

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
13th Sunday in Ordinary Time
June 27, 2004

Marketing Jesus
Luke 9:51-62

Do you remember how beautiful Wednesday evening was this past week?
There were still a few minutes of dusk left after I put the kids to bed,
so I took a walk in the back yard.

My favorite time of day in my favorite time of year.
The horizon was glowing softly, and a crescent moon was rising
as I strolled through the trees and flowers and grasses
of our backyard garden.

I turn and look back at our house, resting quietly, peacefully,
with a yellow light shining from a downstairs window;
I see the lamp on the table beside the soft chair
where I'll be sitting in a few moments.

Beginning toward the backdoor, I say thanks to God
for the beauty of creation
for this little plot of earth to call home,
a relatively safe haven in a tumultuous world.

Inside again, I sink into our upholstered armchair, under the glow of the lamp,
prop my feet on the ottoman, and open my Bible,
looking for some direction for this sermon.

The words I read come to me from so far away, so long ago,
and they leave me bewildered in the restful dusk of my favorite time of year:

*Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests;
but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.*

Hmmm...what could that mean for us, for me, living in such comfort?
Jesus keeps talking, and his words are too harsh for my restful mood:

*Let the dead bury their own dead;
but as for you go and proclaim the kingdom of God...
Now one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back
is fit for the kingdom of God.*

Jesus' urgency comes as a discordant clanging in my pleasant evening.

I was tempted to find another passage to preach.

It's sayings like these that give Jesus a marketing problem in our culture;

I'm talking about the Jesus of the gospels;

the Jesus we find when we actually take time to read the gospel,

not the accommodating Jesus we have refashioned in our own image.

Jesus suffers from a marketing problem.

The statistical reports of our Presbyterian (USA) denomination attest to this.

The trends have been fairly consistent for at least a couple of decades:
On the bright side, the denomination on the whole is bringing in new members.
But our back doors are swinging off the hinges as they depart.
And where are they going?
They are not transferring to other denominations; not the bulk of them.
Most of those who leave are simply moved to the Inactive Roll;
they are simply slipping away from *any* church involvement.

I suspect there are almost as many reasons for this as there are back doors of churches;
but I would say the bottom line is that people are not falling in love with Jesus.
Now maybe that's because it is possible to be a member of a church these days
and never really meet Jesus.
But I wonder if it might also be that many people *are* meeting Jesus,
and are finding that the cost of following him is too high.
Are we really to give up the comfort of family and possessions
in favor of the discomfort of this journey with one who has nowhere
to lay his head?
Well, *you* are here, and seem to be listening, so, for the moment, let's not turn back,
but put our hands to the plow, and turn the soil of this passage a bit.

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The context of these saying helps explain Jesus' urgency.
Luke says the days are drawing near for Jesus to be *taken up*
which is a reference, of course, to the ascension,
but also to the crucifixion and resurrection which lead up to the ascension.
And because these days are drawing near, Jesus has *set his face to go to Jerusalem*
which suggests he is bracing himself, steeling himself,
for the opposition he is soon going to face.
The words *set his face* call to mind the words of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah:
therefore I have set my face like flint
and I know that I shall not be put to shame.
Jesus' commitment to going forward on his mission to Jerusalem and to the cross
is rock-solid.

On the way to Jerusalem,
Jesus plans a stop-off in a village of the Samaritans,
but the Samaritans will not receive him.
Well, by now this kind of rejection is becoming familiar to Jesus and his disciples:
Just after his Baptism, at the beginning of his ministry,
Jesus was rejected by his hometown of Nazareth,
partly because he gives them a stinging rebuke.
Then when he tries to minister among the Gentiles, he is rejected by them
because he messes with their economy
and they are afraid of his impact on their lives.
Now, he is being rejected by the Samaritans.

And all of this, we know, is only a foreshadowing of the rejection he will face
in Jerusalem.
Apparently, 21st century America is not the first time Jesus has had a marketing problem.

Now we should not be surprised that these Samaritans would turn their backs on Jesus,
because of the animosity that existed between Jew and Samaritans.
Luke says they would not receive him *because his face was set toward Jerusalem*,
which was the center of Jewish worship,
and a place the Samaritans were not welcome to worship.
But I wonder if their reticence has more to do with what awaits Jesus in Jerusalem;
Do they know he goes there to suffer? Do they see what's ahead for him?
Perhaps they just don't care to share in his suffering,
or to follow him to his death?

The disciples are so perturbed
they are ready to nuke the whole lot of them for their inhospitality.
But Jesus rebukes their anger.
My Bible has a footnote that says that
some of the ancient biblical manuscripts have Jesus tell the disciples,
*You do not know what spirit you are of,
for the Son of Man has not come to destroy the lives of human beings
but to save them.*
So Jesus moves on to another village with his disciples in tow.

But remember something about all these rejections:
the Gentiles, Nazareth, Samaria, Jerusalem.
All will be included later on in Jesus' commission to the disciples
at the time of his ascension, when he says to them,
*...you will be my witnesses in [catch this list]
Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*
At the moment, Jesus may be moving on, shaking the dust off his sandals,
but he'll be back. He'll be back!
These villages, despite their initial rejection, are still in God's plan, still on God's heart.
Jesus will be back,
on the lips and in the lives of his witnesses
when they return to carry on his mission after he is *taken up*.

Well, we shouldn't think too badly of the Samaritans;
next we run across these three "would-be followers," presumably all Jews.
All three intend to follow Jesus, but are rebuffed by Jesus
who makes these statements that imply
they are not truly ready for the kingdom of God.
To the first, he says,
*Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests,
but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.*
To the second, who wants to follow if only he can go first and bury his father,

Jesus says,
Let the dead bury their own; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.
And to the third, who only asks to let his family know he's about to leave town,
No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.

When Jesus talks about the kingdom it seems a far cry
from some of the ways the gospel gets presented in our modern world,
with 4 spiritual laws, a simple diagram to explain how it all works,
and a 2 sentence salvation prayer at the end to "close the deal."
It seems Jesus has no bargains to offer here. No pep talk to prop up our lives.
The kingdom of God cannot be reduced to less than it is;
it cannot be a simple add-on to an already planned life;
the kingdom of God is the essential thing,
and nothing else can come before it.

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So what do we do with this today?
Since our following of Jesus today is figurative and not literal,
it may be harder for us to tell if we're really doing it;
or easier to think we are, when we really are not.

The thing that is most disturbing about these would-be followers of Jesus
is that they seem to be genuinely desirous of following Jesus, even committed,
but just not radically or whole-heartedly enough.
None of us want to be like that, do we? Who wants to be lukewarm?
Maybe the Samaritans were the honest ones.
They weren't ready to follow Jesus, and they knew it; so they just said so.
The disciples certainly show, over and over again,
that they were not really ready to follow Jesus all the way to the cross.
And the picture doesn't get any better when we look at the church down through the ages.
The church, for all its striving to be the body of Christ,
is always less than it is called to be.

Let's face it: none of us are fit for the kingdom of God.
This is why, throughout the scriptures,
God's love for the world is the source of God's great anguish.
This is why, throughout the scriptures,
God's relationship with human beings is marked by suffering.
This is why all of the scriptures lead us, point us, drive us
toward this moment in the gospel,
when Jesus *sets his face to go to Jerusalem.*
and to the cross
and down into the darkest caverns of our spiritual brokenness.
Because it is only God's relentless, determined love,
that can make any of us fit for the kingdom of God.

Fitness for the kingdom is a gift of grace.
Thank God, the Son of Man did not come to destroy the lives of unfit human beings,
but to save them.

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So if we find that more and more people in our culture are rejecting Jesus,
assuming they've met him in the first place,
we should not be too surprised.
And when we see churches that are a raging success, we might ask
What Jesus are they marketing?

And if we bear witness to Jesus to the ends of the earth,
and our witness is rejected,
perhaps we don't need to be overly worried.

If Jesus has moved on from the American village for now, he'll be back.
If he has moved on from one particular person or another, he'll be back.
The same love that persists with you and me, will be back for them, too.
Maybe then,
they'll be ready to embrace and proclaim the kingdom of God.
Maybe then, we will too.