

## No more excuses

Pastor Hubert, June 30, '13 (on Luke 9:51-62)



As I was preparing for this service and reading the passage from Luke we just heard, I had to think of two bumper stickers I saw not too long ago. The first one had just two words on it, in big, bold print. All I'll say about the first word is that it had four letters and it was rude. The second word was "religion". I'll leave it at that. The other bumper sticker made me smile. It said: "Jesus preached the Kingdom of God. What he got was the church."

Jesus never intended to start a new church or religion. What he did was explaining to people what God has in mind for us and this fragile creation. Basically he said: you want to know what God is like? Look to me. You want to know how God likes you to be? Look to me. That's Jesus in a nutshell, "Jesus for Dummies": no church, no religion - but a lifestyle, a movement. Or as he and his disciples called it: the Way, with a capital W.

Even so, the Way of Jesus did develop into its own religion and called itself "Christianity". And pretty soon Christianity did what every self-respecting religion does: it developed doctrines and dogmas. Stuff you must believe in, and if you don't believe in them, you're out.

Next, Christianity tried to live out those doctrines in ways that weren't always Christ-like. Over the centuries, Christianity became known as the religion of the Crusades, the Inquisition, witch hunts, persecution of non-believers, killing tens of millions of people. And if they didn't kill them, they excommunicated and imprisoned them for heresy. For instance people who claimed that the earth was not at the centre of the universe - even though the bible says so.

More recently, a big chunk of Christianity supports those who believe in pre-emptive war, economic policies that make the richer and the poor poorer, judgment and persecution of gay people and others, participation in the Residential School System that all but decimated and permanently scarred the aboriginal population - it's a long and deeply shameful list.

For some reason, the temptation to dislike and to get rid of people we don't understand and are different from us has always been with us, as we can see in this passage from Luke, where Jesus and his disciples are about to enter a Samaritan village.

Now the Samaritans were not like the Jews. They were closely related to each other, but they worshiped differently. They spoke with an accent. They did things their own unique way. And for centuries, they and the Jews hated each other's guts.

That's why the parable of "the good Samaritan" is so powerful. Samaritans were considered scum of the earth, and here's Jesus using a despicable Samaritan as the *good* guy, and religious Jews as the bad guys. Jesus liked turning things upside-down and shake things up.

So when Jesus' disciples found they weren't welcome in a Samaritan village, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and kill them?" Elijah had done something like that once, and the disciples couldn't wait to try it out on the Samaritans. Jesus, of course, rebukes the disciples. The words "revenge" and "punishment" aren't in his vocabulary, and shouldn't be in ours, either. And yet, Christianity has been trying to throw people in the fire ever since.

That's what bad religion can do. So looking at it that way, we can understand where that first offensive bumper sticker came from. Religion has a lot of negative baggage to deal with. Saying you're religious does not automatically mean you're a good person. In fact, sometimes it can even mean the opposite.

After Jesus rebuked the disciples, they go on to another village. On their way, they meet several people who want to join them. That's what happens when you're a celebrity – and Jesus definitely was a celebrity in his day: fame is a huge turn-on, people want to be part of it. Hangers-on were just as common then as they are now.

But the way of Jesus is not as easy or fun as they might think. One would-be follower tells Jesus, "I will follow you *wherever* you go." And Jesus replies, "You know, even foxes have holes, and birds have their nests; but I don't even know where I'll spend the night or where my next meal will come from."

To another, Jesus says, "Follow me." But that person says, "First let me go and bury my father." And Jesus' reply? "Let the dead bury their own dead." (more about that in a moment, so hold on to that thought.)

A third person says, "I will follow you, Lord - but first let me say farewell to my loved ones." And Jesus tells him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

This is not sweet-Jesus-the-nice-guy they taught you in Sunday School. This is tough love. His three responses are all harsh, almost insensitive, but the second response is probably the harshest: "Let the dead bury their own dead."

This man's father has just died! For a Jewish person, nothing is more important than making sure that the body of your father is properly buried after death - and of course Jesus knew that.

It's a shocking statement, and yet, it is also a brilliant one-liner that immediately grabbed people's attention (and still does to this day).

So what exactly does Jesus mean by the dead burying their dead? Well, obviously, he is talking about people who are alive, because only someone who is alive can bury someone who is dead. It's kind of hard to go grab a shovel and start digging if you're dead.

So, Jesus is talking about people who may be alive but are without life - in *that* sense they are dead. All they want is a comfortable, pleasant lifestyle that doesn't ask any critical questions; and they will resist anything that may interfere with that lifestyle. Jesus is saying that it is possible to live a life that is lifeless. In fact, it's all too easy to live like that.

If Jesus was here, walking around and speaking to us in the 21st century, he might say, let the dead churches bury the dead churches.

So many churches are so busy trying to keep things as they are or once were. But in doing so, they are already dead. All their energy goes into trying to survive, so there's hardly any energy left to do what they *should* be doing: working for the kingdom of God. They're living in the past they know, instead of the future where anything can happen. And that can be frightening.

They forget that Jesus also said that those who try to save their life will lose it, but those who lose their life for his sake and for the sake of the Good News will find their life restored.

If most of our efforts go into saving our life, saving our religion, our institution, then we're already dead. But if we are willing to take a risk, to dare to do something big, something that risks sacrificing the church itself for the sake of others and for the sake of the Good News, then we will find our life restored.

So if someone drives around with that bumper sticker that says, well, you know... perhaps we should ask ourselves just what religion or what god they are talking about. If they are talking about a god who is judgmental, a god who rains fire down upon people and kills them – if they are talking about a religion that sucks the life out of people, denying them abundant life – then that god and that religion have to be stopped.

I realize this can make you feel, well, uncomfortable. It may not be what you hoped you'd hear this morning. And that's understandable; the very first followers of Jesus felt just as uncomfortable. This was not what they wanted to hear, either.

But if the end of these false gods means life for all, we have nothing to lose and everything to gain. Because the Way of Jesus has nothing to do with the way of death. The Way of Jesus *overcomes* the way of death. The Way of Jesus is about *life*. So, as followers of the Way of Jesus, everything we do should *also* be about life and God's kingdom of shalom.

Jesus came so that *all* people might have life, and have it abundantly. *All* people, not just the ones *we* like and who say and believe the things *we* say and believe – but everyone. That's the Way Jesus lived his life and he invites us to do the same. And *that* is truly Good News. Amen.