

Mark 6:1-13

The Rejection of Jesus at Nazareth

¹He left that place and came to his home town, and his disciples followed him. ²On the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were infuriated. They said, 'Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! ³Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?' And they took offence at him. ⁴Then Jesus said to them, 'Prophets are not without honor, except in their home town, and among their own kin, and in their own house.' ⁵And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. ⁶And he was amazed at their unbelief.

The Mission of the Twelve

Then he went about among the villages teaching. ⁷He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. ⁸He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; ⁹but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. ¹⁰He said to them, 'Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. ¹¹If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.' ¹²So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. ¹³They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

Why Is Jesus Such a Hard Sell?

On the mission trip to Haiti I had the pleasure of meeting Steve Bradbury who heads the mission committee at Wethersfield United Methodist Church in Wethersfield, CT. Steve is a salesman for Comcast, and just prior to me coming to work at Bethel as your pastor, I was a salesman, and while Steve is still working in sales he's also in ministry. One thing we talked about was how pasturing is a lot like sales. Sales is about reaching people who may be interested in your product and persuading them that they should buy the product that you're selling. Salespeople and pastors provide valuable services to customers at a reasonable price. Both salespersons and pastors may be tempted to withhold some information or exaggerate the benefits of a product in order to close a deal and make a sale. And both salespersons and pastors know that some customers will be very pleased with you despite your lack of effort while others will never be pleased despite a huge effort. And of course salespeople and pastors know that some folks will simply not be interested in their product at all.

Jesus clearly understood this last point. When he sent the disciples out two by two, he told them what to do if people don't welcome their message, and he told them this right after he

had been given a very chilly reception in his own hometown. Jesus did not give in to the temptation to tell people what he thought they wanted to hear in order to get them to “buy” the message that he was selling. He knew how to deal with rejection, and he taught the disciples how to deal with it as well, by wiping the dust off their feet and moving on. The question I’d like to pose this morning is, “If Jesus’ news is good news, why do so many people reject it?” or “Why is Jesus such a hard sell?” The next question is this: “Did you buy into Jesus for the right reason?” Was the person who sold you on Jesus an honest salesperson? And finally, the last question: “Are you still sold on Jesus?”

Now a word about the metaphor I’m using; we know that there is no material cost attached to Jesus’ message; Jesus and his disciples did not hand out offering envelopes and say, “Hear the good news and don’t forget to make an offering.” The product Jesus and the disciples are “selling” is absolutely free of any material cost. But when you receive the gift, one way that people know if you have really accepted the gift is that you end up giving *yourself* to Jesus Christ, declaring him “Lord” and “Master.” And Jesus gives us the “Great Commission,” telling us to go out and make disciples of all nations, which means we have something we declare to other people freely, and we hope that they receive this free message, this free gift which in turn will turn them in to disciples of Jesus. No money changes hands, but there is a transaction.

So why is Jesus such a hard sell? To determine that, let’s look at what he’s selling, what message he was declaring that rubbed so many people in his hometown the wrong way. Though we don’t have a transcript of Jesus’ sermon that morning in Nazareth, we have clue about the content. Mark writes:

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

Mark 1:14-15

If this was the crux of Jesus’ message, we can think of several reasons why people then and people now reject it. The first stumbling block we run into with his message is the part about the kingdom of God. If your living pretty well in your own kingdom you may not be very keen on being part of God’s kingdom. It’s still the case that when the soapbox evangelist declares that Jesus is coming soon, the images we get are not positive. In Jesus’ day, whether you perceived the coming of God’s kingdom as a positive or negative thing depended upon what side of the tracks you lived on. To most Jews, who were poor and living under authoritarian rule, God’s coming to establish his kingdom seemed like a good thing. If, on the other hand, you were neglecting the needs of the poor, failing to be generous toward others, if you were selfish, greedy, or just plain mean, God’s coming wasn’t something you looked forward to. And so you don’t buy into that idea of God’s kingdom coming because it frightens you more than it appeals to you. What’s significant is that Jesus says that the kingdom is already here;

it's not some future cataclysm but a present reality, so I suppose that those folks who imagine it as a cosmic event would think Jesus is out of his mind. "Look around you, Jesus. Nothing is changed, you poor silly, insignificant carpenter. How can you say that kingdom of God is upon us when the Romans are still running the show and were trying to scratch out a living? Come back when you know what you're talking about." This is a part of Jesus' message that too many Christians don't get; the kingdom is here now is as much as you have chosen to live within it. It's not something you wait for. But the all-too-common idea of the kingdom is something that occurs outside of us rather than within us.

Now if you're poor and struggling and persecuted, the kingdom of God may seem like a very good thing, but then Jesus throws in the demand to repent, and suddenly our perspective must change. Before we were looking around us at all the evil of this world and we very pleased that God was coming to straighten things out. But now Jesus is judging us all, telling all to repent. Now he's telling us to look at the problems within us rather than the problems around us, and by demanding that we repent Jesus is saying that there is something about you that has to change. Then and now there are an awful lot of people who see no need to change, and many would absolutely take great offence at what Jesus is saying here. There are some who think repentance is a one-time thing, that you confess your sins to Jesus, receive forgiveness, and now they are righteous in every way. Guess what? They're not! God is still working in you to remove the sin that you can't even see yet, so you need to keep looking and repenting when you find the blemish. But if our pride informs us that we're good enough, we stop looking, and we stop repenting. So there's stumbling block number two: the need to repent.

And the third stumbling block: believing the good news. What is the good news? It's that the kingdom of God is here and open for all who want it, but the way you get in is humbling yourself so you can repent, trust in Jesus to guide you, because he is still alive and working change within you, and accept this gift that he offers you by his grace. You are loved by God and you are invited by God to enter his kingdom today and every day. And if you decide to enter it, you can count on Jesus being with you every moment, guiding you, comforting you, healing you, reassuring you, and forgiving you – he showers his grace upon you.. and as a salesman that is to me the biggest selling point.

Living in the kingdom means living an abundant life, which is not the same as a long life in terms of time. An abundant life is a life spent in sync with God's plan for your life. It's a life that often involves risk. It's a life that rarely involves monetary wealth – because you're usually spending your wealth addressing the needs of others whom you love, and that is the one thing you will have an abundance of – love. Jesus is a hard sell because the price you pay is everything, and it's hard for us to bring ourselves to give that much. But only when you make that total commitment, a total investment will you find that you are living life abundantly. I pray that you will see the true value of Jesus Christ and make the investment in him. Satisfaction is guaranteed.