. That shop owner physically stopped her from leaving the store and demanded that she apologize for not buying the coat. How dare he? Yet, his harsh stance was so forceful that the woman made a down payment on the jacket.

Now Jesus was not one to force people into anything, but I do believe that he, too, got tired of window shoppers. Because in this passage in Luke, we find people browsing Jesus to see what he had to offer. Some of them get excited and very quickly try Jesus on for size, but Jesus' basic response to those people was: "If you're not completely ready to buy the whole shebang, then get out!" How dare he?

That's a problem! It's not a problem with the story like an interpretive problem or a textual problem. The problem here is actually Jesus. Perhaps that's a strange statement for a preacher to make. My job, you would think is to preach along the lines of the bumper sticker that says, "Jesus is the answer." You will notice that I have no such sticker on my little CRV, but you find me a bumper sticker that says "Jesus is the problem" and I just might slap it on. In fact, I might just park in the hospital clergy spaces with pride.

Maybe it is different for all of you, but when I am following Jesus most closely, I find more questions, more challenges, and fewer answers. Of course, if I've done any reading in the gospels, that should be what I expect, but it still surprises me. Like the first fellow in our passage – sees the disciples and Jesus headed down the road and makes the decision right then and there to walk the aisle. Strike up the band with "I Surrender All." I will follow you wherever you go! But Jesus turned and said to him: "Let me tell you about the compensation plan I offer. There isn't any. And you know how lots of businesses have break rooms for their workers to drink coffee? We don't. In fact, you'll be thirsty and dirty most of the time. No signing bonuses. No Christmas bonuses. No sick leave. No summers off. No longevity pay. Jesus offered none of things that we'd usually expect, and the Bible doesn't tell us what happened. Did the man sign on with Jesus, or did he just walk away? What would you do?

And what would you do if Jesus took the more direct approach like in the next verse? He points at another man and says, "Follow me." And the man gives a good response. "Yes, yes, Lord. But first let me go back and bury my father." It is a reasonable request. But of all things, Jesus – the Son of God – says, "Forget it. Leave the dead to bury the dead. You, come with me." The man just lost his father. Where is Jesus' compassion? And, where is Jesus' appreciation for sacred, God-given duties – burial of the dead was a religious duty above all others. As a Jew, Jesus knew the importance of this ritual. How dare he? Again, the Bible doesn't tell us what that man did. Did he go with Jesus, or did he walk away? What would you do?

Jesus is the problem. It is stories like these when such unrealistic expectations come out of his mouth that he goes too far. I mean, religion is OK. In fact, the Ladies Home Journal recently reported that a LITTLE prayer and such makes you healthier. But, the article did not say anything about leaving a loved one unburied. That's extreme. We have watched enough news to know that we do NOT want to be labeled as extreme when it comes to faith. We aim for moderation, right? Everything in moderation! Don't look so innocent – I hear that phrase a lot when I catch you with an adult beverage at Skylines. Everything in moderation, Rev.

But one of the classic statements about moderation in the Bible is found in the book of Revelation – 3:16-17. There Jesus says, "I wish you were hot or that you were cold. But since you're lukewarm, I'm going to spit you out of my mouth." How dare he?

So, I've been thinking about moderation and its appeal. I understand it in terms of physical exercise. You exercise too much, you hurt yourself. I understand it in terms of eating, you eat too much, you hurt yourself. I understand it in terms of work, you work too much, you hurt yourself. But, faith? In moderation? You may read the God Squad advice column in the News and Observer with Rabbi Marc Gellman. He answers reader questions on all kinds of faith issues. He recently addressed a reader who works for a cemetery and was angry that he had trouble finding clergy to officiate at funerals when families wanted a minister to say a few words. I was curious as to what Rabbi Gellman would say. He talked about the church's responsibility to serve the general community. He talked about how most clergy will respond to need –and we do, but then he addressed an issue that most of us don't touch with a ten foot pole – so I'll use his words to describe it: "the shocking arrogance of people who do nothing to support their local houses of worship, yet expect them to be available for rites of passage whenever needed." He went on, "There's no shame in not supporting your local church or synagogue if you're not religious and don't plan to avail yourself of its comfort and prayers. However, if you do expect to need such services in the future, the time to extend your support is now. I don't like houses of worship being thought of as fee-for-service institutions. However...for people to be "free riders" is morally indefensible and spiritually limited." How dare he?

Maybe it's because I'm clergy, but I think his point is spot on. When we limit our lives to a convenient dose of Jesus on an as needed basis, we ignore our soul's thirst for him – we drain it of its life's blood – and we hurt ourselves! WE miss out. WE miss out when we handle faith in moderation taking a shot only when absolutely necessary.

We're all guilty of it sometimes – me too. Because I'm afraid. I am afraid that Jesus will lead me to paths that I don't want to travel. I am afraid that he will ask me to do something that I really, really do not want to do. I'm content to say that God is my co-pilot, but I don't want to move back to coach and completely turn the controls over to God.

But, that is exactly what Jesus asks. He frees us to get up, move about the cabin and be more like him. Put God above all other human interests. In the world Jesus is creating for those who follow him, God's claim is above all other claims. God's rule demands ultimate commitment, and if this commitment clashes with any other (no matter how important – family, friends, religious rites) - then that other allegiance must give way. One author says that Jesus uses such extreme words, because "He must attack the world that we have allowed to define us, the life we love so much, in order to give us new life." In other words, he has to pry us loose.

He has his work cut out for him. When we wake up each morning and we make the decision to follow Jesus, it changes priorities for that day. It means that we cannot respond to situations like we might normally respond. We cannot indulge in normalcy. I used to hear that so often as a therapist. I would ask the client, what do you hope to gain from our time together?

I want to be normal. But, when I talk to someone as a Christian, and they say, I want to be normal, the response is that is no longer an option for you. Jesus calls you to something bigger. When life is mean to us and the normal response is to give up, Jesus says, no, you keep going. When people strike out at us, the normal response is to strike back, and Jesus says, nope. Do something different. When we are sad or frustrated, and the normal response is to pack up our toys and go home, Jesus pries us loose from all our self-centeredness and sets us free.

Jesus is not being cruel when he questions the window shoppers. Remember, he was on his way to Jerusalem where all sales were final, and his work was urgent. He did not have time to make nice – he needed to know that someone understood. Do you get why that is so important? He knew the cross was coming. His only plan for carrying the message of salvation into the world after he was gone was us. We are Plan A. There is no Plan B. So, his trip to Jerusalem had eternal consequences. He did not have the time or the patience for browsing in moderation.

I make fun of my father quite often for subscribing to the publication “Opera News.” *Ohh, can’t wait to go home to catch up on the Opera News.* But, occasionally I learn something. I read the story of the composer Giacomo Puccini who wrote a number of famous operas. In 1922 he was stricken by cancer while working on his last opera, “Turandot,” which many now consider his best. Puccini said to his students, “If I don’t finish ‘Turandot,’ I want you to finish it for me.” Shortly afterwards he died. Puccini’s students studied opera carefully and soon completed it. In 1926 the world premiere of “Turandot” was performed in Milan with Puccini’s favorite student, Arturo Toscanini, directing. Everything went beautifully until the opera reached the point where Puccini had been forced to put down his pen. Tears ran down Toscanini’s face. He stopped the music, put down his baton, turned to the audience and cried out, “Thus far the Master wrote, but he died.” A thick silence filled the opera house. Toscanini picked up the baton again, smiled through his tears and exclaimed, “But his disciples finished his work.”

Maybe that is why Jesus was so blunt with the window shoppers –he was desperate for disciples to finish his work. He still is, and here we are – called to serve. Called to love, and called to follow the one who invites us to stay as close behind him as we can, so that our witness is not a matter of moderation with plenty of space between us and him, but a matter of abnormal commitment and white hot promise. We should never spend our energy doing faith in moderation when our calling is to finish the job Jesus came to do. It changes everything, so you see, Jesus IS the problem, but he is not a problem for us to solve. He is problem for us to live. Only you know where you moderate his influence. Only you know when you limit his call. Only you know when you turn him away. But, he still extends his hand promising not life in moderation, but life in abundance. What will you do?