

**WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?
IN THE PRESENCE OF GREATNESS
LUKE 9:28-36
FEBRUARY 7, 2016
TRANSFIGURATION SUNDAY**

The news regularly reports on the presidential campaigns, what the polls show,
and on rare occasion how big are the crowds showing up for various candidates.
Reports on crowd size are interesting.
 Bernie Sanders has been drawing quite large crowds,
 while Hillary Clinton has not.
 But the mainstream press never mentions that fact.
 It makes me think they've got a favorite in that horse race.
Donald Trump regularly makes his own pronouncements
 about the large crowds he's been drawing.
 But we aren't hearing about crowd sizes for any of the other Republican candidates.
Sometimes people think crowd size is a predictor of voting tendencies.
 But I wonder.
 Interviews of individuals in those crowds suggest that sometimes people are there,
 not necessarily because they're going to vote for that candidate,
 but because they just want to be in their presence....
 Just in case they get elected.
 Then they can say, "I was there."
It's the urge to be in the presence of greatness.
 That's why people swarm to see all sorts of celebrities.
 They buy People magazine and some of the tabloids at the grocery store checkout stand,
 and watch Access Hollywood,
 all so they can be "in the know" about those special people.
Today there are people who are famous for being famous.
 Not because they've accomplished anything, but just because they're well-known.
 Think: Kardashians.
 And there are people who want to know all about them.
 And, if they could, they would want to be close to them.
It's a psychological phenomenon known as BIRGing, basking in reflected glory.
 By being associated with another person's fame,
 you feel like you get a bit of it yourself.
 It's like when you watch the Superbowl, and not just the commercials,
 because you actually care about one of the teams,
 when they win you say,
 "WE WON."
 WE won.
It's the person who pays big bucks to collect autographs of famous people.
 So Johnny Manziel, Johnny "Football," could get in trouble with the NCAA,
 because he made big bucks on autographed items.
It's Sheldon Cooper on Big Bang Theory,
 treasuring a napkin once used by Leonard Nimoy.
It's the parent with the bumper sticker that says,
 "My child is an honor student at this school."

MY child, because I'm such a good parent.
Or maybe because I contributed such great DNA.

In fact, both our girls were... oh, never mind.

BIRGing, basking in reflected glory.

BIRGing is done to enhance your self-esteem.

Not consciously, of course.

But that does often seem to be the motivation.

And it's definitely the effect.

The opposite of BIRGing is called CORFing, cutting off reflected failure.

CORFing.

This is the idea that people tend to

disassociate themselves from lower-status individuals

because they do not want their reputations affected

by associating with the people who are considered failures.

For instance, if the Denver Broncos lose the Superbowl this afternoon,

I won't be wearing an orange shirt tomorrow.

When President Richard Nixon resigned from office,

it became difficult to find someone who would admit voting for him.

CORFing, cutting off reflected failure.

A up-to-date example of that is the relative quietness of fans of the Dallas Cowboys.

People want to be in the presence of greatness.

True greatness is magnetic in its appeal.

Actually being there makes people feel better about themselves,

because they are somehow associated with it.

And we all have that tendency.

We want to live in the presence of greatness.

The question we're addressing in this sermon series is:

What difference does it make that you're a Christian?

Today the answer is:

As Christians, we live each day in the presence of greatness.

The first followers of Jesus lived in the presence of greatness.

But for some time they didn't realize just how great Jesus was.

Oh, they knew he was a gifted teacher,

a great teller of stories that could get under your skin.

They knew he could heal the sick and cast out demons,

so he was more than a really great rabbi.

They'd seen him challenge the religious establishment to their face.

He left scribes and Pharisees stumped and frustrated.

They'd seen him challenged by the establishment,

and he'd turned it around on them every time.

They knew he was something special.

And so it was pretty cool to be following him.

Following a rabbi was not something you just chose to do.

You didn't sign up, pay tuition and go.

You had to be invited by the rabbi.

And the rabbi would invite only those with the highest potential.

They didn't want to be wasting time and effort on

someone who was not a good learner,

or someone who was not going to LIVE what they learned.

The rabbis were all about their disciples
 learning the content and then living the content.
 So they invited the best of the best to,
 "Come, follow me."
 It was a great honor to be invited to follow a rabbi.
 The disciple basked in the reflected glory of the rabbi.
 And to be invited to follow a rabbi who could do the things Jesus did....
 Wow.
 Talk about an opportunity to bask in reflected glory!
 But even with all of that, they didn't realize the full extent of it.

Until one day...

LUKE 9:28-36

Jesus took with him his inner circle of Peter, James and John.

He was closest to them,
 and so shared with them several special episodes in his life.

This time he invited them to go up on a mountain to pray,
 a brief spiritual retreat.
 And I'm sure they gladly went with him.

But while he was praying....

Talk about a mountain top experience!

His entire appearance was transfigured.

His face showed forth the glory of God.

His clothing seemed to emanate light

And then Moses and Elijah appeared and spoke with him.

Moses and Elijah?

Those Old Testament guys?

They lived centuries before Jesus!

How could they possibly be there?

Well, Moses, who received the Old Testament Law from God,
 died alone on a mountain top just outside of the promised land.

So his grave, if there was any, was unknown.

A legend had arisen that

God had taken him directly to heaven.

The prophet Elijah did not die.

When his ministry was ending,

God took him up to heaven in a chariot of fire.

These two Old Testament figures represented to the Jews the Law and the Prophets,
 the two great divisions of the Scriptures.

And here they were, talking with Jesus.

It was a vision that meant the Law and the Prophets,

the entire Jewish Scriptures,

pointed to Jesus as God's messiah.

And later they'd understand the crucifixion and resurrection
 were always part of God's plan.

It would have been pretty clear to good Jews like Peter, James and John.

Peter was the one to speak.

He never could sit still and quiet,

just soaking things in.

He was an activist.

We gotta be doing something.
 Let's build shelters and stay here.
 This is a great experience.
 We can stay put and hang onto it for a long time.
 Then a cloud came over the scene, a thick fog that blocked out the view.
 And finally, a voice from the cloud, the voice of God the Father,
 "This is my Son, whom I have chosen.
 Listen to him."
 Don't be dazzled by the bright lights.
 Don't get hung up on Moses and Elijah.
 It all points you to Jesus.
 Stay focused on him.

And then....

The scene changed; it was all back to normal.
 And I'll bet they blinked, rubbed their eyes, and said to each other,
 "Did you see what I saw?
 Was that real?"
 Deep down they knew it was real.
 They had been in the presence of greatness.

Verse 37 goes on:

"The next day, when they came down from the mountain, a large crowd met Jesus."
 Immediately he was confronted by the brokenness of humanity.
 And he again ministered to that brokenness, casting out a demon.
 I wonder if the guys thought to themselves,
 Why couldn't we stay up on the mountain top and bask in all that glory?
 Haven't you felt that way?
 You go on a Walk to Emmaus,
 and you have a wonderful experience,
 bathed in the love of Christ.
 And when Sunday afternoon comes,
 you're ready to return home.
 And yet you think, "I wish I could go back up there."
 I remember vacations when I've felt like that.
 Spending time in the Rockies, Yellowstone,
 the Davis Mountains, the Black Hills,
 and wishing I could stay.
 Jesus led them back down the mountain,
 back to the low places,
 where people were hungry, poor, broken, sick, injured, demon possessed, sinful.
 I wonder if they realized that, even there,
 they were still in the presence of greatness.
 Maybe *especially* there, they were in the presence of greatness.
 Because the glory they'd seen, the glimpses of his divine identity,
 were just as true, just as real, down in the low places.
 It might be under wraps a little bit.
 It might only occasionally peek out through
 a healing or an exorcism or an utterance of godly wisdom.
 But it's still true.
 All the time and everywhere, it's true.

What difference does it make that you're a Christian?

You know you are in the presence of greatness all the time and everywhere.

And he is your way to everything good.

An elk hunter in the Rockies had spent a long day in archery season
traipsing up and down the mountains searching for game.

Carrying his bow over the miles,

he'd seen a few, but could never close the deal.

He bugled and cow called,

got a few responses,

but never got a bull to come in.

As the afternoon shade was growing long,

he realized he wasn't sure where he was.... or where camp was.

This was before cell phones,

so he couldn't just pull up a map.

He felt a bit of panic rising up in his throat,

then sat down to calm himself and think.

"Go to a high point and see what you can see."

He headed up the mountain,

but couldn't find a clearing that allowed him any kind of view.

So he headed back down the mountain,

knowing there would be a stream at the bottom.

At least he would have water, and a few energy bars in his backpack.

Exhausted and lost,

he pulled together some pine bows to make a bed,

and huddled down in his jacket for the night.

The next morning he checked the sunrise

and decided on a general direction to go.

He'd been walking for about an hour without seeing anything familiar.

He glimpsed movement ahead, and nocked an arrow.

Lost or not, he was still an elk hunter.

Out stepped another bow hunter.

"Oh, thank goodness!

I got lost and spent the night out here.

Can you point which way to go to Pagosa Springs?"

"Pagosa? That's where I live.

It's back that way,"

pointing over his left shoulder.

"But there's no way to just go in a straight line to get there.

It's too rough and steep."

"Can you sketch out a map?"

"No, there are too many twists and turns, cliffs and streams to get around.

But I can take you there myself."

"Oh, but what about your hunt?"

I don't want to interrupt it.

Just give me a few helpful hints."

"No, I can hunt later.

I'll go with you.

And maybe we'll find some elk on the way.

Come on."

And off they went.

It was soooo good to be with someone who knew the way.

He didn't point the way.

He didn't draw a map to show the way.

He didn't give him a compass to indicate the way.

He WAS the way.

Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life.

No one comes to the Father except through me.."

(Jn.14:6)

I am the way.

And he still is.

What difference does it make that you're a Christian?

You get to bask in the reflected glory of Jesus every day.

Because living within every believer is the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus.

We live by his power

We follow his guidance.

So we live in the presence of greatness every day.

Greater than any celebrity.

Greater than any presidential candidate.

Greater than anyone.

When your friends want to know what difference it makes that you're a Christian,

you can tell them

I live in the presence of greatness every day.

Thanks be to God!

And as we come to communion this morning,

we can participate in the greatness of God in a most intimate way.