

“Come As You Are” / Mark 4:35-41 / 24 June 2012

“And, leaving the crowds behind, they took Jesus with them in the boat, just as he was.” Did you notice that strange little observation in this story about Jesus and the disciples on the stormy sea? The disciples took him into their boat, Mark says, “just as he was.” How else would they have taken him on their twilight boat ride across the sea? Should they have dressed him in formal eveningwear? Were they cutting him some slack by not enforcing the coat-and-tie rule aboard their vessel? Well, good for them if they were able to take Jesus “just as he was,” because most of us *don't* take people just as they are—and especially not Jesus!

We all have a few tales of acceptance. At Vacation Bible School this past week, there were more children in this building than I've ever seen. I only knew about half of them. Unlike last year, when I had a daily acting part as a French chef at VBS, this year I had no official role to play. And so, on the first day, I took it on myself to make sure nobody was lonely. I wandered around pairing off shy kids with other children, in hopes that they'd become friends. And I was struck, as always, by just how accepting the smaller children were. You're a kid? I'm a kid! Hey, we're friends! You and I outgrew that kind of acceptance long ago.

Most of us don't take people just as they are. I've already told you one of my favorite tales of acceptance in a previous sermon, but I'll repeat it briefly. When we were living up north, a scary-looking drifter poked his head into my office and asked me to get him a motel room for the night. I wasted hours on the telephone trying to make him someone else's problem. But there he sat on the couch in my office, and he wasn't going anywhere. So I finally took him across the street to the only motel in that small town. It was a setup similar to the Bates Motel, on the movie *Psycho*: an old house attached to a row of identical rooms. Sharon was the lady who, with her husband, owned and managed the place, and they lived right there on the premises. For that reason, I felt kind of bad delivering this guy to her door. I found myself speaking a little too breezily when we entered her living room / motel office. “Hi, Sharon, this is Michael. He's hitchhiking to Vermont, and he needs a place to stay.” I expected to see poor Sharon recoiling in fear. How could you bring this filthy person into my home? But Sharon was not looking at me. She was smiling at Michael without a trace of judgment in her eyes. And with not a note of artificiality in her voice, she said, “Ah, so you're hoofing it? Let's get you a place to rest!” As I left Michael alone with Sharon, I overheard her asking, “Do you have plans for dinner?” Sharon accepted Michael just as he was, and he had dinner at her kitchen table that night. I've never forgotten that tale of acceptance because, as much as I like to be the hero of the stories I tell, I was not the hero of that tale.

To tell just one more tale of acceptance: I cannot say that my father-in-law accepted me just as I was when I was dating his daughter. He didn't like my religion, my politics, or my black cardigan. He used to call me “Mr. Rogers” because I made the mistake of wearing that sweater on the day I first met him. But his inviolable code states that, “family is family.” For him, you always love and support your family. And so, ever since our wedding day, it doesn't matter anymore that he doesn't like my politics, my religion, or my sweater—which I still have after all these years. He makes a genuine effort to get along because failing to accept and love me would be a violation of one of his own best principles. It's an authentic, loving acceptance, too. He's taught me most of what I know about car care and home maintenance. What are your stories of acceptance? There are surely people in your life, or your past, whom you cherish because they took you “just as you were.”

Think about it. Most people are nice enough. The majority of people are relatively accepting of strangers—if you're not rude to them, if you speak to them with respect, and if you look and act pretty much the way they think you should. But we grownups have an old, old survival mechanism that makes us start assessing a stranger as soon as we lay eyes on him or her. We can't really help it; every time we're confronted by a new person, we take quiet notes on their appearance: tidy or disheveled, young or old, white or black? We take immediate notice of their mannerisms: straight or gay, drunk or sober, aggressive or docile? We listen to their speech: middle class or lower, educated or uneducated, respectful or disrespectful. We're always trying to determine the degree of similarity that exists between a stranger and ourselves. We probably do it, deep down, in order to determine whether that person is a threat. But those snap judgments are just second nature to most of us. We apply them to other people, and they apply them to us. We get used to being assessed. Rare are the times when we've felt fully embraced by a person who didn't have at least a handful of conditions.

And that's why I'm intrigued by this line in Mark's gospel about how the disciples—simple fishermen—took Jesus into their boat, “just as he was.” It's clearly not the main point of this familiar miracle story. It's just a spare detail, but some say that God is in the details. And Mark includes so many seemingly unimportant details here that they invite investigation. He adds the observation that, “there were other boats with them.” He goes on to say that Jesus was asleep, “on in cushion in the stern.” It's rare for Mark, or any of the gospel writers to include this kind of extra information. It seems almost random. Cushion? Other boats? Just as he was? When you stop to consider just how much time it took those Bible authors to scrawl out a long Greek word onto a bit of parchment with a quill and a bottle of ink, you have to wonder why Mark went to the effort of mentioning all these extraneous things. Whenever you hear these sorts of specifics in a story where they're not expected, you usually think one of two things: Either you think, this is indeed a tall tale, a total fabrication. Something along the lines of: “Mom, you'll never believe it! I was walking home from school, and there was this enormous cat, as big as a horse except with no hooves, and it had bright orange eyes and horns like an elk. And it came running at me sideways and bit the knee out of my pants. And that's why my pants are torn.” The other thing that unnecessary detail might indicate is memory, especially the memory of an emotionally jarring event. Very often, when frightening or amazing events occur, it's the grainy details that get lodged in our minds, only to resurface many years later. Consider the events that swirl around your memories of 9/11 or the Kennedy assassination. In the case of this strange miracle story (which like all the miracle stories must be read like a parable) I think there are traces of an old, old memory here. Someone—perhaps Mark himself—was there that day. He saw the cushion. He saw the other boats. He saw them take Jesus “just as he was.”

Of course, it never does any good *not* to accept people just as they are. Imposing conditions on a personal relationship is nearly always disastrous. It causes people to wear masks, to hide, to pretend to be things they're not. It causes people to lose heart and drift away. Arnie was walking across a bridge one day, and he saw a man standing on the edge, about to jump. Arnie ran over and said: "Stop. Don't do it." "Why shouldn't I?" the man asked. "Well, there's so much to live for!" "Like what?" "Are you religious?" He said, "Yes." Arnie said, "Me too. Are you Christian or Buddhist?" "Christian." "Me too. Are you Catholic or Protestant?" "Protestant." "Me too. Are you Episcopalian or Baptist?" "Baptist." "Wow. Me too. Are you Baptist Church of God or Baptist Church of the Lord?" "Baptist Church of God."

"Me too. Are you original Baptist Church of God, or are you Reformed Baptist Church of God?" "Reformed Baptist Church of God." "Me too. Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1879, or Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1915?" He said: "Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1915." Arnie said: "Die, heretic scum," and pushed the guy off the bridge.

Refusing to take people just as they are does occasionally result in murder, in genocide, in hate crimes. It might even occasionally result in someone getting pushed off a bridge. But most often, the only thing that gets drowned is any and all possibility of a genuine relationship. For whenever a person feels that he or she is being assessed, weighed in the balance, even judged, it makes them behave in artificial ways. They might flee the relationship altogether, or else they might hide their true identities, presenting only those highly edited selves that they think we want to see. I see this kind of behavior just about every time the person sitting next to me on the airplane asks what I do for a living. If I tell that person that I'm a minister, he or she will invariably do one of two things: The person will stop talking altogether—thus putting an end to our seatmate relationship. Or else the person will start talking to me about...religion, assuming that I'm not capable of discussing anything else. Either way, they've assumed that I'm going to put conditions on our brief relationship and that they either need to duck out completely, or else pretend that they are something that they think I will find acceptable. It's sad enough to find our seatmate on an airplane hiding their true selves from us, but how much sadder to discover that our own children feel the need to hide, our long-time friends, our neighbors, perhaps even our spouses. How much healthier our relationships would be if people felt from the very beginning that we took them just as they are.

Still on page 370 of our hymnals, we have that old song that Billy Graham used at the end of all his evangelistic meetings, "Just As I Am without One Plea." My guess is that it will not make the final cut for our 2014 hymnal, and most of us won't much miss it. In my two years here at Bower Hill, we've only sung "Just As I Am" on one single occasion. But whether you like the song or not, you've got to admit that it speaks straight to the heart of our deepest longings and fears: the profound desire to be completely, fully known, just as we are. We all know deep down that real relationship depends on a person taking us just as we are; there can be no pretending, no hiding. But being known "just as we are" is also one of our greatest fears because we think that many—perhaps even most—will not accept us if they know certain things about us. But, oh the power of embracing a person who does not expect to be embraced! Oh, the significance of taking a person just as he or she is, without assessing, without disapproving. Just embracing that person as a child of God whom you are determined to love and accept. It can make all the difference in a relationship, in the church, in the world.

Those long ago disciples took Jesus "just as he was." And folks have been trying to fashion Jesus into a mascot for their team ever since. What would it mean to take Jesus again "just as he is," not as some formula for getting into heaven, but to take his hard teachings to heart: not looking at what he can do for us, but at what he says we should be doing for the world? What would it mean to insist that others accept you as you are, with no hiding, and no pretending? And most importantly what would it mean for you to take other people just as they are? It's the only way to have genuine relationship. Amen.