

Sermon: June 30th, 2019- “Jesus the rotten Salesman”

This week I read an essay on our reading from the Gospel of Luke and a description of Jesus found within it struck me as profound; now granted I was a little bit tired when I read it and was still not feeling 100% from a cold that came upon me last week, so maybe you won't find it as profound as I did, but I just had to share with you the description of Jesus expressed within it. In a way it sounds like a critique about how Jesus responds to the people around him, particularly these three examples of people that wish to follow, within the Gospel. The author of the essay, Debie Thomas, says this about Jesus, “If Jesus went to business school and majored in marketing, he would flunk out of his first semester. Why? (She ponders) because he is a rotten salesman.”¹

Jesus is a rotten salesman...I found that funny in a “The truth hurts,” kind of way. Realistically we as followers of Jesus, likely wouldn't refer to Jesus as a salesman, and we particularly would not use the word rotten; for Jesus wasn't really trying to sell anything to anyone in the truest sense of the word; but at the same time I appreciated what Debie Thomas is wanting us to engage when she calls Jesus a rotten salesman. You see we as Christians today are absolutely immersed in a consumeristic society whether you think you are or not, you are. And because of that we can gain an interesting insight into who Jesus was and what it actually means to follow him. It may seem odd to use words like sales and marketing within the church, but in reality and You may not have heard this, but I quite often hear about folks who are looking for a church or a new church, and how when they are they say that they are church shopping; when I hear those words, church shopping, I instantly know what it means; I instantly know what they are there for, that they are engaging the church and the worship service and everything else we do together and are weighing the pros and cons, like you would a new car. Its not bad, actually it's a great practise to find the right fit; but its important to see and hear that the language of marketing is not out of bounds in the church

The reason it is not out of bounds is because the church is the people, its not the building the structure that makes the church, the church is the people and we as the people have 24/7 access to everything we could want and need and more. We are a people who are completely inundated with advertisements for new products and old products alike. It actually has become rather rare to deal with a salesperson of any sort. Instead we deal with data collection which tells marketing companies what we like and what we are looking for. Data is collected on us by a number of different marketing companies in order to present us with the perfect advertisement for the perfect product. Our patterns, how we spend money and where we spend money, is watched and learned from. In the current age we live in, our internet search history, and maybe even a little scarier our conversations with others within listening distance of a smart device, often contribute to the types and frequency of the advertisements we see.

So, its not fair, I don't think, to take Debie Thomas critique about Jesus ability to make the sale with the current marketing structure and sales strategies that we live in, because how could Jesus' salesmanship or his marketing strategy compare to say Amazon? We are talking about two different worlds here. But, if you start to think of Jesus as a door to door salesperson, then quickly you realize why Debie Thomas statement about Jesus being a rotten salesman is actually true; only its true in a profoundly important way that I think we often miss.

¹ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2251>

Last Saturday I had a knock on my front door and when I opened it there was a nice young salesman, with his ID out and sale pitch ready to go. He wanted to sell me a home security system. He was rather pushy, trying to get as much information out of me that he could. He asked to come inside my house so that he could get a lay of the land and determine what system would work best. When I suggested that was not going to happen, he relaxed his demeanor, his pushiness subsided and he quickly joked with me that his request was rather odd, “why would I invite someone I didn’t know into my house?”

So there on my front step he did what most door to door sales people do, he shared with me why his product was better than others products that were available to me, he offered me free incentives and free equipment and used the classic pressure tactic of time, saying that the deal was only good that day, only in this moment, because he had to leave for BC in the morning. He said and did everything he could to make me want to buy the system and sign up for a contract. When I suggested that I would like to talk to my wife before I agreed to anything, he suggested that it would be better to sign up and give it a ten-day free trial to show her how good it was. When I told him that wasn’t going to happen, he finally agreed to give me his number so that when (not if, but when) she said yes, he could come back. Of course I never called him, but sure enough on Sunday afternoon he was back: his trip to BC had been delayed by one day and so the offer was still good for just a little bit longer, but when I said no again, it was then and only then, that his tactic changed once more, he moved on to fear, saying things like, “It’s too bad your families safety isn’t important to you.”

Now I would like to suggest that actually this young man was the rotten salesman, but the reality is he wasn’t; he actually was good at his job; he knew, what to say, when to say it and how to say it. He was constantly reading the situation and reassessing. He knew and tired every sales tactic there was to get me to sign on the bottom line; he attempted to not pressure me, but when I was slipping away, he added pressure. He tired to wow me with all that the system could do, but when I started to think I didn’t need that much, he quickly threw in free equipment. When I asked questions about the fine print, he said he would walk me through it once I was approved. He expressed to me that there was a time limit on the great deal, but then extend the time limit just enough in the hopes that I would buckle under his kindness for coming back. He had read and implemented every sales strategy he could; realistically he was a good at his job; he did and would pass his first year of marketing.

But Jesus, is rotten at sales. Today in our reading we hear how someone approaches Jesus and says, “I will follow you wherever you go,” and Jesus replies, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head.” That seems an odd way to respond, but effectively what he is suggesting to this would be follower is that that life he is following, is not cushy; it doesn’t come with a VIP card to the classiest hotel in Jerusalem, it doesn’t come with any extra incentives, there is no fine print to worry about or cover up because what you see is what you get. He does not oversell the life of discipleship. It is almost as if what Jesus is doing is the opposite of what a good salesperson would do, which is actually pointing out all the ways that people won’t actually follow. When the people say I will follow, Jesus seemingly says, “Oh, no you won’t.” Can you imagine being one of those people that we read about who have come to Jesus and said I will follow you and Jesus basically says, “Not likely?” It’s just simply not a good marketing strategy, to convince the people that what you have to offer they don’t want.

Jesus does however, change his strategy for a moment in our reading and actually begins the conversation by saying follow me, but the person to whom he says it to replies, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father,” seems a reasonable request, but Jesus replies, “Let the dead, bury their own dead.” That’s a complicated statement. At the Men’s night this past week we discussed that statement and what we seem to agree on, adding to it Jesus point of about not looking back once your hand is on the plow, that what Jesus seems to be saying, is move forward, don’t dwell on what’s behind you, don’t loiter in what’s already gone, don’t focus on how things used to be; move forward, keep your eyes, mind and heart on what’s in front of you.

This of course is what would make Jesus fail his marketing class, because Jesus, as Debie Thomas suggested is a rotten salesman, but I think that’s good. You see Jesus doesn’t need to sell anyone on God’s grace. God’s grace is already present in all of us. The grace of God resides in our very beings. But what Jesus does want to do, is to ensure that we his followers understand what the life of discipleship actually is. The life of faith is not about leading with anger, but leading with love. The life of faith is about forgiveness not retribution. The life of faith is about seeing God in every person we meet, even those that grind every gear we have. The life of faith is about living in love. When Jesus had said the things we read about today, his face is set towards Jerusalem, which means that he knows those that follow him will soon be faced with the horrors of the cross and death. The life disciples, as theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, so eloquently pointed out is to understand that the grace God offers us is costly, not cheap. Its costly, because to live in God’s grace, means that we have moved past the comforts of consumerism, the security of how it’s always been done, and allow the Holy Spirit to move within our lives and our community and be willing to move with the Spirit. It’s costly because it means we will have to, not may have to, but will enter into moments, situations and relationships that will be so incredibly hard and yet we need to still stand on the side of love.

Towards the end of her essay Debie Thomas raises another point and question that I found to be profound, “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 (always familiar, never changing) version we’ve custom-designed to keep our pews from emptying?”²

I am glad that Jesus is a rotten salesman, because it reminds us, as I think was his intent to do, that the life of faith is not a commodity that should be sold and traded. It’s not a life that is designed to bring comfort and security and ease. Instead what Jesus points out today, the life of faith is a life that has its eyes firmly fixed on Jerusalem, a life fixed on the message of the cross and the grace of the resurrection, a life that calls us out of the comforts of the church and into relationships with those outside the church, not to scold or convert, but to be witness of and witness to the grace of God moving in everyone and all around us. You cannot sell something that is already free. So, Jesus doesn’t try. Instead he is honest and open about what a life of faith is; it’s trusting in the grace of God to guide us in all life’s moments and living into that promise, find the wisdom, strength and courage to constantly move forward with love and grace. And thanks be to God for that. Amen.

² <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2251>