

The Trouble With Jesus

a sermon based on John 6:56-69

In the novel, *Joshua*, by Joseph Girzone, things are never quite the same after Joshua comes to the town of Auburn New York. Joshua moves to the quiet suburban town—a town filled with kind and friendly people, just going about their business. Many of them are active members of their churches and synagogues. And Joshua fits in well with them, is liked and accepted. Joshua is a fascinating character, a bit mysterious. That's why many people desire to have him as a friend.

Joshua is a wood-carver. His carvings are exquisite and beautiful, and speak powerful messages to those who purchase them or receive them as gifts. He is kind and gracious, especially to children and the poor. Joshua is a sought-after party guest, and many people discover that he possesses deep wisdom, far beyond his simple, humble appearance. When Joshua shares his religious insights, people are intrigued, fascinated, moved, and overwhelmed. They feel as if he knows them intimately, and that he knows God intimately as well. Joshua quickly becomes a popular person in Auburn.

But his popularity doesn't last. People begin to get more and more uncomfortable with Joshua. His speech is too bold and, sometimes, blunt; he's not always "nice"! He is quick to point out the follies of organized religion. He calls people to freedom and joy, upsetting their safe, routine lives. He challenges people to change the way they live.

People get suspicious of Joshua. There's something really strange about him. They begin to realize there is more to Joshua than meets the eye. He seems to be much more than just a plain and simple wood-carver. Eventually the reader discovers that Joshua is really Jesus, Jesus doing again what he did 2,000 years ago. Jesus mingling with the crowds, meeting people on their own turf, dazzling them with his wisdom, but scaring them with his mysterious character and angering them with his air of authority. This is Jesus, come to free people from their phoniness and their emptiness and their sin. And, in the process, people are offended.

As the book progresses, the reader suspects that more and more people will turn away from Joshua. A climactic conflict is on the horizon. Joshua is on a course that could lead to his destruction. But one knows that there are some who will stand by Joshua no matter what, to the bitter end if necessary.

That's the trouble with Joshua: he won't let people go on coasting through life. Joshua

demands a decision—people must either be for him or against him; they *can't* be neutral.

That's the trouble with Jesus! He feeds 5,000 people or more with just a few pieces of bread and fish. Then he intrigues people by talking about the bread of life. At first folks are fascinated, but then he starts claiming to *be* the bread of life, and he insists that people eat his body and drink his blood, and he demands that they put their trust in him. And that's going *more than a little bit* too far! Now people are getting offended!

That's the trouble with Jesus! When he claimed to be God in the flesh, that was going just too far, some people thought! If he had just been content with being the son of Joseph, and stuck to feeding the hungry and curing the blind, and not insisting he was really the Son of God, he would have been much easier to accept. But claiming to be *divine*? Insisting that people believe in him as the Way to life with the heavenly Father? *No way! That was just too much!*

And that's not even all. He even had the audacity to say he would return to the Father by being lifted up. The Son of God was going to die! The Son of God was going to suffer and bleed and be humiliated by being lifted up on a cross.

Now that was *really* hard to take! *That's not how God should act!*

It really is troubling that Jesus died. He acted TOO human! The Son of God hung on a cross, and died!

And *this* is the One who challenges us to follow him, who demands our trust in him.

It can be pretty hard to swallow! It's not so easy to be a follower of *this* Jesus.

And that's precisely the trouble with Jesus, isn't it? He doesn't make it easy. *He makes it hard—for himself, and for those who might want to follow him.*

No, it's not so easy to get up Sunday after Sunday and go to worship, when we see others working in their yards, or heading off to fish or hunt or play golf, or relaxing at the cabin or the campground. And it's not so easy to be asked to sacrifice, a little bit like Jesus has sacrificed himself for us. To give generously of our hard-earned money. To serve our church and family and community, using our time and our God-given gifts for the sake of others. To live differently in the world: to refuse to take God's name in vain, to treat others with respect instead of ridicule, to tell the story of Jesus and live with integrity, when it seems as if the rule is, "Everyone for yourself!" It's not so easy to follow One who offended so many people, with his plain and sometimes blunt talk, with his claim to be God's Son, and with his bold, prophetic actions. It's not so easy to acknowledge that Jesus is God in human flesh, and trust in One who was lifted up on a cross.

No, it *isn't* so easy to be a follower of Jesus. It's no wonder that so many drifted away in Jesus' day, and it's no surprise that so many drift away or reject the claims of Jesus today. *Jesus is just TOO troubling!* And yet, some catch on. We're here this morning because we have caught on—or, at least, we're curious enough to hang out with those who have caught on. There are those, like Peter and ten others (the Twelve minus Judas), who discovered the truth about Jesus. The truth that, in the humiliation of his death, *Jesus is God in the flesh!* This one, so troubling, so determined to turn the world upside-down, so insistent that we live differently in the world, *this troubling Jesus is the one who gives us life!*

We can trust Jesus. We can believe in Jesus. That's why Peter made his confession, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

Yes, Jesus is the Holy One of God, and so we cling to him. We cling to him for dear, eternal life!

Another man named Peter discovered the power of Jesus. For years, he had lived under a destructive power—the power of addiction to alcohol. But Pete had been

attending Alcoholics Anonymous for six months. At each meeting, he introduced himself, “My name is Peter, and I’m an alcoholic.” The drinking he had enjoyed so much in the past had finally enslaved him. It cost him jobs and financial security and lots of heartache, and it almost cost him his marriage and even his life. But, on the outside at least, after treatment, attendance at AA several times a week, and six months of sobriety, Pete seemed to be doing OK.

On the inside, however, Pete was living through hell. He craved “just one more drink” constantly, even though he knew it could destroy him. He wasn’t strong enough to resist. He needed to lean on his AA sponsor. And, he needed to cling to his higher power, to God as Peter understood God. Pete wanted to believe that God could help. Even in his drinking years, Pete had been an occasional church-goer, so he hoped he could believe in God. But he wanted something more than a “Higher Power” who was out there somewhere. He wanted—*he needed*—a personal God, a God who was real, a God he could sink his teeth into.

One Sunday, a Communion Sunday, Pete mumbled to God on his way to the altar, echoing his AA confession, “I’m Pete, and I’m a sinner.” He approached the altar reverently. He waited to receive the bread and wine. He knelt there and received the body and blood of Christ. It struck him in a way it had never struck him before: this Jesus, the one coming to him now, was not a vague, nebulous God out there

somewhere. “Peter, the body of Christ, given for you. The blood of Christ, shed for you.” He heard those words, heard them in a way he had never heard them before, and then he knew: *this Jesus was a God he could, indeed, sink his teeth into!* God had come near to Peter—very near!—even to dwell with him.

Pete couldn’t keep the tears from streaming down his face. And at that moment, he was so much at peace he didn’t even care. “That’s exactly what I need,” he thought, as he prayed after receiving Communion. “I need a God who dwells in me. Only a God like that can give me what I need. Only Jesus can give me new life and new dedication.”

As he thought that, he remembered the words he had heard just recently, the words of another Peter, centuries before: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” Jesus—God in the flesh—a man who is the Son of God. Jesus—the *man* Jesus—has the words of eternal life.

That’s the trouble with Jesus.

Or is that the *gift* of Jesus?

You decide.