

An interesting op-ed column ran in the New York Times last week. It was entitled Congregations Gone Wild. The article pointed to a trend in American religion: that more and more people see their churches as entertainment. We live in a consumer culture; going to church is like going out to a show. People appreciate theater seating. They expect polished, high-tech worship services. And, studies show, they want sermons that are funny, no more than 10 minutes long, and make them feel good about themselves.

I know some of you are thinking, what’s wrong with that?

But dig a little deeper and you realize this trend reflects how we approach the Bible, too. Too often people’s knowledge of scripture is limited to favorites like Psalm 23 or John 3:16. We get this fuzzy sense of what the Bible should sound like – the Lord is my shepherd; for God so loved the world – so that when we come across passages that are jarring or unclear we don’t know what to do with them. And, let’s be honest, there are a lot more of these hard texts in the Bible than we’d like. Verses like “If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off.” or “If you want to follow me, go, sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor.” or “You need to forgive not 7 times, but 70x7.” Texts like these make us feel uncomfortable, confused. And then there are texts that can make us offended, or even angry, like today’s gospel from Luke. “I came not to bring peace, but division.” or “You hypocrites. Why can’t you interpret the present time?” Ouch. So what do you do when God’s word isn’t always an easy word?

Carrie was a woman in my former congregation. She probably went to church every couple of months, but she didn’t think much about God when she wasn’t there. A few years back, when her kids were little, she started attending a Tuesday morning play

group at church. Over time she became friends with a couple of the other moms. They invited her to attend a women's Bible study. It was way out of Carrie's comfort zone, but she liked these women, so she agreed to go once or twice. The group was studying was the book of Daniel. It's not an easy book. It's filled with foreboding, even scary images. The more she read, the more confused she became. She said to one of her friends, "Every time I think that God is on my side, I read something that makes me wonder if that's even something I want. Sometimes I don't like the God I read about in the Bible."

Anybody agree? If you only read these 9 verses from Luke 12, I can understand why. Here, after excoriating the Pharisees and chastising the disciples, Jesus turns on the crowds. He sees their half-hearted commitment, their all-about-me-attitude, and he calls them on it. *You hypocrites! You think you understand the way God works, but you don't.* His message is getting more and more pointed. *Are you ready to take up your cross, or not?* he says. *Are you watching out for others, or for yourself? Are you prepared to give up everything for me, like I will for you?*

It's good to remember that the Christians to whom Luke was writing struggled with these same questions. For many of them, committing to the Way had come at a high cost. Relatives turned their backs on them for fear of guilt by association. Faithful Jews called them blasphemers and kicked them out of the synagogue. Gentiles saw them as religious nuts. Early Christians lost their families, their community, their security, their businesses, their way of life. *Were they prepared to give up everything for Jesus?* This passage reminds us that choosing to follow Jesus – then or now -- always means letting go of something: our stuff, our preferences, our time, even our relationships.

Is that what makes this text hardest for you? The way it highlights the cost of being Jesus' disciple? Because Jesus makes it clear that the road to the cross isn't an easy road ... for him, or for us.

Or perhaps what makes this text hard to hear is the way Jesus is treating the crowds. We like to see Jesus as a gentle, benevolent shepherd, warm and comforting. But this Jesus is blunt, even harsh. Why? Remember, he's on the way to Jerusalem. The clock is ticking. He doesn't have the time to coax along those folks who aren't sure if they can commit to his cause. Maybe he's trying to wake them up, shake them up so they'll understand just what's on the line – for him, for them.

Or maybe you're most bothered by his seemingly casual treatment of the family. "From now on," Jesus says, "households will be divided against each other, fathers against sons; mothers against daughters; in-laws against one another." We live in a time where family is often seen as the most important thing. It was no less true in Jesus' day. In the first century one's very identity came from who your ancestors were. But Jesus isn't advocating his followers pull apart or distance themselves from their loved ones. He's simply acknowledging that discipleship comes with a cost – sometimes a big one. And even as Jesus states that families might be split over religious belief, he's not suggesting they treat others with contempt – if anything, it means striving even more to love their neighbors ... even if their neighbors aren't loving them back.

The thing to remember with hard texts is that they always point to something that really matters to God. When Jesus says, "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off," maybe he's saying, don't let anything get in the way of your doing the right thing. When he says, "Go, sell your possessions," it could be he's suggesting that we need to hold

on to our stuff a little less tightly, and take better care of those in need. When he says, “You hypocrites,” perhaps we need to take a hard look at our own attitudes toward discipleship, so we’re ready and able to live out our faith in spite of the cost.

Remember Carrie, the woman I mentioned earlier? Somewhere along the way the time she spent in Bible study started to take hold of her heart. It opened her eyes to God’s love and promises and gave her a hunger to learn more. But she soon found it only made her life more complicated. You see, as a sign of her commitment she really wanted to start giving regularly to the church. She looked at her family’s finances and figured they could afford about \$40 a week. It felt like the right thing to do. But there was a problem. Carrie’s husband Jeff didn’t have much use for church. And he sure didn’t want his paycheck going to support it. So what should Carrie have done? Found a way to stick her neck out for Jesus’ sake? Or done nothing to keep the peace at home?

There aren’t always easy answers. Maybe that’s why we don’t always get an easy word. But what we do get is this: a promise, that God’s word always flows from his wide, wide love. And that even when the world is divided, his arms are open wide to unite us. Amen.