

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Epiphany

Sermon 2.4.18

Scripture: Isaiah 40:21-31

Mark 1:29-39

Fame is a fickle food  
Upon a shifting plate  
Whose table once a  
Guest but not  
The second time is set.

Whose crumbs the crows inspect  
And with ironic caw  
Flap past it to the Farmer's Corn -  
Men eat of it and die.

~Emily Dickinson  
"Fame is Fickle Food" (1659)

I've been ruminating on fame lately.

Fickle, on the one hand, it purports a sort of power. It wields an effect akin to gravity or the wind. Unseen, ephemeral, it yet turns people's heads and draws people in. It's yet sought after, even hunted down—and apparently now more than ever. David Brooks notes in his recent book, *The Road to Character*, that people surveyed in 1976 “ranked being famous fifteenth out of sixteen possible life goals. [But] by 2007, 51% of young people said it was one of their principal ambitions.” But if winning fame for yourself isn't in the cards, being close to fame is a good second best. Brooks also notes, “On a recent multiple-choice quiz, nearly twice as many middle-school girls said they would rather be a celebrity's personal assistant than the president of Harvard University.”

On the other hand, though, there's a powerlessness in it, even vulnerability. People can prey on you and exploit you, use you for some purpose other than what's in your own interest, and for this it functions as a sort of imprisonment, a state of being unfree in a way us regulars can hardly imagine.

When I began as an intern at Old South Church in Boston, the church staff was coming off a funeral that had recently taken place, the mother of someone famous, I never learned who. The pastoral staff was still speaking of the service in hushed tones, even after the fact, likely out of habit. After all, they hadn't wanted to risk that the service be flooded with strangers, people off the street,

all hoping for something, though who knows what? In the age prior to the selfie, was it just proximity to fame, or the possibility of connection, or the chance to see a chink in the armor of glamour and celebrity? “People can be mean,” someone close to the celebrity is said to have said.

I have no idea how essential to the human experience the phenomenon of fame is—its appeal, its backlash, its fickle way of touching down and then withdrawing itself. Though glory is certainly a timeless phenomenon (not to mention an ancient pursuit—glory as a warrior might win in war [Achilles! Odysseus!], glory as a beautiful woman might wield because of her beauty (Helen! Penelope!)), I have no idea if this is akin to our current thrall to fame. Therefore, I have no idea if it’s the grossest sort of anachronism to suppose Jesus was seeking to avoid becoming famous when he told his disciples, as he repeatedly did, not to tell anyone about what wonders he was performing in their midst.

It’s especially the case that this was Jesus’ concern according to Mark. This gospel narrative, Mark, remembers Jesus to have told those who witnessed his wonder-working not to tell anyone about what they’d seen, about what they perhaps knew or were coming to know. Mark is indeed known for the so-called “Messianic secret.” We heard it alluded to last week, when Jesus encountered a man with a demon. The demon said, “I know who you are, Jesus of Nazareth,” so he ordered the demon to be quiet. We’ll hear of it next week when, much later in the story, Jesus had taken three friends up a mountain, was transfigured before them, and was then declared by a voice from a cloud to be the beloved Son. He ordered his three friends “to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.” To a once-leper whom he healed, he said, “See that you say nothing to anyone,” and when Peter had, in front of the other disciples, confessed of Jesus, “You are the Messiah,” Jesus “warned them not to tell anyone about him.”

As for this morning, we hear mention of his silencing demons, not permitting them to speak because they knew him. But this reading takes the urgency of that secret up a few notches.

We’ve picked up where we left off last week, in the synagogue where Jesus performed his first public act. Once through with that, they left the synagogue—Jesus and his newly called disciples—and they entered the house of Simon and Andrew.

It’s worth paying attention in this gospel whenever Jesus is described as having gone in or having gone out—because it happens a lot. Mark makes nearly obsessive note of Jesus going in and out—*in* to a synagogue, *out* to the river Jordan, *in* to Simon’s house, *out* to the wilderness, and

then, during the final week of his life, *in* to the Temple and then back *out* of the Temple, several times over.

You could argue, of course, this is commonplace movement, the sort of thing any of us would do at any time on any given day. I myself sat *in* a café while I wrote this, and then headed back *out* to the car for home, where I would go *in*, though only to gather the dogs so we could all go *out* for a walk.

But the mention of this though commonplace activity in this otherwise terse gospel suggests something more than the commonplace is going on. To me (and perhaps only to me) it suggests that Mark especially seems to understand Jesus as someone who deigns to the structures of human making, the constructs of human civilization, while also removing himself from these structures, these constructs. And this suggests something about human creativity, something about our constructing of civilization, which God can and does bless as good for now, though without ever ordaining any of these attempts at ordering creation as absolutely good. God inspires and blesses our building up, and God insists upon its also eventual tumbling down.

We will tinker, and with an aim for a common good. We will construct, and in the name of an ever more perfect union. What's more, God will inspire this tinkering, God will energize this constructing and building up. God will enter these frames that give order and shape to our living. But God will never endorse any of these as ultimate in their achievement. God's reign, ever our aim, is never our achievement. And yet we continue in that aim.

This comes as bad news to those who like to solve problems. But it comes as good news to those who like meaningful work.

We will never come up short of meaningful work to do.

This seems to be what Simon's mother discovered when she'd been healed. It might otherwise seem a little retrograde, what she's remembered for having done. Sick, and then healed, when the fever left her, she's said to have begun to serve them; and it's easy to hear this along gender lines—that a woman begins to serve this roomful of men, and is praised for having done so. But the word used to describe her service is *diakono*, as in a church's diaconate or their deacons, and this implies that her service wasn't merely domestic but was exalted, wasn't the sort of work that's easily dismissed as menial but the sort that's held up as holy. It also begs that the distinction be made less as regards what the task itself is and more as regards in what service the task is to be

done. Preparing food for people to eat is only as menial as we decide it is, is only as degraded as we insist it to be.

This healing, it seems, opened a floodgate of need. That evening, at sundown, once the Sabbath was over, the disciples brought all who were sick or possessed with demons to Jesus for healing.

And he cured them all—those with various diseases, those full of a mean spirit.

He worked through the night, the whole city gathered around the door, practically trapping him inside.

In the morning, likely exhausted, he went *out* to a deserted place. And there he prayed.

These deserted places, these wilderness landscapes: they represent an experience of God that is immediate. More than that, even, they make possible for Jesus an experience of God that is immediate.

This is another word we'll hear from Mark a lot—immediate. He'll describe the work of Jesus in term of "immediately." He'll note the movement of Spirit in terms of "immediate." Without mediation, without a medium or a mode, when God acts on Jesus, or when Jesus acts on the world into which he was born and amidst which he now ministers, he does so "immediately." And this is best done, it seems, when there is nothing between Jesus and the wild, uncontained God whence he came—no roof, no canopy, no shelter at all, but God.

It's not for nothing that, as in Isaiah, God can be felt as the one who stretches out the sheltering heavens, that Christ himself is well understood as the tent that proves eternal and most grandly encompassing.

But it would be short-lived—for Simon and his companions hunted for him.

They *hunted* for him.

Mark makes use of this but eight times in his gospel: hunted. Twice it's to characterize people who approach Jesus with some distraction, some request or demand that runs contrary to his true mission. Five times it's to describe the actions of those who seek to kill him—the chief priests and scribes twice hunting for a way to kill him, some Pharisees hunting him amidst a crowd, the whole council hunting for people to offer testimony against him, and Judas hunting for a chance to betray him. Once, here, it's used to describe the disciples. There's no clear reason why. We can only suppose.

Of the funeral for the celebrity's mother, one of the church staff confided in me, it went well. But the feeling of being in the presence of some of the most renown stars of our generation was unnerving to him. "There's this glow," he said, "and it draws you in. It's seductive. You want to be a part of it even though it has nothing to do with your life, with what you've aimed for or what you value."

I think I can imagine it.

I went to see a play once. *The Elephant Man* at the Williamstown Theater Festival was starring Alessandro Nivola, whom I knew in high school. It co-starred Bradley Cooper, who'd just weeks earlier been named *People Magazine's* Sexiest Man Alive. I obtained a ticket for the show from a friend of a friend, and it landed me front and center, beside Sandro's wife, as it happens. Also an actor, Emily Mortimer: I'd just seen her in my re-watching *30 Rock*.

At intermission, after much internal debate, I turned to her and said, "I think you're Sandro's wife," and at hearing his nickname (the only name I'd ever known to call him) she said, "How do you know him?"

She seemed relieved to have made a connection here, and insisted that I go with her backstage after the show, saying something to the effect that she was nervous about meeting stars, too.

In the green room, when he'd come out of his dressing room, I said a quick hello to Sandro, whose head was not in high school at the moment, so he confessed to only barely remembering me, which I assured him was fine, that I hadn't meant to come on this strong, had really just meant to see the play, which I really enjoyed, by the way. Then I met Bradley Cooper, and then Patricia Clarkson, who, playing Madge Kendall, had only just earlier been naked in front of me on stage. And I wanted so badly to get out of there, and I wanted so badly to stay and hobnob and get to know them all, to have them invite me out to drinks afterward and maybe even dinner, and then to become best friends with them all, and to date Bradley Cooper. To heck with Jesse and the boys! This was the sexiest man alive!

This, I think, is not what Jesus wanted. This, I think, Jesus knew is not how the gospel would function, was to attract. This beguiling, seductive phenomenon of fame is not how he meant to make his way in the world, indeed was not how the gospel would come to find followers.

I spotted a copy of the movie *Godspell* the other day. Made in the early seventies, it has never sat well with me because it seemed the people who'd come to follow Jesus were more

beguiled by him than convicted in the work he'd come to do, more enchanted by Jesus' dreamy looks and free spirit than by his uncompromised insistence that, though the way he'd walk in he world was somehow, by some miracle of grace, absolutely good, it wouldn't necessarily go well—neither for him nor for the ones who'd follow him.

“Everyone is searching for you,” the disciples said to the one for whom they'd hunted—hunted perhaps to harness his star-power, hunted perhaps to co-opt his renown for purposes other than God's, hunted perhaps also to disavow their own self-possession, their own free will and sense of responsibility. To follow Christ is something other than falling into the thrall of a celebrity or into a personality cult. To follow Christ is to answer a call, to accept an urgent command to live by the way of self-giving love. It's not enchanting; it's commanding. It's not seductive; it's urgent. It doesn't mess with your head; it rearranges your heart.

“Let us go to neighboring towns,” Jesus said to those who'd hunted for him, and maybe to restore his own equilibrium, “so that I may proclaim the message there also, for that is what I came to do.”

I don't imagine this is all that important a sermon for this particular congregation. No one here has ever struck me as in pursuit of fame—neither to become famous yourself not to be close to fame for its own sake. Similarly, no one here has either seemed to mistake Jesus as a star whom the men should want to be like and the women should want to be with (if you will). Maybe, though, there's some seed of challenge and assurance in that to follow Jesus is not to engage in a transaction of power and exploitation but to engage in a fullness of being. It's not to submit your own freedom in favor of thrall, but to take up your freedom and use it to choose the good.

Jesus, especially according to Mark, is going to impress us. And why shouldn't he? The one who sits above the circle of the earth; the one through whom the heavens were stretched out like a curtain and spread like a tent to live in—he himself the only structure that can be trusted as good, cruciform as it is, self-giving as he was; the one who brings princes to naught and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing; this one has come to live among us, to teach us and lead us, indeed to save us yet by means of self-giving love. He's come, though not to impress us, but to impress upon us this claim: that his power and efficaciousness in the world are to be ours as well, that love might increase and goodness might reign.

Thanks be to God.