

Truth in Advertising

By Debie Thomas. Posted 23 June 2019.

For Sunday June 30, 2019

Lectionary Readings ([Revised Common Lectionary](#), Year C)

1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21

Psalm 16

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

Luke 9:51-62

If Jesus went to business school and majored in marketing, he would flunk out his first semester. Why? Because he's a rotten salesman.

As this week's Gospel reading from Luke makes clear, Jesus is perfectly indifferent to the rules of good salesmanship. He doesn't wrap his product in slick packaging. He doesn't minimize costs to attract more customers. He doesn't hide the hard stuff in fine print. He never rushes his pitch to close a deal. If anything, he does the bizarre opposite: he takes pains to push potential buyers away. "I'll follow you!" an eager customer gushes. "Oh, good grief, no you won't," Jesus groans in response. "You have no clue what you're talking about."

Jesus takes "truth in advertising" to such an extreme level that we, his Church, would do well to consider what version of Christianity we're "selling" to those who walk through our doors. Is it Jesus's version? Or is it a lukewarm, low-risk version we've custom-designed to keep our pews from emptying?

The challenge of this week's lectionary is this: if we want a way of life that's soft and cuddly, Jesus's way isn't it. If we want a God who will respect our priorities; honor our social, cultural, and economic boundaries; and keep our lives neat and orderly, Jesus is not that God. If we want a spirituality that's comfortable rather than costly, and stable rather than transformative, we should walk away now. Because Jesus's face is set like stone for Jerusalem. For sacrifice. For the cross. Yes, he bids us to follow. Of course he does. But he bids us, in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's chilling words, "to come and die."

Luke records four interactions between Jesus and his would-be followers in this week's lectionary. Each interaction offers us a challenging bit of truth-in-advertising about the kingdom of God. Do we *really* want to know what Jesus is selling? Okay, take a deep breath. Here we go:

First, he's selling rejection and forbearance. The Gospel passage opens with a group of Samaritans refusing to welcome Jesus into their village. Though Jesus expresses a desire to minister, teach, and heal in their midst, the villagers reject him outright. When James and John hear the news, they offer to burn the offending village to the ground. But Jesus “turns and rebukes them.”

I don't think many of us are in danger of burning down villages. But are we in danger of leading with anger rather than love when people disagree with us? Are we in danger of privileging resentment over kindness when our feelings get hurt or our egos get bruised? Jesus rebukes James and John because they allow their supposed loyalty to Jesus — their spiritual zeal and fervor — to cloud their judgment and gnarl their hearts.

The call, Jesus reminds them, is to bring life, not death — even to those who reject and insult us. The call is to practice forgiveness and forbearance, never retribution and revenge. The call is to face each other gently and with great patience, because even the people who make our blood boil are precious to God.

Rejection, Jesus seems to suggest in this exchange, is a given. Wounded feelings are par for the course along the road to Jerusalem. What matters is how we respond when we are wounded. What matters is whether love or hatred ultimately governs our hearts.

Second, Jesus is selling inconvenience and hardship. As Jesus continues his journey, a passerby calls out to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” But Jesus says to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.”

Is this an advertisement for homelessness? Maybe. For sure, it's an advertisement for inconvenience. Jesus offers no guarantee that the Christian life will be easy and comfortable. He never promises his followers a fat bank account, a posh career, a fancy zip code, or a three-car garage. If anything, he promises the opposite: a reordering of our priorities (professional, financial, and geographical), that will feel risky and destabilizing. A surrender of our most prized possessions and preferences. A willingness to depend on the goodwill and generosity of others. An identity that isn't defined by the stuff we own, the clothes we wear, the degrees we earn, the neighborhood we live in, the company we keep, the awards we accumulate, or the cars we drive. A life that is messier, grittier, and humbler than the one we curate so carefully on Facebook.

The temptation here is to leap too quickly to metaphor. *Surely*, we want to tell ourselves, Jesus isn't talking about our actual material lives. He's not indicting consumerism. He's not criticizing *literal* privilege. Is he? Well,

here's the thing: the Son of Man, the Creator of the universe, *God incarnate*, spent his adult life homeless. No matter how squirmy and defensive this fact makes us feel, we need to sit with it, and ponder what it means for our everyday lives.

Third, Jesus is selling disruption and disorientation. Soon after Jesus riffs on the foxes and the birds, he invites another passerby to follow him. The man responds, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." But Jesus says, "Let the dead bury their own dead; as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

Okay, I won't mince words: I don't *like* this Jesus. He sounds so harsh! So insensitive! Whatever happened to family values? "*Let the dead bury their own dead!*?" What does Jesus have against funerals?

I wonder if what's "for sale" here is a testing of *all* of our loyalties. Maybe the point is that Christian discipleship requires a degree of detachment from *every* other commitment we have — to family, to tradition, to culture, to reputation, to social norms and expectations. These are important, of course, and they have their place, but they are not primary. Jesus is primary. Or, he should be.

His harsh-sounding words to the would-be follower suggest that there will be times when our faith requires us to violate cultural norms, or disappoint our families, or move against the grain of the broader society we live in. If we have a burning need to fit in, to be popular, and to conform at all times to our peers' expectations, then we cannot follow Jesus. Discipleship *will* disorient and disrupt us. It *will* make us the neighborhood weirdos. It *will* shake things up in our families and friendship circles. It *will* challenge the status quo. Are we still interested?

Lastly, Jesus is selling intensity and urgency. As our lection draws to a close, one more traveler on the road offers to follow Jesus: "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus's response? "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

Yeah, ouch. We can't even say *goodbye*? Well, no. Not if it causes us to hesitate. Not if it takes away our sense of urgency for the Gospel and for the world God loves.

Can I even count how many times I've offered Jesus a version of this last excuse? "Sure, Lord, I'll follow you! I'll give you everything I've got, I promise. But, um, not right now. *Later*. After I..."

After I what? After I finish these last few *super important* projects. After I find a spouse. And lose twenty pounds. And get over my dysfunctional past. And finish raising my kids. And spend a few more years cozying up to my boss. And get a raise. And buy a house. And pay off my grad school loans. And retire. And turn forty, fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty....

The list is endless, and that's precisely Jesus's point. If our to-do list *ends* with Jesus instead of beginning with Jesus, we'll never get to Jesus at all. If we keep glancing over our shoulders in nostalgia instead of fixing our eyes on what lies ahead, we'll never step onto the road that leads to Jerusalem. Spiritual fitness requires a sense of urgency and passion. A sense of the sacred, irreplaceable value of *right now*.

Just to name the obvious: this is a hard Gospel reading. It's confrontational. It's demanding. It's offensive. In it, Jesus asks us to surrender absolutely everything, and he does so without apology. In fact, he gives the people around him every possible reason to say no. So why would anyone say yes? Why would anyone close a deal with Jesus on these appalling terms?

Because these are the terms we were created for, and Jesus knows it. Jesus the rotten salesman knows the cure for our malaise, our boredom, our hunger, our angst. He knows how deep calls to deep within our restless souls, how something unrelenting in us aches for a life of purpose, a life of meaning, a life we can pour out in love until we are spent and reborn. This is the life of the Holy Spirit within us — a life no advertisement can capture.

Jesus is hard on us because he knows that our hearts cry out for transformation. For renewal. For resurrection. Nothing else we buy will suffice. Nothing else the world sells can compare. So Jesus bids us to come and die. So that we can really *live*.

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