

The main reason Jesus is difficult and demanding, is that Jesus' way runs counter to the world's way. Like those first disciples we are prone to misunderstand and confuse Jesus' peculiar way of salvation. Yet as with the first disciples, Jesus keeps on working with us, keeps on teaching us, keeps on nudging us in the correct direction, towards living the kingdom life to which God calls us.

Poor James and John, are they deaf or crazy or stupid or stubborn? They hear Jesus describe in some detail all that is about to happen - suffering and death and still they ask for two seats in the Presidential Box! Jesus is moving inexorably toward his final agony and humiliation - the disciples are still talking about power and glory – their own power and glory!

We talk about Jesus as our Teacher, and Jesus was and is that and more. Jesus as teacher is never solely interested in leading people from point "a" to point "b". Jesus was and Jesus is all about opening up minds that were formerly closed, all about trying to get people to see the world in a different way, all about changing people's behavior, changing lives – inside and out!. Jesus is all about teaching, sharing, living, embodying, dying and rising a new way of living, with a whole new set of priorities!

If all we expect from a sermon is hearing some new nugget of information about Jesus, then both preaching, and listening to sermons would be easy. But when we recall that the goal of preaching – both for the preacher and the congregation is to see lives changed, every sermon is a challenge, an enormous challenge, for both preacher and hearer.

When Jesus spoke in riddles and parables – the disciples didn't get it!

They demanded Jesus give it to them straight – they still didn't get it!

Even when Jesus describes what will soon happen to Him, and it is not a pretty picture – they engage in selective listening and remain unmoved.

Jesus describes how He will be betrayed, rejected, killed, and rise again, with all the emotion and sincerity that accompanied these words – even this does not penetrate the firewall the disciples have erected to protect themselves! The disciples had signed on with Jesus for glory; but now Jesus talks to them of the way of the cross.

Just maybe the disciples' real problem is in fact also our real problem. It's not that they/we don't understand what Jesus is all about; it's more that understanding what Jesus was all about they/we didn't like what Jesus is all about. They/we don't like it and so they/we twist Jesus' words in such a way, that just maybe everything would come out right and they/we would come out smelling of roses.

Let's be very clear, honest and upfront, with each other and with any who come here seeking a church home, Jesus' way is a way that not many people really want to follow. It is bad enough that Jesus says that he is headed to a cross but then Jesus adds that every prospective disciples must also travel in the very same way! Mark Twain once wrote, "It's not what I don't understand in the Bible that bothers me; it's what I understand all too well."

Sometimes, we come to church expecting that there we will have our faith confirmed. We will be able to listen to the sermon, nod, and say to ourselves, "Yes, that's what I've always thought. That's how I've always seen it." And then we can go home and have lunch. Yet, today's Gospel reading offers us a startling reminder that the gospel of Jesus is considerably more dissonant and demanding! Jesus' Gospel contains a close critique of our unexamined lives; a challenge to a whole new way of living; while also providing the promise of God's love working in us to renew us, to change us and so allow us to share God's Good news everywhere we go.

The truth of Jesus' Gospel is such that none of us ever fully gets it. But thanks be to God - the point is not so much that we need to get it, but to be sure that it gets us! Held in the loving embrace of God's love we can stick with Jesus, and let Jesus keep talking to us and teaching us and changing us. This is why we should approach Sunday worship and indeed all of life, expecting to meet Jesus, expecting to be surprised, expecting to grow, expecting to be criticized and challenged and changed by Jesus and so enabled to grow in faith and love and grace.

One thing we can never say about Jesus is that He is **boring**. Jesus' teaching is always challenging, strange, off-putting, daring, but never **boring**. My friends, to the extent that we actively pay attention, listen, focus; to the extent that we will willingly unstop our ears, open our eyes, put our brains in gear; Jesus can break into our lives. As we release the brakes on all our senses and emotions, and fully engage our thoughts and feelings - Jesus comes challenging us, engaging us, enraging us, and loving us, asking us, daring us to make choices in how we will act and live!

An old country preacher had a teenage son, and it was getting time the boy should give some thought to choosing a profession. Like many young men, the boy didn't really know what he wanted to do, and he didn't seem too concerned about it. One day, while the boy was away at school, his father decided to try an experiment. He went into the boy's room and placed on his study table three objects: a Bible, a silver dollar, and a bottle of whisky. "I'll just hide behind the door," the old preacher said to himself, "and when he comes home from school this afternoon, I'll see which object he picks up. If it's the Bible, he's going to be a preacher like me, and what a blessing that would be! If he picks up the dollar, he's going to be a businessman, and that would be okay, too. But if he picks up the bottle, he's going to be a no-good drunkard, and, what a shame that would be." The old man waited anxiously, and soon

heard his son's footsteps as he entered the house whistling and headed for his room. He tossed his books on the bed, and as he turned to leave the room he spotted the objects on the table. With curiosity in his eye, he walked over to inspect them. Finally, he picked up the Bible and placed it under his arm. He picked up the silver dollar and dropped it into his pocket. He uncorked the bottle and took a big swig. "Have mercy," the old man whispered, "he's gonna be a politician!"

Today is a day all about choices – choices about how aware we are of God's provision for us; choices about the extent to which we will trust God; choices concerning our desire and attitude towards giving of our means – our money, our talents, our time – for God's work in the world through Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church. Today the response we make to the Stewardship Campaign indicates the choice and the choices we are ready to make.

Stepping Up... Reaching Out... asks you to take hold of your faith, to take hold of the faith you have, the faith you were taught, the faith you, yourself, have forged, the faith with which you have been gifted and to set out in faith - determined to keep close to Jesus as you move forward in your Christian life, serving God, serving one another, serving your neighbors.

Stepping Up... Reaching Out... invites us to realize that God needs us. Yes, God needs you! God has a life for you to live – a life that only you can live! God needs you to be committed to the way of the cross – in the way that only you can do. God needs you to live out your calling, your unique calling, in such a way that you will positively impact each other's lives and the lives of many other people through the mission and ministry of this church, serving God, one another, and your neighbors.

Stepping Up... Reaching Out... is not boring but daring, daring us to identify the very next step we will take in our life and faith. Today as you are invited to bring forward your 2010 Pledge card there is something more that I ask you to do – I ask you, before you depart from this fellowship today, to identify one decision, one choice, one change that you will make and dare to expect God to fill your life in the next week or month, so you can live a changed life, serving God, serving one another, serving your neighbors.

As we commit our lives to God I ask each of you to accept the challenge of living gratefully, gladly, generously! Will you see? Will you hear? Will you realize? Will you be aware, very aware, that your life is blessed by God? You do know don't you, you do know that you are a beloved child of God, that you are a follower of Jesus Christ, that to you the Holy Spirit brings comfort and counsel? Out of this truth you are to live gratefully, gladly and generously.

Live gratefully - thankful for all the great gifts of God present in our life, in the life of your family, in the life of the world.

Live gladly – assured that life and love will always trump death and despair.

Live generously – by living out of one of the great affirmations, that all you have belongs to God.

Live gratefully, gladly and generously by giving to God and God's work through our church a realistic, responsible, rightful proportion of your time, your talent and your treasure. As a congregation Oakland is called to live gratefully, gladly and generously as we embrace this church community as our home! Embrace one another in the life of our church, allow yourself to be embraced by this church family so you can welcome all who will be drawn here. Let us value each other and every person, let love and forgiveness shape our relationships. Let prayer and worship thrill us and change us. Let serving others define who we are when we are at our very best.

“Stepping Up... Reaching Out.. has reminded all of us that God has much for us to do We are all called to be God's people grateful, glad, generous; ready to give to God gladly a goodly proportion of all the good that God has given to us; so that God's grace may be given and granted and gifted to us and to all – guaranteed!

Gracious a good many “g's” – but just to show that I know all the alphabet – listen to and follow this sentence ....

As blessed Christians declaring earnest faith .... Get it ABCDE ...follow along now....

As blessed Christians declaring earnest faith, giving honor in Jesus. Keeping less money, now Oakland pledges, quite rightly stepping towards upping, very willingly, expanding y'all's zeroes.

Is that sentence alone not worth something more on your pledge? For real, we have so much to give. It is God who is asking, pleading, needing, expecting... God needs much from us. Oakland - it is time to be daring not boring! Amen.