

January 28, 2018 Epiphany 4

Gospel: Mark 1:21-28

The story has barely begun, and already the battle is joined. Jesus sides with humanity against every force that would bring death and disease. These forces recognize Jesus and know what his power means for them. This, however, is only the first fight. The war will go on much longer.

²¹[Jesus and his disciples] went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught.²²They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. ²³Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." ²⁵But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" ²⁶And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." ²⁸At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Who are some of the famous people that you've met? Who are the famous people in which you've had some close encounters? My guess is that nearly everyone in this room at one time or another, has had some event in which they crossed paths with, or was associated with, someone who is or was, very well known.

I've had a few instances. One time I was walking in a building in downtown Columbus and out from the elevators came Walter Cronkite. I once crossed paths with Mr. T at an airport. I have shaken the hands of some famous politicians; I was in a private meeting with John Kasich, and once shared the dais with the mayor of Columbus. A couple of years ago Karen and I got to meet several Hollywood actors and actresses and hang out with them at a movie premiere post party which was really fun and probably a once in a lifetime experience. It was here that we met Kristen Bell, who just hosted the SAG awards this past Sunday night.

In terms of religious people, I have had close encounters, through random circumstances, and have met every single presiding Bishop of the ELCA. When the first Bishop of the ELCA, Herbert Chilstrom, was in Columbus for a joint synodical assembly, as the crowd entered in to the worship area, he got lost from the procession where he was supposed to be, and ended up standing beside me saying that he was lost and wasn't sure which way to go. I happened to look ahead and I was able to see, even though he was much taller than me, the processional cross - and I pointed it out to him and said- just follow the cross. He slapped me on the chest and said that was good advice. After being elected the second Bishop of the ELCA, H. George Anderson was walking in the convention corridor late at night with his wife, at a time I was coming back to my hotel after hanging out with some other pastors, and have a chance meeting with

him. And I met Mark Hanson, the third bishop on several occasions. And the fourth Bishop of the ELCA, Elizabeth Eaton, as we know, has worshipped here with us on several occasions.

Famous people. Some of you know that my daughter is currently working in Los Angeles in Hollywood. She has worked with a number of famous people. Currently she is working with American Idol with people who want to be famous.

Fame. Famous encounters. Popularity. Notoriety. My guess is that nearly everyone in this room could stand up and tell stories that are similar and probably a lot more significant than mine, of people that you know or have met, who are well known throughout the community, country, or even the world.

In our gospel text, the lesson concludes with this verse: “At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.” “At once ...his fame... began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.”

When his fame began to spread, what kind of fame did Jesus have? Was he famous for casting out the unclean spirit? Was he famous for one who had authority? Was it fame for doing miracles? Was he famous for multiplying bread so that people could have a free meal? What do you think people were running up to others and saying about Jesus? What were the first words out of their mouths? Was it: “Hey come and see this guy who can heal people?” Was it: “Come and see this guy who is feeding people? Was it: “Come and see this guy who can outwit those religious guys? Or perhaps some even said: “Come and see – we have found the Messiah!” But later on, we could wonder how those words changed, how

his fame changed, how his image changed, in the course of his three-year ministry.

The reality is that Jesus's fame probably took on all kinds of angles, aspects, and approaches throughout his ministry. I'm sure there were people who came just for the miracles, what type of healing, sign, or wonder was this messenger going to do next? I think we can be relatively sure that many people followed him to get even more bread after the feeding of the 5000. We have passages that tell us that some of the people simply went away, when the bread wasn't going to be a daily thing so to speak. We are told that even some of the disciples themselves, when they got up and close to Jesus, and heard his message about eating body and drinking blood, that this proved to be too much and they simply left him. We also hear in other parts of the gospels, tellings of how some of the disciples began to give up and go back home. Why was this? Was it in part because they followed someone that they thought was famous, but it turned out that it was not in the type of fame they wanted?

So, what was the fame that Jesus had? Was it the type of fame that made some, even his disciples, argue if they could sit on his right or left when he came into power? We definitely know that for some the whispering that he was the Messiah, and that his parables and teachings were connecting and touching people in a way that was so powerful that it drew their hearts and minds like a magnet to God, made them stick around, even when they did not quite understand everything.

Perhaps the climax of Jesus's earthly fame came with him riding into Jerusalem on that day we now call Palm Sunday, when the crowds cut down branches and spread garments before him, welcoming him, celebrating him, with a royal welcome to the city of David. However, it is

likely that there were some people who cheered that day, crowded in to get a glimpse of this man, who just a few days later would shout: “Release for us Barabbas and crucify him!” I am guessing that is true because very likely, people were just as fickle then as they are yet today.

What do you think Jesus is famous for today? I am guessing that it still would be for the person along the street that answers of miracles and feeding thousands would still come up. I am guessing that this side of the cross, many would correctly speak about him being the Promised One, the living Son of God. I am also guessing that he would be famous for somethings that I do not believe are true about him and would likely make me cringe. Would he be famous for welcoming the outcast today? Would he be famous for hanging around prostitutes and those society considers “low-lives” of today? Would he be famous for touching the untouchable, forgiving the unforgivable, welcoming the stranger, casting down the rich, and including all in God’s love?

These are not typical things that make one famous today? Notorious maybe, but not famous. What does that say about the way we make people famous today; what does that say about the way we choose leaders today. Because sometimes the emperor has no clothes: sometimes when we see our heroes and famous people up close we see the blemishes, the failures, the inconsistencies, the shortcomings, and we think they need knocked down a few pegs.

What about us as his followers, as Christians? What are Christians famous for today? It is a scary question to ask, because I think I have seen some of the answers already – and these too make me cringe. When it comes to economic and national decisions, I find myself often embarrassed by what some people claim as the Christian response. Sometimes not only

am I embarrassed but also at times ashamed and upset, because I think it often incorrectly assumes that some people are better than others.

There is an old Christian hymn that is called: “ And they will know we are Christians by our love...” I wish that what Christians, first and foremost, could be famous for would be our love of God and love of others. This past week at our local Partnership meeting we talked about leadership and courage. Jesus Christ, as the Son of God, did not always do the popular thing or the easy thing. He took on the religious establishment of his day. He took on what was not God’s intent for this world, as he announced the Reign of God had come near. He embraced the unembraceable, he included the outcast, he loved the broken. In the end, Jesus became famous in God’s way, a way that humanity did not first understand. It certainly astounded the first followers and continues to astound us today. The Suffering Servant Messiah, who gave his life that we may gain everlasting life, turns the values of the world upside down. It holds out a promise of unconditional presence, unconditional love, unconditional acceptance and unconditional forgiveness for every person on this planet. May we be so bold to be famous for these things too. Amen.