

In worship a few weeks ago we heard the story of Andrew and Simon, two brothers. They were standing in a small boat on a really big lake, tossing nets into the water, and hoping to catch enough fish not only to feed their family, but enough fish to sell or barter with, too. Like so many of us, they were hoping to turn at least a little profit.

But then, the story goes, a man came strolling along the lakeside. He was about my age, but probably a few inches shorter, and with darker skin and eyes and hair.¹ And the man calls out to them, loud enough so that they can hear him across the water and the sound of the waves, “Come! Follow me! And I will send you out to fish for people.”

And, the story goes, the brothers dropped their nets and followed him. I imagine this part like a movie: a close up on the two brothers, holding a net; they share a look, and it’s one of those looks that only best friends can have, where they’re able to use that brief look to have a whole conversation and reach a joint decision; then they drop the net and jump into the lake. And the minute they leave the picture, we suddenly their father, left standing alone with a bewildered look on his face: *What just happened?* (Matt. 4:18-19).

That story – the story of Jesus walking along the sea of Galilee and calling the first two of his disciples follow him – is so brief. It’s literally two Bible verses long. And it’s missing so many details that we’re left to wonder along with their father: What happened? What was it about this man, walking along the lakeshore, that was enough for them to leave their family, their job, the village they grew up in, their whole lives – and just go, follow that man into a mysterious future?

What attracted people to Jesus so powerfully?

Because it’s not just two brothers, right? It’s ten more guys who left their homes behind to wander around the Israeli countryside with Jesus. And it’s a group of women who gave of their own money to support Jesus and his merry men (Luke 8:1-3). It’s huge crowds of people that followed him out into a field and stay there so long they realized too late that they should have packed a dinner (Matt. 14:13-21). It’s a despised – and short – tax collector who climbed up a tree so he can just catch a glimpse of Jesus (Luke 19:1-9). It’s religious leaders, Pharisees, who wanted to know more about what he was saying, who sneaked off to see Jesus at night (John 3) or who invited him home for dinner (Luke 7:36-50). It’s a Roman soldier who sent his servant out to find Jesus (Luke 7:1-9). It’s strangers who stop Jesus on the street and ask for just a second of his time, who reach out in a crowd just to brush their fingers along the fringe of his robe (Matt. 9:20-22).

What attracted people to Jesus so powerfully?

We might wonder especially when we start comparing all those Bible stories to today. We’re constantly hearing that the church in the U.S. is shrinking. We worry about getting our attendance here at St. Andrew. But what’s most heartfelt of all: many of us wonder why our children, our grandchildren, our parents, our siblings our friends don’t want to be a part of the church, of this community of faith that means so much to us. Which changes our question, turns it into...

1 Sarah Pruitt, “The Ongoing Mystery of Jesus’s Face,” *History*, 16 April 2019. <https://www.history.com/news/what-did-jesus-look-like> Accessed 20 February 2020.

Why aren't people so attracted to Jesus today?

Why aren't people so attracted to the body of Christ – the Church – today?

We carry that question around with us, right? And then we come to here this morning, and we hear this story: Jesus, on a mountaintop, suddenly started to shine like the sun, his clothes dazzling white, his face radiant. Two ancient holy men appeared beside him, and they started talking together. And as if all that isn't glorious and miraculous enough, a bright, shining cloud appears over the top of the whole scene, and a voice comes out of the cloud and declares: "This is my Son, my Son whom I love, and I am proud of him. Listen to him!"

HOLY MOLEY!

I mean, no wonder the disciples were convinced this was the Son of God, right? No wonder people were flocking to Jesus, the Man Who was Transfigured on the Mountaintop. The Man Who God Said to Follow.

If God could just show up in one of those shiny clouds out here on the corner of Mack Hatcher and 96 and point to our bell tower and say: *This is part of my Church. They're Lutheran, and I like that about them. Give them a try!* That would probably attract some people, right?

Only, that's not how it works.

And that's not how it worked back then, either.

When we read the Bible, it doesn't seem like Jesus was known as the man who shone on a mountaintop or the man pointed out by God directly. I'll admit that I did not re-read the entire New Testament this week, but I'm pretty sure we don't really hear about those things outside of this story, and that part of an epistle – a letter – we read from a few minutes ago, where Peter used the story of the Transfiguration to try and prove to people *who already believed in Jesus* that he really was powerful and really was coming back. So, yes the Transfiguration was a story people told and retold, a story that was important to people, important enough to be written down and preserved forever – but it doesn't seem to be what got people hooked on Jesus.

So what was it? What attracted people to Jesus so powerfully, if it wasn't the glory, the "Wondrous Image, Vision Fair"?

Well, let's look at what the Gospels themselves tell us about that:

The crowds gathered around Jesus to hear him teach. And remember what he taught:

"Blessed are the poor [and the poor in spirit] for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:3).

"You are the light of the world" (Matt. 5:14).

Don't be anxious about worldly things; God cares for you. (Matt. 6:25-34).

They were messages of God's love, especially for the people who did not feel very loved. People who were outcast and poor and suffering. I mean really outcast, really poor, really suffering.

Jesus spoke words of good news and grace and compassion. But his words were not easy, and they were not always nice and cozy either. In fact, I think maybe more often than not, they were challenging, convicting:

Don't give in to your anger or your lust or your greed (Matt. 5:21-30).

Don't judge other people (Matt. 7:1-5).

If anyone slaps you on the right side of your face, show them your left cheek. If anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give them more than they ask for. (Matt. 5:38-39).

“Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:44).

“Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48).

Jesus always said that God was bringing changes, and we better get on board or get left behind.

And crowds gathered around him to hear those messages – first, because Jesus made them feel seen and loved and cared for both by other human beings and by God. And then, learning that they were seen and loved and cared for, they were ready to get on board the change train with Jesus, the man who made them feel different than they ever had before. Jesus gave them hope that things could really be different for them and their families. And Jesus and his disciples were living that change themselves, everywhere they went. And these crowds – or at least the people really captured by Jesus and his teaching – they wanted to change themselves, and be part of changing the world.

That's why the second reason – and maybe the most common reason – that the crowds were gathering around Jesus was: they came to get a taste of that change. Over and over again we hear that the crowds were traveling to meet Jesus, carrying their sick and injured loved ones for miles, in the hopes that Jesus would heal them. In fact, as Jesus, Peter, James, and John walk down the mountain after this glorious vision and re-joined the crowd, they immediately meet a man who has come to beg Jesus to heal his son (Matt. 17:14-18).

So what attracted people to Jesus so powerfully?

I think it was the experience of being seen as they were: in whatever life circumstance was causing them suffering, in whatever ways they felt ignored by everybody else (especially the people with real power). The experience of being seen for who they were: sinners, yes, but also people who were *trying*, were doing the best they could. To be seen, and then not to be rejected, but accepted. To hear that they were loved, and that they, too, could be changed by God's power to be the light of the world.

And Jesus not only saw them, he helped them. He brought healing in all the ways he could, physical and spiritual. He fed people. He spent time with people. He worked on making the world a better place.

Jesus loved them – loved them not only in word, but in truth and action (1 John 3:18), and with a power that would not let the world stay the same.

That's what attracted people to Jesus so powerfully.

It wasn't the glamour or the glory or even the promise of an afterlife. It was the real love in action right there, breaking in to the struggles and heartaches that consumed their lives. That's what the Transfiguration was meant to really show us: Love incarnate walked the earth in Jesus Christ. God walked the earth in Jesus Christ. And it wasn't the glorious appearance that mattered to people as much as the actual Love-in-action, God-in-action among them. That's what attracted people to Jesus so powerfully.

So why aren't people so attracted today?

It might be easy for us to turn that question back onto the people who aren't involved with a church. Why aren't you coming? Why can't you see that God loves you, that God's waiting for you with open arms? Why can't you see how wonderful and important that is?

But, we are nearing the season of Lent: a time for self-reflection and change. So maybe we, as part of the capital-C Church, the Church universal, should try to answer the question ourselves. Why aren't people so attracted to Jesus today?

Maybe it's not about Jesus, exactly. Or at least not all the time. Maybe it's mostly about us, the Church, the Body of Christ who is the most obvious sign of Jesus's presence on earth today. Gandhi once said: "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ." Maybe a lot of our neighbors feel the same. Maybe that's what's making it hard for them to take the life-changing risk to join in relationship with God – and with the Body of Christ.

What are we doing to attract people to Jesus?

Are we – individually and as a community – are we living the way Jesus lived? Are we ministering to people both inside and outside of our congregation? Are we getting to know the kinds of folks Jesus spent time with: the poor, the suffering, the people we're trained to look down on?

Are we seeing people as they are? Understanding their suffering? Bringing them good news of God's love, forgiveness, and power? Bringing them hope for things to change on this side of heaven? Are we giving them relief and help healing right now?

Or are we still standing in our fishing boat, not really wanting our lives to change? Not really wanting to follow Jesus into the different, the unknown?

A famous poet from Iran once wrote this poem about the Church; maybe these can be the words and the vision we keep with us, that we try to learn to live into better this Lent:

*Where Jesus lives, the great-hearted gather.
We are a door that's never locked.*

*If you are suffering any kind of pain,
stay near this door. Open it.²*

² Trans. Coleman Barks, *The Essential Rumi*, (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2004), p. 201.