

I believe most of you know our one member, Ethan Minkel, works for Wal-Mart as a manager at the regional level. I've shared with him a number of times that I remember the construction of the huge new store in Canandaigua. And I've said that wouldn't have the stomach to handle the financial risk of something that big. The store is several times bigger than the old one. I have no idea how many millions of dollars it cost to build. Plus there's a whole new parking lot and all the infrastructure investment to support it all. Let's not forget that the store inventory itself is worth several million dollars. I've said that I assume they have financial models they use to help determine where and how big to build. They look at population, traffic flow, average household income, proximity to other stores and competitors.

And he agreed, indeed they do have financial models they use, and most of the time they are right. They may be risking millions upon millions of dollars, but they can be pretty confident that the risk will pay off. In the case of the store

in Canandaigua, the risk is paying off. It is the right size store and it is doing very well.

I think we are all willing to take risks. We know the saying well, "Nothing ventured, nothing gained." But before we take risks we want to know what we are getting into, and we probably want to be pretty confident of success. Of course, sometimes you're wrong. But that's okay. You pick yourself up and try again.

Use the idea of retailers taking risks in the construction of a store and put yourself in the place of a Jew in Jesus' day awaiting the coming of the promised Messiah. There are qualities and characteristics you're looking for. He needs to be faithful, a God-fearing man. You expect him to be strong, charismatic, and a good leader. He'll know and obey the religious rules. He'll speak with authority and be respected in religious circles. There's also some theological things you're looking for: He has to have the right pedigree - be descended of David. There are prophecies he'll be fulfilling, of course.

And then there's this man from Nazareth called Jesus. After a couple years of preaching in the countryside he and a rag-tag bunch of merry followers come into Jerusalem for Passover. Reports about him are mixed. He grew up in Nazareth, but the Messiah was expected to come from Bethlehem. His family heritage isn't clear. Apparently he's done some miracles, but he's also gotten into plenty of spots of trouble. He follows the rules - sort of. Some of the religious leaders like him. Others don't.

If the Messiah is someone you're going to pin the hopes of the nation upon, this guy is coming up weak. If you were a Wal-Mart executive and you were looking for a place to build a store, you'd want more solid evidence before you'd take the risk.

I say all this because as we are here on Palm Sunday and we remember the crowds greeting Jesus' arrival, I think it is safe to say that many of them were not solidly convinced of Jesus' abilities. On Sunday they were welcoming him gladly into Jerusalem, but they were expecting to see evidence of his messiahship. That didn't come. Given the risk and how much

faith they would have to put in him to really follow him, he just wasn't good enough.

It is easy to think of the crowds as fickle - excitedly embracing Jesus on Sunday, then crying for his death by Friday. But from their perspective, there was a lot on the line. And the same goes for us.

One of the ongoing challenges to faith is the God simply doesn't give us as much solid evidence as we want -or think we need to have- in order to make the major life commitments necessary to be a disciple.

The call of Christian life is very counter-cultural, and it is getting more counter-cultural every day. If you are going to be a committed Christian in our society in this day and age you are going to pay the price. It's going to cost you socially, and it will probably cost you financially. Most of us do the best we can, but then we fail. We know we should do more, but we start to feel guilty.

Kids sports is always a prime example for us. We know that athletic involvement will help our kids to grow, to be well-rounded, well received, and successful. But in our culture today, a church-attending child hasn't gained anything. There's no social benefit to bringing your child to church. It won't help them get a job in the future, or get into a school, or get acceptance or anything.

In our nation today, from a social perspective, faith and church involvement is purely a liability, and has no assets.

We turn to God and, like the crowds, say: you're asking us to make a lot of sacrifices and take a lot of risks, but we don't see, feel, or experience benefits from it. We want more security, more guarantees.

Here's how we wish things would work: As you know, our snowplowing costs from last winter were way beyond normal - we're so many thousand over that's it's causing cash flow problems and the council is looking at the rest of the budget to find savings. But, that's only part of it. We have a contact with the snow plowing company. It is down in a legal agreement

laying out how the snow is to be plowed, when it has to be plowed, and how much they will charge us. They also send us a bill and in that bill is documentation of what they've done and when they've done it.

As it turns out there are a number of charges that we find questionable. So, what are we doing? We're contacting the plow company about the questionable charges. Who knows how it will all end up? Perhaps there is a mistake on his part, or there is an explanation that will resolve the issue. The point is, there is solid evidence we can use for the conversation.

We want that kind of solidity with God. We want there to be assurances from God if things don't work out, or if we have questions. We want to be able to get on the phone and talk to someone with the authority to fix what needs to be fixed.

But the last I checked there is no phone line to God. Sure, prayer can be a phone line, but there's no guarantee of a response. There isn't even snappy music to listen to while you are on hold. God simply doesn't do business deals. With God there are no leverage capabilities.

When it really comes down to it, we are a lot like the Palm Sunday crowds. Jesus isn't coming across as strong enough, secure enough, or dependable enough to be the kind of messiah we think we need to have. When Jesus says, "Take up your cross and follow me." We are all too likely to say, "Thanks, but no thanks. I'm going to pin my hopes on something more reliable."

I think we need to own up to the weakness of our faith. And we need to recognize God's forgiving power in this. God knows our doubts. God knows the way our fears get the better of us and we fail. Look forward to the end of the week. By Friday how many people are still with Jesus in solidarity? None. Zero. Jesus goes through with it anyway - even as everyone has failed. Jesus may not be the messiah that you want. But he is the messiah that you need. Amen