

IT PAYS TO ADVERTISE

Mark 1: 40-45

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It has been said that selling is part of the American DNA. We Americans love to sell products. Advertising is part of our cultural make-up, and no matter how much we complain about commercials, we love a good one. We love the Doritos commercials make us laugh, the Hallmark commercials that make us cry and we even like the ones that make us cringe.

We reward the most creative and effective ones with Clio Awards.

We talk with our friends during the Super Bowl but all talking ceases for the commercials.

We remember and many of us can recite our favorite ads. We have even created board games around "classic" commercials. We pay for the privilege of advertising for companies by wearing their t-shirts and we pay extra for clothing made by designers who put the label on the outside of the garment.

People running for public office routinely pay about \$1 for every thirty voters to advertise on yard signs the effectiveness of which is dubious at best. They know that, according to literature, yard signs don't really convince anyone. They create some name recognition for those who need it and they remind those who are already convinced. And, more importantly, they give the convinced voter a sense of ownership.

When you put a sign in your yard "the" candidate becomes "my" candidate.

When the leper came to Jesus in Mark 1:40, Jesus was just "a healer." When the same man leaves the scene in 1:45 Jesus has become "my healer." And that man can't help himself; he just has to tell others about *his* healer.

We best follow the Great Commission of Jesus (Matthew 28:16-20) when the story we tell is not about the savior, but about our savior.

ADVERTISING AGE

Last week one of the networks had a reporter standing outside Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis, interviewing people as they tailgated and made their way into the Super Bowl. Two of the questions he asked were: "Who won the Super Bowl two years ago?" And, "What was the final score of last year's Super Bowl?" The vast majority of the people, about 90 percent couldn't answer either question.

But when they were asked which commercial from last year's Super Bowl was their favorite, they all had a ready answer (Little Darth Vader was the winner) though few could remember what the commercial was advertising.

This year, a 30-second spot during the big game cost somewhere around \$3.5 million. (That's down from \$3.7 million in 2010.) That cost is just for the time. The production costs for the commercial itself (talent, special effects, music, etc.) probably doubled or even tripled that price for many ads.

Mine was the Volkswagen ad with the dog that was too fat to get out through the doggy door -- the one with the surprise ending featuring the cantina from Star Wars and the little Darth Vader -- a commercial about a commercial, if you will.

So, was the high cost of those ads worth it?

Jonathan Salem Baskin, writing for *Ad Age* thinks not. He believes that advertising should always be about the product and those expensive Super Bowl ads are more about the ads themselves than the product they are supposed to be advertising. And, in some cases he's right. Can you remember what that ad with all the barking dogs was advertising? Does anyone even know what GoDaddy.com is?

Other experts in the field disagree with Baskin. All ads, they say, are not about selling a product. Some products are already sold and the ad is just to cement the relationship between the buyer and the product, to make us feel good about a product we already like.

Committed Coke drinkers are probably not going to change to Pepsi. They like Coke. The point of the ad is to keep them liking coke and feeling good about the choice they have made. They want the customer to think of Coke not just as a soft drink, but as my soft drink. Their goal is that people who drink Coke will come to think of themselves as "Coke people."

It's all about personal ownership, you see. It's about people telling other people about "my candidate." It's about getting people to be so excited about your brand that they wear your label on the outside of their clothes and identify themselves with your logo. It's about creating "Chevy people" and "Ford people," "Coke people" and "Pepsi people."

And for those of us who call ourselves "Christian," it's about creating "Jesus people."

MY HEALER

Immediately after dealing with the demoniac in the synagogue and healing Peter's mother-in-law, while traveling around Galilee, a leper who has obviously heard of Jesus' healing ability approaches Jesus. As the story unfolds we learn that this guy is something of a jerk.

We're sorry about his illness but, let's face it, he's kind of abrasive.

He opens the seen not by asking Jesus to heal him but by challenging Jesus. His remark is almost a taunt. "Jesus, you can heal me if you want to."

We've had people like this come into the church office when they need help. They have heard from someone, somewhere, that the Methodist Church is good for a few bucks or a voucher so they come expecting to get in on some of the good fortune being handed out here.

Before they come to the door they have convinced themselves that help is available here. All they have to do is show up and ask and, if we don't give it to them, it isn't because we don't have it, it's because we don't want to give it. We are, for whatever reason, withholding it from them.

Sometimes we have money to help and we do help them. But sometimes we don't. Sometimes we have helped all the people we can afford to help and we have exhausted our resources. Sometimes they have been misinformed. But that is never how they read the situation. They honestly believe that we could help them if we wanted to; we just don't want to.

So they challenge us: "Well, what am I supposed to do?" or "You mean you aren't going to help me, is that it?"

Remember the text from last week, how we were told that "all came" and "many were healed?" Remember that? Not everyone who came was healed. And that's the way it is here at the church. Not everyone who comes to the door with their hand out gets help. Sometimes we have to refer them on down the street or we just have to say, "I'm sorry. We just can't help you at this time."

So, that's what the leper in this story does to Jesus. No doubt he's been to every healer he could find. He's been to physicians and clinics and he's sent checks to TV preachers and received prayer towels and vials of Jordan River water and nothing has worked. But he has heard that Jesus is the real deal.

But he's got this wall up. He doesn't want to seem vulnerable by asking. So he lays out a challenge. "If you choose to you can make me clean."

Now watch Jesus.

He doesn't rise to the bait. He doesn't respond to this guy's challenge by being defensive or explaining himself. He responds out of pity.

"Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him..." In one sentence, he breaks two cultural taboos. One, he allows himself to feel pity.

For some reason, our culture has decided that pity is a bad thing. Only weak-kneed, do-gooders allow themselves to feel pity. It's a sign of weakness AND it's an insult to those toward whom it is directed. None of us wants to be pitied. Only losers are pitied. Only the weak and the wounded are the objects of pity. To have pity directed toward us is to admit to being a failure.

But that is not the Biblical stance, is it? Jesus feels pity for this man and he is no weaker for it. In fact, he may be the strongest person in the story because he can, in fact, allow himself to be vulnerable enough to feel pity for another human being, even one who is being kind of a jerk.

Then, as if feeling pity isn't enough, Jesus breaks another cultural taboo. He touches this man, this unclean man, this leper. You just didn't do that back in those days. Leprosy was not a disease as much as it was a contamination. To touch a person with leprosy was to risk being contaminated, being made unclean.

And immediately, the leprosy leaves the man. He is cleansed, healed.

Now, the next part of the story is a little confusing.

Throughout the gospel of Mark there is a continuing theme that scholars call the "Markan Secret Theme." Jesus does something, heals someone, performs a miracle, teaches a lesson that reveals him to be the Messiah and then he tells those who witness it not to tell anyone.

Scholars have debated the reason or reasons behind this recurring theme and it's a fairly complicated business but I think the simplest explanation is often the one most likely to be true and that is this: For Jesus, these miraculous events are meaningless in and of themselves. The miracles, the healings, even many of the lessons have no meaning outside the context of the Gospel message as a whole. Put another, more contemporary way, Jesus wants to control his message and he can't do that if his disciples and the people who are being healed are running around telling bits and pieces of the story.

So Jesus tells this guy to simply abide by the laws of Leviticus wherein it states that if a person claims to have been healed of leprosy they must have that healing confirmed by the priests at the temple before they can re-enter the community. Go have your healing confirmed by the priests, he says, and then go quietly back to your life.

But, as we have already established, the guy just can't bring himself to do that.

A few minutes ago this Jesus was just another alleged healer, but now he is "my healer." The message about Jesus that was distant and objective is now up close and personal. The story this man has to tell is as much about him as it is about Jesus.

I was a leper and now I am healed.

I was unclean and now I am clean.

I was exiled from the community and now I can live with my family again.

I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.

And so effective is this story that Jesus is mobbed by people who need healing, so much so that he can't even enter the towns but has to stay out in the countryside where the people can come to him and, eventually, he has to leave the area just to get a moment's peace.

UP TO YOUR NECK IN LEPERS

One of the reasons I love the Mark's gospel is his abrupt, matter-of-fact style of storytelling. He doesn't spend a lot of time explaining things or drawing conclusions. He tells you what happened in a sort of lean, bare-bones style and then he moves on to the next event.

In this story we are left to draw our own conclusions, of which there appear to be two:

The **first** is this: If you insist on healing a leper, don't be surprised when, the next day, you find yourself up to your neck in lepers wanting to be healed.

To modernize that lesson you can substitute "helping" for healing and "poor people" for lepers. Or you can substitute "addicted people" or "hard living people." The truth is just as true. You help one person and whole lot of needy people are going to hear about it and want to be helped.

That's the way it is, says Mark. You can't prevent it, you can't escape it. Jesus couldn't two thousand years ago and you can't today. Learn to live with it.

The **second** lesson is this: There is no mode of advertising that is more effective than one person telling another person the story of their personal experience.

"I went to such-and-such restaurant and had the best meal I've ever eaten."

"I got these shoes at such-and-such and they're the most comfortable shoes I've ever owned."

"I called that repairman and he got here quickly, was courteous, and made the repair perfectly at a reasonable price."

"I drove that care 200,000 miles and it never gave me a lick of trouble."

It is through hearing the stories of "Chevy people" that other people become Chevy people.

It is through hearing the stories of "Mac" users that other people become Mac users.

And it is through hearing the stories of Christians that other people become Christians.

So, why aren't we telling our stories?

A BETTER MOUSETRAP, A BETTER SAVIOR

A seminary professor of mine used to say, "If we discovered a perfect cure for athlete's foot we would tell everyone we know. But when we discover the perfect cure for the troubled soul, we don't tell anyone about Him."

And he was right.

We get our back pain fixed, we tell everyone about our chiropractor. We find a new recipe that's fast, easy, cheap and delicious and we can't wait to share it with other cooks. We hire a carpet cleaner who gets that nasty stain out that others couldn't, we tell all our friends.

So why is it that we are so reluctant to tell people about our experience with Jesus and his church?

I suspect that there may be any of several reasons:

We may not have a story to tell. Maybe we come to church because we always have or because our friends do or the kids want to or because our parents expect it of us, but nothing in church has ever really moved us or spoken to the troubles and issues of our lives. Maybe we've never allowed ourselves to be touched by what happens in church. Maybe Jesus is just a guy we learned about in Sunday School but who has never really spoken to our everyday reality.

If that's the case, then I challenge you, this morning to start taking this religion thing seriously. Start asking yourself about this Jesus who calls us to love our enemies and sell everything we have and give it to the poor. Who insists that God will love us like a lost and wayward child returning home. Who accepts us before we ever realize how badly we need acceptance.

Start reading. Start asking questions. Start exploring. I've been studying and working at this Christianity thing for the past 50 years and I feel like I've just scratched the surface. It is truly an adventure more exciting than any frontier, more challenging than any puzzle, and more exciting than any exploit you can imagine.

Get yourself a story.

Or we may have a story to tell but we're afraid to tell it. We're not good story tellers or speakers or our story is very personal to us and hard to put into words.

If that is the case, then I suggest that you practice. Writers learn to write by writing. Drivers learn to drive by driving. Witnesses learn to witness by witnessing.

The tradition of the church is that we learn to tell our story by hearing others share theirs and then sharing ours in a safe, non-judgmental environment. Like church. This is where we learn to tell our stories, first to each other, then to the world. If you have a story to tell, tell it first to your friends. As we used to say, "share your testimony" with those you trust here in your church home.

Then share it with your family: your spouse, your kids. I can't imagine that they've never heard your Christian testimony but I suppose it's possible. Well, it's about time they did. Share it with them.

And then, share it with others.

And that brings us to our final point, this morning. Once we have a story to tell, a Christian testimony to share, with whom do we tell it, and when, and under what circumstances?

The “who” is easy:

Friends. Family. Neighbors. Co-workers.

We’ve already covered your immediate family and your church friends, so this is talking about your extended family and your friends in other areas of your life.

Our story is best heard by those with whom we have developed a relationship. Shouting it from a street corner may make us feel very self-righteous, but it isn’t very effective evangelism. Those best positioned to hear our story when we tell it are those with whom we have opened ourselves in other areas of our lives.

So friends, family, neighbors and co-workers are the ones to which we can probably most effectively share our stories.

When and where to share our story is a little harder but not terribly so.

We share our story most effectively when we share it as an answer to a question that is being asked. When the people in our lives are hurting, searching, asking, exploring, that is the time to share our story with them. When our story can provide a solution to their problem, that is the time to share it with them.

And notice that “share” is the operative word.

When we tell our story we are not lecturing or offering advice or setting ourselves up as role models. We are simply sharing our experience. We are holding out a possibility that worked for us.

WHERE THE HAND HOLDS ARE

Most of us are, I think, reluctant to share our stories because we don’t want to come off self-righteous, or a know-it-all, or a religious nut.

But it needn’t be that way.

My friend and mentor, Charlie Cecil, about whom you have heard much, used to tell the story of a man who was walking along, not paying attention, and fell into a deep hole. He got up and stood at the bottom and dusted himself off and, after discovering that he wasn’t badly hurt, he called out for help.

Another man came to the lip of the hole and looked in. “Fell in, did ya?” he asked.

“Yes,” said the man at the bottom of the hole. “Can you help me get out?”

“Sure,” said the man at the top, whereupon he jumped into the hole.

“What are you doing?” cried the first man. Now we’re both stuck in this terrible hole. I meant for you to go get help or find a rope. How can you possibly help me now?”

“Well,” said the second man. “I’ve been here before. I know where the hand holds are.”

Evangelism, at its best, is one person showing another person where the hand holds are when we’ve fallen into the holes of life.

AMEN