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Texts: Mark 1: 16-20; Luke 5: 27-32  
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### What Was It That Jesus Saw?

I'll begin in exactly the same place I began last week: with the bumper sticker that adorns one of the bookshelves in my office upstairs. "The most radical thing we can do is to introduce people to one another," is what it says. For those of you who weren't here last week, that phrase prompted a meditation on friendship and loneliness, which was then followed by an invitation: for each person to write their names and contact information on a card, and then to drop it into a big wooden bowl that I placed up front, so as to be matched up with another person in order to share a conversation. I was delighted that so many among us responded, and Laura and I had fun this past week drawing out names two by two, and then emailing each of you to put you in touch. I hope and trust that you received those emails, and that you're making efforts to get together with your partner. A few of you have already made it happen, which is great.

It turns out that a funny thing happened as I was pulling those cards out two by two. I had my phone sitting beside me, and a news alert popped up. I glanced down at the headline, and was startled. "Friendship anxiety is everywhere right now," I read. I then went on to read about how for many people, the pandemic wound up weakening a kind of psychic or relational muscle, the one that we all use when we engage others. For many people, even a year or two after the fact, that muscle hasn't been reawakened. Even ordinary, passing conversations have left many people feeling drained. It's a little like quitting any exercise for years, and then suddenly being asked to run a 10K, or a half marathon. Some of us could soldier through it, but we'd be flattened afterwards. Others of us would despair at the enormity of it, and would simply retreat.

Now, I don't really believe in signs. Even so, it made me wonder what might be happening for each of you as you received those emails, and as you prepared to get to know a relative stranger. Might there be a strong dose of anxiety for some of us when we're getting to know someone new? I confess that I feel a tinge of anxiety whenever I enter a new social situation, even though I do it a lot as a part of my work here. If I feel that, I imagine more than a few of you might as well, even among people you trust. And so I thought I'd take a little time today to address those anxieties, to tamp them down as best I can, in hopes that you'll feel a little more confident meeting new people, whether here or elsewhere in your life.

At risk of oversimplification, I would say that much of our anxiety stems from two sources: the suspicion that we ourselves are not especially worthy of the interest of another, and the related suspicion that the other may, for one reason or another, not be worthy of our interest or attention. Let me quickly dispatch both of those suspicions: they're simply untrue. Whether you know it or not, you contain fathomless depths that, with the right perspective, makes you a person not only of infinite worth, but of infinite interest. The same holds true of everyone we meet, including the person that you'll soon have lunch or coffee with. But then a third suspicion lingers just behind the first two. It may be true that we all have sacred worth, and it may be true that we're all infinitely interesting, but how do we actually get to the place where we can sense that, and feel it? How do we break through the facades that we all present, to get to the places where we're most real, most authentic, most fully ourselves? To get to those questions, I'd like

to examine the two Gospel stories we heard earlier, after which I'll offer a kind of model for getting to that sense of fullness with another.

At the beginning of both Mark and Luke, we find Jesus going through Galilee recruiting his disciples. Both Gospels use a word that is easy to overlook, but that nevertheless contains wonderful possibilities. The stories tell us that Jesus "saw" the individuals before him. He "saw" Simon and Andrew, and James and John, and then he "saw" Levi the tax collector. In both cases, the Greek words that are used mean something far different than merely observing with the eyes. It means something far closer to the act of contemplation, or understanding in one's inner being. The implication of both stories is that Jesus didn't merely catch a glimpse of those early disciples, but that he thought about them, and contemplated them. The language of the Greek suggests that Jesus understood them all, and that he valued them in the fullness of their being, flaws and all. Importantly, they hadn't led exemplary lives. They had done especially interesting things. In the case of Simon and Andrew, they were fishermen. Their father was a fisherman. They weren't poets, or inventors, or statesmen, or entrepreneurs. They fished, and they sold the fish, and that was probably that. And yet Jesus saw in them something worthy of contemplation. In the case of Levi, he was a tax collector, meaning not that he worked for the ancient analogue of the IRS, but that he was involved in shaking down his neighbors for money on behalf of the Romans. Levi's was not an exemplary, or even a very interesting life.

But here's the thing: Jesus can see them, not with his eyes, but with his heart. That is to say, it was a matter of discerning their divine worth, but more importantly, it was simply a matter of discerning their personhood, in all of its particularity. The text hints that perhaps Jesus had been in relationship with them for some time. It hints that he may have undertaken a process of getting to know them, one that took place over the course of months, or for all we know, years. That's why, when Jesus invites them to follow him, they immediately leave their occupations and go with him. They felt known by this man.

It's striking that such a basic act of relationality is how this thing called Christian faith begins. Jesus saw people. Which is to say, he got to know them in an intimate way, and then invited them to go deeper into the beating heart of the world by "seeing" - understanding - those who they encountered in day to day life. Quite often, that involved seeing and understanding those who, for the most part, were not easily seen or understood - the diseased, the lame, and the poor, but also at the opposite extreme, the Roman centurions and the very wealthy. Jesus somehow has the capacity to "see" them all, and to call forth the best from them.

If that all sounds gauzy and kind of mystical, it's not. It's just ordinary relationship building. In the time that remains, I'd like to offer a schema for how we might go about doing the sort of relational work among ourselves, how we imitate that early practice of Jesus. It's one possible map for how your conversations with one another might proceed. It traces the outline of a common stick figure drawing. If I had a wipe board, I'd draw as I talked, but instead, I'll ask all of you to sketch this stick figure in your mind for the next few minutes, as a way of imagining what sorts of questions we might want to ask to get to know someone well.

Start at the top, with a circle representing the head. When we focus on the person's head, we might ask what kinds of things the person you're talking to knows. What sort of knowledge do they possess? What skills do they have? What educational background do they have? Those are the kinds of questions that most of us find fairly easy to ask, and fairly easy to answer, so it helps to move down a little farther on the stick figure. So here we'll draw a small line under the head to represent the person's shoulders. The shoulders prompt us to wonder what burdens or responsibilities that person is bearing. Are they caring for another - a child, a spouse, an aging

parent? Are they in charge of a lot of people on their job? Are they worried about something or other? The shoulders help us to wonder, and to ask, what a person might be carrying.

Now move a little lower, to the area of the chest. Here, we'll draw a heart on our stick figure. When focused upon that part of the person, we might ask, who is this person connected to? Who are their family members? Who are their friends? What are the relationships that define them, whether in the past or in the present? That's the area that, for many of us, most needs to be strengthened right now, and so it's worth asking - how is this person connected to others?

Moving then to the immediate right and left of the heart, and down from the shoulders, we find lines representing arms. One arm can be represented holding a work bag of some sort, prompting us to ask what the person does, or did, for a living. That too is an easy part of the conversation, for it involves work. We get work. But the other arm is harder. It can be represented holding an object of leisure - a tennis racquet, say - prompting the question, what does this person I'm talking to do for fun?

Let's pause there. Because that might be the hardest place to go in an initial conversation. The question of fun requires saying something about ourselves that might seem frivolous, bearing no particular relation to our responsible, professional, utilitarian selves. In Protestant New England, I think we still have a hard time admitting that we have fun. Let me give you an example. If it were me sitting before you, I would have to tell you that one of the ways I have fun comes on Sunday nights, when all of my church responsibilities are over for the week. That's when I like to put on Gospel music from out of New Orleans. That's when I like to mix up a gin martini, and it's when I like to stuff myself with chips and salsa, all while hanging out with Rachael. In another moment, I'd have to tell you that a fun afternoon for me is being in a city, with several used bookstores on my agenda, and just letting the hours slip away by combing the shelves. Now, in one scenario I sound like a total lush. In the other I sound like a total bore. But hey, it's me. It's what I like and it's how I have fun. By telling you that, I would hope to create an opening where you could say what you most like, silly or pedestrian though it might be. It could even be something like what our former sexton, Mark Testori, once shared: that his idea of fun was to crank up the Gloria Estefan Greatest Hits album and grill steaks. I loved him for that. When we tell each other such things, we wind up becoming just a little more human, a little more real. We have to imagine that those are the sorts of things that Jesus knew about Simon, Andrew, and Levi.

But let's continue our tour of the stick person. In the region below the heart, we'll draw a square to represent the stomach or the guts. That allows us to consider what fire or inner drive might be burning inside of them. It allows us to consider what angers them. Now, anger is an emotion that most of us tend to shy away from, at least in public, and I think for good reason. But anger has its place in the life of faith. Jesus displayed anger, after all, especially when confronted with hypocrisy. God the Father displays anger too, when the poor, the dispossessed, and the hungry are ignored in favor of public displays of piety. Anger, in other words, is a part of the Godhead, and it's a part of what it means to be human. Like any emotion, when taken to extremes anger can have destructive implications. But when used and channeled well, it can help reveal the things about which we care most deeply, those things for which we are willing to fight and sacrifice. Structural racism, the persistent inequities in our economic system, environmental degradation, you name it - these are things that many of us are passionate about, and angry about as well. A little more anger, a little more passion about such things, would be welcome, and entirely appropriate. That's the furnace inside each person that can lead to greater

investment in the life of the world, and it's worth asking for each person what it is that fires that inner furnace.

Then there are the two legs on our stick figure. They represent the foundational beliefs or values that a person might stand upon. We all have them. For some of us, that foundational belief will be the autonomy of the human person, including a resistance to anything that interferes with that autonomy. Others of us may hold onto loyalty, to a family, or to a country perhaps, as a foundational belief. Still others of us may point to our trust in God, our foundational belief that, as the book of Romans has it, there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God shown to us in Jesus Christ. We have these core beliefs, and not only do they allow us to stand. They are the inner convictions that get us through the dark nights of the soul. They are the core values that help to move and propel us through life.

That's my stick figure, representing each one of us to some degree. Now I don't know - this may not be a rubric you want to use in a conversation, and it might even feel a little awkward to use it. But it's a way of entering a relational encounter that might help to move past the surface, allowing us to actually see the people sitting before us. I would suggest to you that when Jesus "sees" his earliest disciples this is the kind of holistic personhood that he discerns. Such "seeing" captures the external markers of our personhood - our age, or our race, or our gender. But it allows us to dig beneath those surface markers to the places where we're most human, which is what many of us are longing for.

Yesterday afternoon, I was unsure just how to finish this sermon. And then I remembered a scene from that film *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*, about Fred Rogers. It might actually rank as one of my all time favorite films because of the relational genius that Fred Rogers displayed. In the scene, Rogers sits in a restaurant with a jaded journalist, and they're both doing their best to get to know one another. The journalist doesn't quite believe that Mr. Rogers is anything more than an act, an inauthentic character. Rogers, for his part, can sense beneath that suspicion the wounded soul sitting before him. He asks the journalist if he would just sit in silence for a minute, and to think of the people in his life who loved him into being. In a way, he's asking the journalist to access the different parts of himself represented on our stick figure - the heart, the legs, the guts. The film itself goes silent for a full minute. First, Rogers gazes at the journalist across the table from him. But then, he gazes into the camera, inviting viewers into the exercise. It is as though he sees, truly sees, us. It's a magical effect. I would dare say that it's holy. The gaze asks us to get in touch with the full dimensionality of our personhood, and it feels overwhelming and good.

That's what it can be to sit with another person. That's what it can be to learn to see in the sense that Jesus sees. That's what it can be to sense the full dimensionality of a human being. That's what it can be to move past whatever friendship anxiety we might feel, and into the confidence that we, along with everyone around us, are worthy of knowing and being known.

What was it that Jesus saw? He saw ordinary, flawed, and deeply loveable human beings. People like you. People like me.