



Truth in Advertising in Evangelism

Mark 8:31-38

March 12, 2006

Last week, I challenged you to adopt a new kind of discipline for Lent, a discipline not of what you will give up for Lent, but a challenge of whom you will invite here for Lent. I wish you well on that challenge. May God open your eyes as you circulate among your friends and neighbors and coworkers and family, and lead you to someone who is searching for God, and lead you to make that person a simple invitation: “Come and see.”

And last week, I lifted up before us the kind of evangelist Jesus was, how he did not hold himself up above us as holier than ordinary humanity, although he had every right so to do. Instead, Jesus got in line with the rest of us to be baptized. And because he came as one of us, the good news he brought was a hand up rather than a put down. The good news he brought was really good news.

Now today, we see another great thing about the way Jesus was an evangelist: his honesty.

Nowadays honesty is in short supply. Take advertisements, for example. Most of us have learned to view advertisements with a wary eye. They play up the alleged benefits. They play down the costs. The typical advertisement will say, “Use this product and you’ll be successful, happy, financially independent, and irresistible to the opposite sex.” And that’s just the ads for soap. But we know there’s always a catch, there’s always fine print at the bottom, there’s always those last quick words that the announcer reads so fast you hear only a blur: “Tax-tags-excise-and-delivery-charges-not-included. Not-available-in-the-forty-eight-states-of-the-continental-U.S. If-side-effects-persist-for-forty-eight-hours-see-a-doctor. Void-where-prohibited-by-law.”

If Jesus had been an evangelist like that, then he would have come saying, “If anyone will follow me, he will become attractive, successful, healthy, wealthy, and happy.” In fact, there are times today when some people come close to saying just that. If Jesus has been an evangelist like that, then you would expect him to play up all the benefits and downplay all the costs. “If anyone will follow me, he will enjoy salvation and forgiveness from here on into eternity. And, by the way, occasionally he will have some rough times, and occasionally she may have to do some difficult things.”

But that's not the way Jesus sells the good news. Instead, he says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Jesus is the anti-salesman. He emphasizes the costs. In fact in this passage, he doesn't even mention the benefits. Remember how Harry Connick, Jr. says that his cell phone company practices "Truth in wireless?" Well, Jesus Christ practices "Truth in witness." Jesus is not about selling the gospel. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, preparing to die for the world, and he wants us to follow him. The way of Jesus is the way of high demand.

Now some of you may be wondering: "I always was taught that salvation is a free gift, but now you're telling me that salvation is a matter of high demand. Whatever happened to grace?" The best answer I can give you is to point to the baptistery here. Baptism projects the whole picture of what it means to receive the gospel. When I baptize someone, I ask two questions. First, "Do you believe in Jesus as your savior, your rescuer from sin and from death?" That's the grace part. There's not a thing you or I can do to save ourselves from our sin. There's not a thing you or I can do to avoid death. Our only hope is that Jesus will rescue us with the gift of his forgiveness of sins and with the gift of his resurrection power. It's all grace. It's all gift. There's nothing you can do.

But when I baptize someone I also ask a second question: "Do you commit yourself to following Jesus as your Lord, that is, your leader for the rest of your life?" Ah, there is the demand part. There is no way we can earn salvation. But when we receive it from Jesus, we want to spend the rest of our lives thanking him for it, by following him. And that's where it starts getting costly.

Do you see it now? To receive the gift of the gospel is free, but once we've received it, to RESPOND to the gift of the gospel is costly. So the Christian way is a way full of grace. But the Christian way is also a way full of costly challenge and high demands. And when Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem to die for us, he emphasized the challenge and the demand: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Jesus as an evangelist simply will not appeal to the lowest common denominator. Instead, he appeals for the highest and uncommon sacrifice. Jesus raises the bar in more ways than one. On the way to his own crucifixion, Jesus raised the cross-bar to his shoulders and carried it up the hill to his death. And now, Jesus raises the bar of expectations for our own living and dying on the Christ way.

It makes all the difference in how we his followers will live and die. And it makes all the difference in how we invite others to come and live and die the same way, that is, the Christ way.

THE DIFFERENCE IN HOW WE LIVE AND DIE

What is the difference in how we his followers live and die? For one thing, we define success in a totally different way from how our culture defines success. Our land says, “grab for all you can get.” Our time says, “He who dies with the most toys wins.” Our culture says, “You deserve the best.” This time and place is all about saving and accumulating.

But our Lord says:

For those who want to save their life will lose it,
and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. (Mark 8:35)

Because of the way Jesus lived and died and lived again, you and I are set free from the rat race of this world. We are now free to give ourselves away, and to do so with no fear, knowing that when we have lost everything for God’s sake, Jesus will restore it all and then some. The Olympic skater from Greensboro who won two medals, what was his name? I may forget the name, but I won’t forget what he did. The \$40,000 he won, he gave away to children in the Sudan, so they could someday know the joy of sports. At the closing ceremonies, he was selected to bear the American flag. He had the courage to give it all away, but in the end he received so much more back. It happens that way in the kingdom of God. When we have the courage to give ourselves away -- our wealth, our time, our energy – when we have the courage to lose our lives for Jesus’ sake, we will save them.

That is the difference in how we live and die with Christ, and that is also the difference in how we invite others to come live and die with Christ...

THE DIFFERENCE IN HOW WE INVITE OTHERS TO COME LIVE AND DIE THE CHRIST WAY.

If you and I are already living the Christ way, then others should be able to see from our own lives that following Jesus will be costly. They should be able to see how we have denied ourselves and put ourselves second for the sake of loving God and humanity.

So, when we invite others to Jesus, and when they ask us what this Christ way will be like, we certainly don’t tell them it will be easy, and we don’t tell them that they will be happy all the time, and we don’t tell them that they will be successful. No, we try to be as honest as Christ. Following Christ will put you at odds with the world. Following Christ will cause you some grief. Following Christ will cost you some of the dreams you had for yourself. It will be the hardest thing they have ever done.

So, if this is what it means to share the gospel, why would anyone listen to us, much less begin to follow Jesus? Because, before Jesus issues his total challenge, Jesus

embraces us with his total acceptance. Remember? The grace comes before the work. It is the high acceptance of Jesus, his love for us and his forgiveness for us that motivates us to want to imitate the sacrifice of Jesus. Rick Warren says that Jesus never lowered his standards, but always started where people were. Wherever people were, Jesus granted them total acceptance. And from there, Jesus went to the cross and died for them, and asked them to follow. Total acceptance, and total challenge. You could call it truth in advertising. Truth in evangelism.

I think we have a moment of truth for us as a congregation in our evangelism. For years we have prayed that God would send us young people and children. And so God has these last few years. Our Children's Ministry in Bible Studies and Children's Choirs has really grown. Hallelujah! These last few months in particular have shown me how far we have come. Since last fall I have done about twenty funerals in about twenty weeks. If that had happened here a few years ago, everyone would have been worried about the future of this congregation. But I have heard no such worried talk. In fact, I see our participation in Bible study and worship rising, and I sense excitement and confidence for the future.

But that's not all. God has answered our prayers for growth in children not only in ways we prayed for, but also in ways we didn't pray for! God has sent to us children holding the hands of their parents who have brought them; we prayed and hoped for that. But also God has sent us children who have come to us completely on their own, especially on Wednesday nights. We weren't expecting that. Most of them walk here on their own. I once was shocked and moved to hear that some children had hired a cab to come to church. I mean, would your child do that? Would your child care that much about coming to church? What is it that is drawing children here? Certainly we have some freebies for them here, and probably they are a little bored at home, but those aren't the only reasons. They come because they know this is a safe place where they are loved. They come because they want to learn the stories of Jesus. Folks, we have prayed for children in this place, and God has answered our prayers in more ways than we have ever dreamed of.

So what do we do now? Do we struggle to hold on to our preconceptions of what we thought our church growth would be like? No, Christ has set the bar higher for us. What we do is we deny ourselves, we lose our lives for his sake. And in God's miraculous way, every time feel like we're giving away the life of this church, God will give back to us a life together more abundant than anything we have known before!

That is truth in evangelism.

-- Douglas E. Murray