

“Famous Teacher”
Isaiah 32:12-17; Acts 14:14-17;
Matthew 4:23 – 5:2

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Last week we talked a bit about the idea of spirituality and the idea of a relationship with God being central to a healthy spirituality. Oftentimes when people talk about spirituality, not so much within a church context, they will talk about spirituality as that which is involved with purpose, meaning, and how we get along with others. So when we think about our spirituality, we think about the meaning and purpose, and how we get along with others in our lives.

I think that what is central about spirituality is our relationship with God, especially when we think about the nature of who God is—a transcendent, incredible, wonderful God who we can't know without God coming to us. It is that “coming to us” piece that is part of that spirituality. So what we're doing this fall is thinking about the one who is coming to us, about Jesus.

As I began to reflect on that, I thought about how we go about life, how we look for meaning and purpose, how we get along together, and how many different ways we try to do that. It feels to me like it's almost human nature to want some kind of meaning and purpose and ways to get along together. We're always going to look for a voice that helps us do that. We look for some kind of teacher, some voice that speaks to us. Certainly there are lots of those out there. We might be looking for one that can “Stand and Deliver” the right teaching to us. One who can teach us to “Seize the Day.” If I knew more movies, I could probably keep coming up with movie titles that might describe the teacher we are looking for and the teachings that would be important to our lives in a variety of ways.

So as we think about teaching, where do we look? Do we look back to Socrates? Do we look to great philosophers? Do we look to others in our lives? Generally, as we're looking around, no matter what kind of field it is, we can find somebody who has become famous in that field who we might look to. We might look to Einstein to teach us a little something about science. Think of any field. I'm sure if I wanted to look for somebody to teach me fly fishing, I could find somebody who is famous there. So what famous teacher do we look for?

It's interesting to me that today, as we think about whom we look to and learn from, there is a sense that we all are looking around us. Some suggest that is exactly what we do. We're always looking for a model. We're always looking for the other and how the other is doing. Based on how the other is, if they like something maybe we should like it. If they don't like something, maybe we shouldn't, either. If they know something, we might want to know it.

There's a phenomenon today that is interesting to me. It seems to me that not only do we look for a famous teacher, sometimes we just look for somebody famous. Sometimes it seems that you can be famous for being famous. I'm not sure I quite

understand that, but it seems to be fairly prevalent in our society. Maybe we are just looking for someone to compare ourselves to in order to see how we doing.

We can learn a lot of different things from different teachers. We can learn the “habits of highly effective people.” We can learn all kinds of things. It’s useful to learn different habits. It’s useful to learn different skills. It’s useful to learn about things, but when we come down to it, we still want to know the meaning and purpose, how it enables us to get along in life. There are teachers out there who will claim to do that for us in a variety of ways. They have knowledge that they can just transfer to us. But I’m wondering as we begin to think about who it is we’re listening to, we might think about somebody else who got a little famous.

In scripture today, it says that his fame began to spread. Jesus had begun to collect some disciples. He has about four of them at this point. He had begun to wander through the neighborhoods of Palestine. It says he was teaching, proclaiming, healing. The healing is the one that gets our attention because it seems so miraculous, and in fact in Matthew it says he was teaching, he was proclaiming the Good News, and then he was healing, then Matthew goes on a little bit about the healing. It’s interesting the order those are in: teaching, proclaiming or announcing the good news, and healing. It feels a little bit like that’s just about how Jesus’ life went.

At least in this Gospel, it hasn’t been that long that his ministry has started and here we have him going up on a mountain to teach, the crowd following along. He’s beginning his ministry. It’s starting with teaching. Maybe there’s something about that. Maybe there’s something we have to listen and begin to recognize that he has something to say before we can hear what he announces and what he finally does to heal us and give us new life. I think sometimes we read the Gospels and we spend a lot of time on the healing, on the new life, the wonder of salvation. It might be useful to think back on Jesus’ teaching as well, especially if we want, as the Psalm says, to know the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. I believe it is useful to think about what he teaches us as we go on to hear the announcements and to know the healing. So we’re going to do that.

Today as we think about Jesus as a famous teacher, do you suppose he got out his white board? That’s what I think about when I think about a teacher. Really, I think about a blackboard, but these days it’s turned white. Jesus becomes a teacher that teaches, proclaims, and heals. As a famous teacher, he’s not just any old famous teacher. His fame began to grow way back in Palestine some 2,000 years ago, but it’s interesting to me that his fame has never really stopped growing. If we’re really looking for a famous teacher, why not look to Jesus. He started getting famous in this little place 2,000 years ago and has continued to be famous across time. If anything, his fame has spread across the world. So why don’t we look more closely at what Jesus says?

The question is, as we go forward into this week, what kind of barriers do we have? Why don’t we spend more time looking at what Jesus has to say? Maybe you do. Maybe your heart is completely open, and your mind is ready, and you are yearning to hear what Jesus says. I would expect that some of us, at least, some of the time have a little trouble being that ready. We’ve got too much to do. We don’t have time to sit

down and read scripture. Or, it's so old. Can anything from 2,000 years ago really speak to me? Or, I've heard scripture used in ways I don't appreciate so I'm not going to look at it anymore. There are all kinds of reasons why we might not look or don't want to hear what Jesus has to say. I invite you to start reading chapters 5, 6, and 7 of Matthew. There might be stuff in there that you might not want to hear. Put it this way. There have been times in my life when I started reading it and wanted to put it down and not read any more. It's not all easy reading. There's a challenge in it.

What are our barriers? I invite you to think about that for yourself. What gets in the way of my taking the time, opening my ears and my heart, having my mind ready, having a spirit that is yearning to hear what Jesus has to say? What gets in the way? It's probably a little different for each of us, although some of us might share some of those barriers. I'm not going to define what it is for you. I invite you to think about that so that as we go through this week, we can prepare ourselves to hear Jesus speaking to us. Then, if you take the time to read chapters 5, 6, and 7—that's a good length; there's a lot there—I would invite you to pay attention particularly to the things you read that you really like or the things that you read and really don't like, or the things you read that just make you wonder, that stand out. I invite you to write those down so that as we work through all this together, you can refer back and see if those are still there for you and what it might be about.

We have the fall to work on this, so you don't have to do it all in one week. You don't have to have it all figured out. In fact, what we really will find is that it takes a lifetime. We can start or continue to read and wonder about what Jesus says any time. We can wonder and wander through it together over the next few weeks.

As we think about Jesus as a famous teacher, one that invites us to hear and learn, we recognize he is inviting us into a relationship with God. He's inviting us into a way of being and living that has meaning and purpose and he invites us to get along together. He invites us to listen to what he says and he invites us around the table. He invites us to begin to become disciples and to know that as we are his disciples, we have sustenance. We have a family. We have a place to be. We have a table to gather around, and in gathering we know that God is with us and for us. God shows us hope to share and leads us into the future together.

Let's pray:

Lord, we know that so much of our time we wonder about how we're going to grab hold of life and move forward. We do want a teacher that stands and delivers and helps us seize the day and enables us to recognize the wonder and hold on to life, even jump into it. Help us remove the barriers that we put in the way of listening to Jesus and enabling him to guide us on that path. As we wonder at what he says, remind us that he has invited us around a table to be in a community, to share those questions together, to learn together at his feet. Lord, we ask your blessing on the week to come and our thoughts about who Jesus is, what he teaches us, the wonder we have, and the hope he shares with us. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.