

“THE PROBLEM IS JESUS!”

Mark 8:31-38

Dr. Charles D. Yoost, Senior Pastor

I was driving somewhere listening to the radio when an advertisement caught my attention. It was an advertisement for a church. With upbeat music in the background, a cheerful and energetic voice urged me to worship with that congregation. “We provide coffee and have fresh-baked Otis Spunkmeyer cookies for you to eat during the service. No need to worry about anything, just come and enjoy the fellowship.”

I confess, I was a little taken aback. It seems that churches are doing more to market themselves these days, and we need to get our message to the people. But by the time this commercial had ended, I wasn't sure whether I was being invited to a religious service or a social club! If the organization being advertised is a club, there certainly aren't very high expectations for those who attend.

I firmly believe that people need the church and what it has to offer today more than ever before. The headlines of Tuesday's paper announced that the stock market is now half what it was just 17 months ago. In recent months we have witnessed not only dramatic market losses, but the collapse of the world's largest insurance company, the largest savings and loan failure in banking history, and numerous bankruptcies and mergers. Every day seems to bring more economic uncertainty. The American Psychological Association recently released a survey of 7,000 American households saying that 80% of us are stressed about the economy and personal finances. Half were worried about their ability to provide for their family's basic needs, 56% were concerned about job stability; 60% reported feeling angry and irritable, and 52% reported laying awake at night worried about all this.(1) The report concluded, “The declining state of the nation's economy is taking physical and emotional toll on people nationwide.”(2)

In addition to this global economic crisis, personal problems are taking their toll as well. Marriages are in trouble. The education of our children is a huge issue. Child care and child rearing are increasingly challenging in these tough economic times. Crises in our relationships, and unexpected health problems add to our burden.

Then we hear an advertisement for a church that offers fresh-baked cookies, and I have to admit, it has its appeal! As I continued to reflect, I realized that we advertise on WCLV and WHKW on our Sunday morning program, inviting people to participate in the program and life of Church of the Saviour. We offer coffee and cookies, too — maybe not during the service, but the parlor is not far away!

I truly believe that here at Church of the Saviour, we have a product, to use business terms, that people need. The church with its message of help and hope has what people are looking for, and what people need. John Wesley's message of appeal to the head as well as to

the heart is tailor-made for today's society, especially for the community where we find ourselves. Our slogan is "Bringing New Life to Greater Heights," and God willing, Church of the Saviour is doing just that.

Well, folks hear us on the radio, read our church newsletter, hear that good things are happening here and they come. We are receiving between 50 and 100 new members each year, and as I have said before, 30 babies were born or adopted by families in our congregation last year, and we have had four births so far in 2009.

Yet, sad to say, all of our new members do not stick around. Oh, it's true, people are extremely mobile these days. I will never forget the young family I received into membership one Sunday. Six weeks later they called to say they had received a job transfer quite unexpectedly and were moving to Kentucky. But there are others who come faithfully, then start to miss a Sunday here and there, then they come only once a month, and then only at Christmas and Easter, and maybe one or two other significant days in the life of their families. What happened? What indeed?

Researchers tell us that unless people get involved in the life of the church in some way — joining a Sunday school class, becoming part of a choir, a Bible study group, a face-to-face fellowship group of some kind — **half** of new members will become inactive within six months. We have instituted the "Time and Talent Survey" for our new members, and our volunteer coordinators, Ros Collins and Kristi Bergren, work diligently to match the talents and interests, not only of the new members, but of all of us, with the opportunities that the church has to offer. This process is working very well. But still there are people who come on strong, then eventually — sometimes quickly — back away. What is going on?

Sometimes I think we are guilty of false advertising! Oh, don't get me wrong, we have a friendly church that serves coffee between all three services and you can almost always find a donut or a cookie in the parlor. We have capable Sunday school teachers, a fully staffed nursery and a knock-out youth program. Our music program is of high quality, and we pastors do our best to provide the pastoral care that people need. But, I repeat, sometimes I think we are guilty of false advertising! And by that I mean that when we advertise on the radio, we do not tell the whole story. Salvation is free. It is God's gift to everyone. But discipleship is costly, and it involves not just eating homemade cookies and drinking Fair Trade coffee, but a lifetime of service, sometimes at great cost.

At one meeting where a church group was discussing how to assimilate and keep new members, one woman blurted out, "**The problem is Jesus!**" The room got uncomfortably quiet as she continued: "The problem is Jesus. Jesus is demanding and difficult. People get lured here to church, thinking that they will find the solution to their problems, and then they meet Jesus and find out that he is the beginning of problems they have spent their whole lives avoiding!"(3)

Today's Lectionary text is not one that we would use in an advertising campaign. It is one of what theologians refer to as the "hard sayings" of Jesus. We think of "hard sayings" as those that we have difficulty understanding. But some of the "hard sayings" for me are those that I have no trouble understanding, but a heck of a time practicing. I love the comment Mark Twain made when someone said, "Doesn't it bother you that there's so much of the Bible that you don't understand?" "Yes," answered Twain, "But what bothers me most is the part I do understand."

The Gospel of Mark begins with Jesus' simple directive: "Follow me!" Jesus invites all

of us to follow him. One might expect that some of the folks might ask, “Well, who are you and where are you going?” But they don’t! They just follow! And as they follow, Jesus gradually unpacks for them who he is and where he is headed. Jesus has been feeding, healing, working and preaching, but he hasn’t said all that much about himself. Now, halfway through Mark’s Gospel, Jesus explains who he is and where he is going.

Jesus surprises the disciples by telling them that he is going to the cross. “God forbid!” says Peter, the chief of the disciples. “This must never happen to you!” It’s just impossible to believe that this Son of God should be betrayed and suffer and die. Last week Jesus was tempted by the devil. This week Jesus is tempted by one who loves him and is close to him. Peter does not want to see Jesus be crucified. He expresses his objection only because he cares about Jesus and his welfare. Jesus rebukes Peter for standing in the way of what Jesus believes God has called him to do.

The disciples are surprised to hear that Jesus is going to the cross. “Surprised” is too mild. They are shocked. But the surprises keep coming, for Jesus tells the disciples they also must bear a cross, because they are his followers. Now please note: a “cross” is not something that you bear because you are a human being — such as a health problem, an annoying relative, an unpleasant atmosphere at work, or a neighbor that is hard to get along with. The cross that Jesus talks about is that which results from our following him. The cross is the result of walking with Jesus.

Can you imagine a public relations firm meeting with Jesus after he’d said, “*If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me?*” (Mark 8:34) “You know, Jesus, crucifixion is an ugly way to die, reserved for the lowest of Roman society. A lot of us don’t even like to say the word “cross.” We’ve been talking here at the agency, and we’re not sure this is the best image for you to project. How about something softer, gentler, that gets across the same idea without the off-putting image of, well, you know. I mean, who is ready to make this kind of commitment? Frankly, I think you’re setting the bar too high. How about something like, and I’m only making a suggestion here, “Be as nice as you can be as often as you can.” I mean, if the standards are too high, who will want to join? Oh, and one of the guys suggested, when it comes to the offering, that you add, “Give what you can, when you can.”

The pastor was giving a tour of the church’s beautifully renovated sanctuary. An impressive new pipe organ had been installed. “You probably notice that we don’t have a cross in the front of the church,” the pastor said. “Frankly, once we got the new organ installed, dominating the front of the church, there just wasn’t room for the cross.” Amidst all the activities and objects competing for our attention, is there room for the cross in our chancel? Is there room for the cross in your life and mine?

Each Sunday morning at the 11 o’clock worship service, one of our youth brings the cross down the aisle. It is a high honor to lead the procession of choirs and clergy as we begin our time of worship together. The person carrying the cross is a sign of all that is to come. But there is a larger purpose and a deeper reason why it is a high honor to carry the cross. The cross that one of our youth carries on Sunday morning is a symbol of the cross each of us is called to carry not only on Sunday, but every day of the week. The cross bearer or crucifer, which is the technical term, reminds us of the tough, difficult teaching of Jesus that goes against so much of what our culture expects from religion. The truth is that you can’t walk with Jesus unless you

are willing to take up your cross and walk the way that Jesus is walking.

If the bad news is that the way of the cross can be demanding and difficult, the good news in this challenging teaching is that Jesus believes we are able to bear the cross. With the call comes the power to do what Jesus is calling us to do. It's always a package deal. Jesus always gives us the resources, the fortitude and the strength to carry the cross that he puts before us.

Yes, salvation is free, but the cost of discipleship is enormous. I truly believe that Christ is the answer to all the problems we face in life. But with the good news of salvation also comes the call to take up the cross and follow Jesus.

It is my desire to see folks attracted to Church of the Saviour. My vision is that this church will continue to draw people from all walks of life and all regions of our metropolitan area. I truly hope that all will come, and that all will get involved and stay part of this community of faith. But as much as we do to make the church attractive, as the woman said, **'The problem is Jesus!'** The problem is his hard, demanding claim upon our lives and his hard saying that only by losing our lives will we find the abundant life we are seeking. In these difficult days, **the problem is Jesus!** But with the problem also comes the solution: life in all its fullness. Let us take up the cross and follow him!

Prayer: Dear God, When we hear the words of Jesus calling us to take up the cross and follow him, we confess that we are reluctant. We are O.K. with eating cookies and drinking coffee in the parlor, but when we discover that discipleship involves costly acts of service, we hesitate. Give us the willingness to bear the cross, knowing that you will be with us every step of the way. Help us to remember that only in losing ourselves will we truly find life in all its fullness. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Notes:

1. Hamilton, Adam. *Enough: Discovering Joy Through Simplicity and Generosity*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *The Clergy Journal*. Vol. 37. No. 1, p. 43.