

“Celebrity”

Matthew 21:1-11

So I want you to take yourself back in time ... some of you are not going to have to journey far, some of the rest of us will be taking significant time voyages here. I want you to take yourself to the age of 13, 14, thereabouts, and I want you to remember your room, your room at home when you were a teen, and see if you can remember what you had up on your walls.

When you get to be an old boring adult, the things you put on your walls are chosen because they work with the wallpaper or maybe they're the right size to go over the dresser, or whatever, but when you're a teen, the stuff on your walls is there to declare loudly to the world who you are. The Lady Gaga poster is not there because it works with the carpet.

So do you remember who *you* had on the walls? My room décor was comprised almost entirely of these posters that came from a teen heartthrob fan magazine which I had assumed was defunct, but turns out not to be: Tiger Beat Magazine. On eBay, I just learned, I can actually get me a copy of the March 1978 issue, with the very same fold-out poster of Shaun Cassidy that graced my teenage wall in Charlottesville, Virginia. I am in fact sorely tempted to get it for the Parsonage. Shaun Cassidy took up much of my wall of fame, but he did share some space with Andy Gibb, younger brother of the BeeGees, Mark Hamill – aka Luke Skywalker, and – somewhat incongruously, John McEnroe, who was just bursting onto the scene as the bad boy of tennis.

My friends and I would snatch up every magazine as soon as it hit the stands, breathlessly exchanging information, while also trying to one-up each other in the ‘did you know’ category. “Did you know his favorite candy bar is Milky Way?” “Yeah, but do *you* know his brother’s middle name?” Everything they did, said, were, everyone they dated, we wanted to know. We also wrote fan letters, incessantly, hopelessly – just for the record, just so you know, John McEnroe was the only one who wrote back. Not just such a bad boy after all.

I had assumed, somehow, that this sort of teen adulation had gone the way of the dinosaurs, but no – I was somewhat pleasantly surprised just this past year to discover that the girls in JPF were able to give me the middle names and birthdates of every member of the British boy band One Direction, and assured me that their pictures were all over the walls, and that Tiger Beat fan magazine still exists. I don't know why I found this heartening, but somehow I did.

I'd like to say that I grew out of all this, but the royal wedding two years ago seemed to bring back every latent fascination with celebrity that had been tamped down over the years. David found me in the living room that morning - - April 29 2011 -- at 4:30 a.m., wrapped in a Snuggie, eyes glued to the television. Who are those women with the odd hats? he queried. That, of course, I said, is Princess Eugenie and her sister Beatrice, daughters of Prince Andrew, who is, I'm sure you recall, William's uncle and the younger brother of Charles. And who is William again, he said. "For God's sake, David" I said, "he's the one getting married." "I've never seen this side of you," he said, wondering, no doubt, what else marriage would reveal.

Why I'm talking about Shaun Cassidy, One Direction, Lady Gaga, and William and Kate is because I want to give you some sense, some feeling, for what it felt like in Jerusalem two thousand years ago. I want you to sense something of the fever pitch of celebrity-watching hysteria that was going on in the streets of the city that day. Because this man, this Jesus, was every one of those celebrities times ten. They didn't have Teen Beat or People magazine then, but it didn't matter, they had the grapevine, and every piece of information that I obsessed over as a teen, they were obsessing over with this guy. They knew what town he was from, they knew who his mom was, they knew the names of *all* twelve disciples, and where *they* were from. And they knew what day he was coming to Jerusalem, and let me tell you, they were *beyond* excited.

Because they were fascinated by him; they hadn't met him yet, no, but they knew people who knew people who had met him, and who said that he was amazing. They hadn't seen him in action just yet, but they knew people who knew people who had seen him do, like, healings, miracles, incredible things. And they hadn't actually gotten to hear him in person, but they knew people who knew people who had heard him speak, and they said that his words gave

you hope, his words made you feel like maybe things were going to be okay, maybe things really were going to get better.

Because, here's the thing: they really needed things to get better in Jerusalem. They were on year 70 of Roman Rule, 70 years of being oppressed by Caesar and his cohorts. They'd been down so long it looked like up to them. And this man, this celebrity Jesus, well, word on the street was that he was going to turn things around. With his words and his miracles and his powers, with his personality and his following, with – if necessary – some force, some show of might, he was going to turn it around. Because this, this was the Messiah. That's what they'd heard. This was the one.

So that's what it was like on the streets of Jerusalem, under the palms waving frantically. That's what it was like for the people swarming out into the marketplace, screaming Hosanna as the entourage drew near.

On this man, this celebrity to end all celebrities, were pinned the hopes of generations. So these fans, they were rabid fans. Their fascination with Jesus would put to shame any of our most fervent celebrity-watching. And that's how Jesus entered into the final week of his life, this week that we now call Holy Week. That's how he entered in – as a man followed by crowds everywhere, as a man with a huge fan base, adored, sought after. Everywhere he went – standing room only.

Then ... then ... ever so subtly at first, the fan base got a little weaker, the followers began to lose their enthusiasm. It started with – to be honest, it started with the donkey. The donkey he rode in on. It wasn't really the entrance into the city that they'd hoped for, they kind of thought a conquering hero would enter the capital city a little more dramatically, a little more regally. So that was disappointing, odd.

And then, well, then, it was the people he was surrounding himself with. Yes, they'd heard the stories of him healing lepers, that was impressive. But they hadn't actually grasped that he spent time with them, went to their homes. Tuesday night of holy week – the scripture story we read last week here – Tuesday night Jesus had dinner with Simon the Leper, *in* the house of Simon the Leper. That just – well come on, that was just wrong, that was gross.

And women, too – he let a woman come and meet with him that night, anoint him with oil, crazy expensive oil, and there was a rumor that she was *that* kind of woman, and why would he talk to *her*?

And tax collectors? My God, tax collectors? I mean, they worked for the Romans. What kind of conquering Roman-defeating hero goes and hangs out with the enemy? And so the fans began to ebb away. In the time that it takes to rip a poster off your bedroom wall, a lot of those folks gave up on Jesus. He wasn't what they had in mind after all. He was supposed to smite the bad guys, and instead he'd sit down and talk to them, again and again. He was supposed to marshal the troops, and instead he seemed more interested in gathering kids together, talking to an old widow woman in the temple, talking to diseased folks. He was supposed to talk about power but all he talked about was love. So they drifted away, a lot of them, went looking for another celebrity to follow, went searching for another Messiah to rally behind. This wasn't the right one.

I guess you could say that this was the week that separated the real fans from the fickle. Because this was the week in which this man, this Jesus, was shown to be who he really was.... not a conquering hero, not a white knight with a sword, but a gentle man uninterested in any glory this world has to offer, a man more interested in breaking bread with a leper and a tax collector and an outcast woman. It was the week when people had to decide – is that what we want? Are we still fans? A lot of them said no tore their posters off the wall and went looking for the next big thing.

Well, it's a big week for us, too. It's a week for us to decide what kind of fans we are. Because this is when we come up against I ... this is when we see, we really see, what kind of Savior we've thrown our lot in with.

This is the week when we see, really see, just whose poster we've got up on the wall. And we have to decide, we have to decide – are we **real** fans? Are we die-hard fans? Most of us here were probably baptized somewhere along the line, somewhere along the line probably a lot of folks in this room were confirmed in a church somewhere. That's good, that's good. We bought the posters somewhere along the line.

But this, this week, is when we ask ourselves, are we really truly fans of this man? Because this is who we've got. We've got someone who this week says winning isn't everything, loving is everything. We've got someone who says I'd rather be servant to everyone than king over anyone. We've got someone who says I'd rather die than hurt anyone and it turns out he really means it.

And we have to decide – are we in? Is this the one? Are we real fans? I hope so. Because I'll tell you one thing – this world of ours needs more real Jesus fans. This world needs more people who choose compassion over victory; this world needs more people who choose serving over winning; this world needs more people who choose the outcasts over the in crowd. This world needs more people who would do anything not to cause hurt, who instead will work for what is right.

This world needs more people who will be moved by the sorrow of one person, who will reach out a hand in kindness to heal an enemy, who will leave the crowd to go find the one lost overlooked person on the edge. That's what Jesus did, that's what he does all this week. That what his real fans buy into.

This world, this nation, needs more real Jesus fans.

Jesus didn't lose *all* his fans this week, not by any means. In the end, there were some who kept his poster on their wall; there were some who followed him all the way to a supper in an upper room, who walked alongside him while he carried a cross, who didn't run. If you follow along this week with the scriptures that we've printed out on those purple handouts for you, if you join us at worship this week, you'll meet them ... and a good many of them, by the way, were women. (Just sayin'.)

They were in all the way, Jesus' most loyal fans – on the side of love, on the side of compassion, on the side of courage – and God, as it turned out, was on that side too. Let's each commit this week to strengthening the fan base. Let's each, this week, say I'm in, all the way. Amen.