

Rev. Shannon J Kershner
BMPC – Jan 19, 2014
John 1:29-42

What Are We Looking for?

I had a lot of fun with many of you this week, thanks to the gift of technology. If I have your email address, then you received a Monday morning request. I sent an email asking for you to respond to the question that has been posed throughout worship today, the one Jesus asked those two men who decided to follow after him. “What are you looking for?”

Many of you responded. Some of your responses were given in bullet points. Others were long paragraphs. All of them were incredibly sincere. Quite a few of them began, “I thought this would be an easy question, but it really isn’t.” Many of you thanked me for even posing the question to you, because it forced you to step back from the “tyranny of the now and the urgent,” and to really pay prayerful attention to the longings of your spirit. If you look at the front of your bulletin, you can see a sampling of the phrases you used. Many of you responded with words like “peace,” “hope,” “love.”

And quite a few of you responded to the other ways I posed the question. In addition to Jesus’ original query, I added, “Why do you come to worship? Why are you a part of a church?” With that spin on the question, many of you wrote you were looking for a place to be fully welcomed and loved; you were looking for companionship on the journey; or for a space and time to give thanks for the way God has blessed your life. One poet among you said she was looking for moments that pricked her soul. Someone older said he always desired to be pushed into thinking and living more deeply. Several parents of young kids reflected that time in worship gave them strength and a centering for the week ahead (plus an hour of free child care!). And a woman who is rather new to BMPC talked about how after her husband died on a Saturday, she and her adult daughter decided to be in church the very next day. “I could not fathom where else I should be,” she wrote, except to be in the midst of the comfort and embrace that only her faith community could give her.

Like I said in the beginning—having this kind of conversation with so many of you, even over email, was a gift I unwrapped all week long. But as I began to write this sermon on Friday morning, I started to wish that I had sent you a follow-up question too. I wish I had responded to your emails with “How did it feel to even ask yourself that question? What happened as you imaginatively looked Jesus in the eye and he asked you ‘What are you looking for?’”

I know that when I reflected on Jesus’ question for myself, when I imagined Jesus stopping and seeing me, asking me that question, unanticipated tears came to my eyes. As our poet wrote, my soul was pricked. And I wondered if any of you experienced something similar - an unexpected welling up, which is why I wished I had followed up. But I also began to wonder about those two early disciples. On the dusty road that day, when Jesus turned around, took a good hard look at them, then asked “What are you looking for?” did they feel their souls pricked and their hearts laid bare?

John the Baptist had already told them who he believed this Jesus to be. And he did it with complete transparency, something that caught me a little by surprise. I had always thought of John as a bit of a know-it-all, saying everything with complete confidence. Yet John admitted to his followers that it had taken both some time and the Spirit to help him realize that Jesus, his cousin, was actually Jesus, the One whose Way he had been preparing. But once it sank into his thick prophetic skull, it sank in deeply. “Behold,” John had excitedly proclaimed to his followers the day before, “The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” Clearly, his sermon was designed to tweak his followers’ curiosity. And it did. But John was always so over-the-top dramatic in everything that he did and in all that he said that John’s followers might also have been just a bit suspicious of his claims about Jesus. And yet, at least two of them were curious enough, restless enough, maybe soul-hungry enough that when the next day dawned and John pointed Jesus out to them again, they decided to follow.

Jesus knew he was being tailed. I imagine he also knew of their curiosity mixed with slight suspicion, their restlessness and their souls’ hunger. So Jesus stopped walking, turned around, and pondered them for a moment. And then, he said his first words in this Gospel. “What are you looking for?”

Now, that is not the first question I would have predicted Jesus might ask. I would have thought Jesus might have turned to them and said “Can I help you?” or “Why are you following me?” But instead, Jesus stopped, turned, and asked them one of the most profound questions we can be asked, “What are you looking for?”

Don’t you imagine their eyes filled with tears? For you just know that no one had asked them that kind of question before, or if they had, no one had ever meant it like that before. So they responded in kind, soul to soul. They laid bare their hearts, saying “*Rabbi, where are you staying?*” Now perhaps to us, that question does not sound very heart-baring, certainly not very soulful. To us, it might sound like a weird response to Jesus’ intense question.

But that is because we are dealing with English and not biblical Greek. The word our Gospel writer John uses with those two disciples is the word “meno.” It is one of John’s favorite words. And as you might recall from previous conversations, “meno” does not just mean physically stay. They were not simply asking which hotel Jesus was occupying for the night. Rather, “meno” means to abide, to remain. It has more to do with one’s nature. One’s identity. “Meno” is the word Jesus uses in chapter 15 when he speaks of himself as abiding in the Father and the disciples abiding in him. Tom Long preaches that in essence, the two disciples were really asking Jesus “Rabbi, Who are you? Where is the ‘home,’ the center of your life?”¹ So that means that when Jesus asked them “What are you looking for?” they responded “Home—is that You?”

It is no wonder why this story moves many of us, this preacher included. For when I am honest and really search my own heart for some of my reasons being here every day and every Sunday, I find I have the same response as those disciples. I am here with you

because I am looking for my home. I am here because I am looking for a community of people with whom I can abide in Jesus Christ, in the fullest sense. I am looking for the place, or rather, a community of the faithful where I can know and be known. Where I can share my brokenness and my gifts. Where I can try to discover God's hope, God's imagination for my own life and for the life of the world. I am here with you because I, like you, believe with all my heart that I have been called to follow Jesus-- the Way, the Truth and the Life-- but I cannot do that alone, not in this world, nor should I.

Like those first two disciples, I am here with you because I am looking for my home—longing to abide in God, and I believe that only when we are trying to do that together, will we make it. And I know from your email responses that I am not the only one on that mission, that quest.

“What are you looking for?” he asks. “Home,” they say, “Is that you?” But then how does Jesus respond back to them, to their question of home and identity? He does not respond with an articulation of theological doctrine. He does not respond by quoting Scripture from the Torah. He does not respond with words that John the Baptist might use, something like, “You must repent and believe.” No, Jesus does not respond to them in any of those ways. Actually, he does not respond with any real kind of answer at all. Instead, Jesus simply offers an invitation. “Come and see,” he says. “Come and you will see.” It's evangelism at its best.

But that is exactly what they did. Perhaps it felt like that they could not help but go with him. I can understand that. Sometimes I follow Jesus because I cannot imagine living any other way—he has too much of a hold on me. But from how the rest of the story is told, we can assume that Jesus got a hold of them too. In Jesus, with Jesus, they discovered what they were longing for, what their souls were hungry for. Our story tells us they remained, they abided, they stayed with Jesus all day long on that first day of their re-creation. They did exactly as he invited—they went and they remained in him and they saw.

And oh, in those days, what all they saw! First, they watched as immediately, Jesus formed them into a community, a congregation, if you will. He gave them new names with new meanings like Cephas-Peter-rock. And then Jesus called even more into the bunch. Jesus knew that if they were to find their home in him, to follow him, they were going to have to go the road together. We know that same thing. It was, it is, much too difficult a journey to travel alone. So as those first disciples watched, Jesus gathered more people to follow him, to abide in him, to stay with him.

And soon, the community grew and changed. Soon, it was full of men and women, Jews and Gentiles (even Samaritans), outsiders and insiders, young and old, rich and poor, sick and well. Everyone who walked up to Jesus searching for his or her home was not just treated warmly, but welcomed and brought in as if they were a long-lost family member, a prodigal son or daughter, who had finally made their way back. Those considered unworthy were valued. Those who considered themselves too worthy were lovingly humbled.

But everyone who gathered around him, everyone who did their best to follow, all of whom he formed into this community of the faithful, found themselves at home in Jesus in a way that pricked their souls, laid bare their hearts, and occasionally brought tears to their eyes. And somewhere along the way, following Jesus, they must have realized they never did get an answer from him. Instead, they found their way home. “What are you looking for?” “Home, is that You?” “Come and see.”

Over the last four years people have asked me, “What is your vision for Black Mountain Presbyterian? Why do you think God called you here?” And over the last four years my response has deepened in intensity, but not really wavered in content. I believe God has called me here to do whatever I can, in full partnership with you, to make Black Mountain Presbyterian a place for **all** of God’s children who are longing to find their way home, who are trying to trail Jesus, who want to come and see where he might lead— no matter anyone’s age or income, race or sexual orientation, political views or education levels. My vision, your vision, of who God is always calling us to become as a faith community is to be a way, a people, doing our best to follow Jesus Home.

Because I think no matter who we are, one reason we are here is because sometimes we still stand with those first disciples—homesick and restless, perhaps a little suspicious, maybe even soul-starved. So we come here to worship so we can stand together, look at Jesus in the eyes, and try to listen for his voice above the fray. We are here so we can all stand together, trying to open our hearts and lay bare our souls, longing for an answer but knowing it is a journey. “What are you looking for?” “Home, is that You?” “Come and see, come and see.”

*“Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling. Calling for you and for me....
Come home, come home,
Ye who are weary come home;
Earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling,
Calling O sinners come home.”*

What are you looking for? Come and see.

¹ Long, Tom. “Party in Room 210...Everyone Invited.” Shepherds and Bathrobes (Lima, Ohio: C.S.S. Publishing Co., 1987). Quoted on www.sermonmall.com.