

In the Footsteps: Come and See for Yourself
Matthew 16:13-20

The killing of three students near the University of North Carolina this last week seemed very far away to me when I heard about it—one of those shootings that happens all too often in this country, the kind of thing that makes us shake our heads but does not interrupt our day. But later in the week I heard a piece on the radio, recorded last May—just months before this shooting. One of the young women who was killed recorded a piece on StoryCorps, National Public Radio’s series that invites regular people to step into a soundbooth with another person and talk about their relationship. The young woman who was killed, Yusor Mohammad Abu-Salha, had recorded an interview with her third-grade teacher from the Muslim school she had attended. They spoke with great respect and care for one another, and about how it felt to live as a Muslim in America. "Growing up in America has been such a blessing, [Yusor said] and you know, although in some ways I do stand out, such as the hijab I wear on my head, the head covering, there's still so many ways that I feel embedded in the fabric that is our culture. And that's the beautiful thing here, is that it doesn't matter where you come from. There's so many different people from so many different places, different backgrounds and religions, but here we're all one, one culture."

Hearing the voice of this young woman, and the voice of her teacher who said, “I always knew this student was special,” let me—*made* me—experience this week’s news story in a different way. Hearing their voices let me *feel* the completely tragic, senseless loss that happens in hate crimes—when one person hates another simply because they are different. I might have said something similar before, but I would not have felt it in the way I do now, but for the experience of hearing the hopeful, innocent voice of this 23-year-old young woman who will never speak again.

I can tell you about this experience, but I can’t give you what I feel because of it. That moment changed my perspective a bit, but I know that it can’t really change yours. The same thing happens—or doesn’t happen--when we see a photograph that someone else has taken. It used to be that people only took cameras on their trips away from home, to record the things they saw that were out of the ordinary. Now people take pictures of everything—their lunch, the cat sitting in the same place it sits on the sofa every day. They share those photos on Instagram or SnapChat, as if they’re trying to share with other people a moment from their own life, an experience that you can get better from a picture than you can with words.

But you can’t actually pick up how it felt to be in that moment—right? You can look at someone else’s pictures from their last vacation and appreciate the beauty of what they saw, but it’s almost impossible to capture the awe they felt when they saw that amazing sunset or that ancient building. You can recognize friends in a photo on Facebook, but that’s different from the feeling of being together.

To experience something, you have to see it for yourself.

The traditional reading for this day in the church year, the Sunday before Lent begins, is the story of Jesus' transfiguration, when he takes three of his disciples up the mountain with him, away from their everyday work and the people who need something from him almost every minute. Jesus goes a little ahead of them, to the very top of the mountain, and suddenly James and John and Peter see not just one person there, but three. And as much as they know it's impossible, suddenly it looks like Jesus is standing there with Moses and Elijah, the two greatest prophets in Israel's history. It's a powerful moment for them. They know it says something worth remembering about who Jesus is, and the kind of cosmic credibility he has. There were no cameras, of course, but Peter has the same instinct—to build an altar on the spot, so that this moment can be preserved and shared. “No!” Jesus says, a little sharply. “No altars. Don't even tell anyone about this,” which must have left the disciples looking at each other with question marks on their faces. You want us to see something this dramatic, experience something that changes our whole sense of who you are, and not tell other people about it?

This wasn't the first time that Jesus had surprised them by hushing them up. Just before the story of the Transfiguration is the story Sahr read this morning. Jesus and his disciples are in Caesarea Philippi, Matthew tells us. Like most of the details in the Gospel, this detail about place is meant to tell us something. Caesarea Philippi was way off the beaten track for Jews in Jesus' time. It's like Jesus was taking his disciples on a field trip, way up north, into Gentile country. It was the opposite direction from Jerusalem, which was where everybody went to worship God. Jesus took them far away from home, away from the Temple, as if to he wanted to separate them from all the 'right answers.' And out there, Jesus asks his disciples, “Who are people saying I am?” They were able to answer pretty quickly, I imagine: Well, some people think you're the next John the Baptist, and some are thinking even bigger—like you might even a prophet as great as Elijah or Jeremiah.

But Jesus doesn't seem to have been looking for easy answers or compliments from the crowd. He was looking for something else, an answer that wasn't so conventional, so neatly tied up. And so he asked them, these people who knew him best, who had been with him day-in, day-out, “Who do *you* say that I am?” I imagine there was a bit of silence. They knew this was an important question, and they wanted to get the answer right. “You are the Messiah,” Peter finally said. “You are the son of the living God.” Jesus praises Peter for this answer, gave him every reason to think that he has seen and identified Jesus accurately.

“But don't tell anyone,” Jesus said. In fact, Matthew's words are even more emphatic than that: “Jesus *sternly ordered* the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.” Why?

Maybe because the question Jesus asked—*Who do you say that I am?*—was a question Peter could only answer for himself. A question every person has to answer for him or herself. If Peter had run out and said, “I know, I know! I've got the answer!”, or if he had built on that transfiguration mountain the definitive altar to “the true reality of Jesus”, we'd be practicing an altogether different kind of religion than the one Jesus was inviting us to. Jesus taught people something about truth, but he never did it by cementing a set of rules or waving around his resume. He communicated his most significant lessons with his presence—where he showed up, who he talked with, the meals he shared, the questions he asked. What he offered people wasn't an idea or a philosophy; it was an invitation, an opening into a relationship.

Who do you say that I am? Probably we could, each of us, recite something we learned in Sunday school a long time ago, or a line from a creed, something we read in a book or heard a preacher say in church. But I don't think that's the kind of answer Jesus was looking for. He really wanted to know—still wants to know—what your answer is after the kind of silence that important questions demand. The kind of pause that suggests not that you're worrying about getting the answer right, but that you're being mindful of your own truth. Because the only answer to this question that matters is the one we have tested with our own experience, the one we have seen and known for ourselves.

We can learn about Jesus by reading the Bible, by studying who he was historically, by making ourselves part of a community that is trying to fall into step behind him. But the point of discipleship—being a follower of Jesus—is not really to learn *about* him; it's to *encounter* him in some way, to get close enough to hear him ask you, "Who do *you* say that I am?"

Can you hear the mutuality, the relationship embedded in that question? It's a question about *your* experience. You can't answer a question about who Jesus is for you without also answering a question about who *you* are. The road that we take toward a truthful encounter with Jesus is the same road that takes us closer to a truthful encounter with ourselves. We will recognize the one who is our messiah when we expose and knock down all our false messiahs; all those things we thought would save us, but don't. All those illusions and self-deceptions that we thought could protect us, but that harm us instead.

This is the long process of the Christian spiritual life. It takes us on a field trip, out of our regular patterns, until we are close enough to hear Jesus ask us, "Who do you say that I am?" We answer...more than once. Many times. Our answers are not always the same. There have been times in my life the call to wholeness has been about morality and goodness, calling me on the ways I let myself off the hook, way too easily. Other times it has felt like someone was walking ahead of me, giving me courage for the danger ahead. Sometimes I have needed healing and hope. Sometimes I think I see Jesus clearly ahead of me, leaving footsteps that are easy to follow, and other times it feels like I have lost the thread entirely. I'm grateful for the stories of Peter, who got it wrong as often as he got it right.

As we begin the season of Lent, on Ash Wednesday this week, instead of asking you to give up chocolate or wine, I want to invite you to a more intentional prayer practice, the kind of prayer that is less about listing our needs or disciplining ourselves into positive thinking, and more about paying attention. The kind of prayer that just might transform your perception of reality, open you to a different way of seeing and knowing your own life. Every weekday morning at 6 am and evening at 6 pm, the Chapel will be open for thirty minutes of guided prayer and meditation. If you're anything like me, that's more time than you're accustomed to spending at prayer. Stopping at the church at the beginning or end of your work day might seem like a pain in the neck. But Lent is just forty days—roughly ten percent of the days in a year. Maybe not too much to give to try a different, more soul-ful way of living.

And what if it really did change something?