

Commitment can be a hard thing to come by these days. If I were to announce in worship this morning that I was in need of a group of people to try out a new Bible study, I wonder how many people would show up for it. I'm guessing a few of you might be thinking, I would check it out. But what if I were to add that this study would be longer than your typical 6-8 weeks, it would last at least a year, and you couldn't miss a single session, I wonder how many takers I would have then?

These days we all have so many different things that we are committed to! We have our jobs, or if you are retired you probably volunteer or have other obligations. We also have our household responsibilities, our spouses, our friends, our television shows, we even have commitments through our children or grandchildren who also have obligations such as; school, sports, homework, clubs, boyscouts, dance, Sunday school, Confirmation. With all these requirements and responsibilities taking up our time and energy, whenever we are asked to add one more thing to our lists, it had better be something we really enjoy doing, or it needs to be something extremely important, vital, or life affirming!

In our Gospel story for today, and during the past couple of weeks, Jesus has had some tough things to say, teachings that are hard-hitting with some difficulty to them. He is the bread of life, come down from heaven, he is not merely human, but divine, unless we eat of his flesh and drink of his blood we will have no life in us, no one can come to him unless it is granted by his Father. We see just how difficult Jesus words are when we witness how the people in crowd react to the spiritual ideas he is trying to instill upon them. And how do they respond to his proclamation? They declare that his teachings are too difficult, and eventually many of them turn their backs on him and cease to follow him!

Wow! It's hard to imagine such a drastic change taking place in the people after they had encountered Jesus healing the sick, after they had had heard him say

some amazing things about God, after they had experienced first-hand his miracle of feeding thousands of people just with a small amount of bread and fish! All of a sudden when his teachings get deeper, when they aren't plain and simple or easy to grasp, they start to lose their commitment to Jesus, they become divided by their ability, or inability, to continue following him.

When some of his disciples declare, "These are tough words, who can hear them or accept them, we should consider that they aren't just having a hard time hearing or accepting the Words of Jesus, they are also having difficulties with who Jesus is claiming to be! Don't forget that many people in the crowd thought they knew who he was, that he had come from the earthy home of Joseph and Mary in Nazareth. All of a sudden, he is telling them he has come from Heaven and is offering to ascend back to his divine home. This is evident when Jesus asks his disciples and the people in the crowd if he has offended them. Not to mention the fact that he has also offered his flesh and blood to be eaten and drunk by them, and the Jews in their midst find this impossible to understand and accept!

Charles Amjad-Ali was born in Pakistan. His mother is Hindu. His father is Muslim. Charles grew up Muslim but is now a Christian, and is a Professor, teaching at Luther Seminary. Part of what intrigued him about Christianity was its absurdness. It was either the biggest joke or it had to be true! He goes on to say, "I think that the absurdness of Christianity –which we life-longers may often take for granted, is part of what made Christ's words so difficult and hard for the people in the crowd to understand. Jesus is bread that came down from heaven! They are to chew on his flesh and have life!"

Being that many of us have probably grown-up learning about Jesus at Church and in Sunday School, it can be difficult for us to imagine what the people in the crowd might have thought about such statements. Especially when many of them were lifelong Jews! If this same thing happened today, I'm guessing many of

them would probably be thinking, “Wow is this guy off his meds? Somebody needs to lock him up in a padded room and throw away the key!

So, who is able to listen to Jesus and understand him? How are the 12 disciples able to keep their commitment to Jesus, even after all the confusion and turmoil? Well, it’s a matter of faith! Proper belief is not just believing what Jesus has said, even if its’ difficult to comprehend, but true faith is also about knowing about, and believing in Jesus! Who he is, where he came from! Like the people in the crowd, like his disciples, we need to ask ourselves, who is Jesus, where was he from, where did he go, and where is he now? Is Jesus from God our Father in Heaven or does he belong in the loony bin?

What I think was so “scandalous” about Jesus is that he was just too common to have come down from heaven. He was too much like any ordinary human being. He was just like the other children of Joseph and Mary. He was just another kid from the ol’ hometown. He was too much like you and me! For believers, this is a great thing and something that we cherish! It gives us hope and encouragement for us to know that God became human and experienced the same earthy things we go through. Jesus knew what it was like to be hungry, to be sad, he experienced joy, and felt tears of sadness stream down his face.

For those in the crowd that couldn’t keep their commitment to him, or to the people now adays who are unable to commit themselves to Jesus, the problem was, and is, that he was in the wrong packaging and there is some truth that “packaging is everything!” Some of you may remember when people spent their money on pet rocks! Why would they pay for something that could be picked up in their yard? The packaging. The marketing! Apparently, Jesus was viewed by some as to being in the wrong package for one coming down from heaven!

Yet, after we spend time with God’s Word in worship, after we hear God’s word proclaimed, after we experience his Word and it makes a difference in our

lives, we begin to see that God's Word was uniquely packaged in the flesh and blood of Jesus! We should also remember that as believers, as his Modern-Day disciples, God's Word is also packaged in human beings like you and me. Just as God sent Jesus to us, so Jesus sends us out to others. We represent God's Word!

If this is the case then we must ask ourselves, how committed are we to God's word, how committed are we to God's mission of sharing Jesus with the World? If Jesus were to ask us the same question he asked Peter, "Do you also wish to go away?" What would our answer be? Would we respond the same way Peter does, Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life?" With all the Commitments and responsibilities, we have in our lives, I hope we can make Jesus and his Words our top priority! For the Gospel message that we all have been given can provide hope, love, and life to so many people who desperately need it in this world!

There was a piano teacher at a Midwest university who was simply and affectionately known as Herman. One night at a university concert, a distinguished piano player suddenly became ill while performing an extremely difficult piece. No sooner had the guest artist left, when Herman rose from his seat in the audience, walked on stage, sat down at the piano, and with great mastery completed the performance of the same musical composition.

Later at a reception following the concert, one of the students asked Herman how he was able to perform such a demanding piece so beautifully, and without notice and with no rehearsal. He replied: "In 1939, when I was a budding young concert pianist, I was arrested and placed in a Nazi concentration camp. Putting it mildly, the future looked bleak. But I knew that in order to keep the flicker of hope alive that I might someday play again, I needed to practice every day. I needed to stay committed to my art. I began by fingering a piece from my repertoire on my bare board bed late one night. The next night, I added a second piece and soon I

was running through my entire repertoire. I did this every night for five years while in that camp.”

“It so happens that the piece I played tonight at the concert hall was from that repertoire. That constant practice, my commitment to my music, is what kept my hope alive. Every day I renewed my hope that I would one day be able to play again on a real piano and in freedom.”

Noted psychologist Dr. Victor Frankel did extensive studies with holocaust survivors after World War II and came to this conclusion. He said that victims in concentration camps who gave up because they had no hope soon perished. It was only those who were able to hang on by faith and cling to hope, that there would be a future, managed to survive.

There is something in the human spirit—the Bible calls it faith—that enables individuals to overcome adversity and achieve a dream. I believe that this is the message of the Christian gospel—of hope overcoming despair, of turning defeat into victory, of transforming tragedy or disappointment into blessing and new life. Each of us has been given the gift of having Jesus in our lives. And just as we are committed to him, we are also committed to live out his Words even if they are difficult or challenging. Take up your cross and follow, love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you, forgive those who have wronged you, sell your possessions and give to the poor. Any of these could be highlighted as rough words of Jesus. But we are called to follow them, as we follow Jesus.