

2 Epiphany, Year A

Isaiah 49:1-7

Psalm 40:1-12

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

John 1:29-42

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter).

John 1:35-42

In today's gospel, Jesus asks one of the most important questions of the Christian spiritual life, but don't blink or you'll miss it. There he is, walking down the road, minding his own business, when he realizes he's being tailed by two of John's former disciples. Jesus stops, turns, and asks the million dollar question:

"What are you looking for?"¹

Or as the King James Version has it:

"What seek ye?"²

Or best of all, in the blunt language of the New International Version:

"What do you want?"³

On the surface it doesn't sound like all that important of a question. In fact, to our well-mannered Southern ears, it may sound downright rude: "Whaddaya want?" If we were Jesus, surely we would have asked, "Is there somethin' I can help you with, sugar?"

¹ John 1:38 (NRSV)

² John 1:38 (KJV)

³ John 1:38 (NIV)

When I reread this gospel last week in preparation for this sermon, it immediately reminded me of a story told to me by a fellow southern priest about when he lived in New York. He was new; he was lost; everyone was in a hurry. Finally, he worked up the courage to stop someone and ask for directions, and when he did, she turned and curtly asked, “Whaddaya want?” He sputtered and said, “I’m sorry. Nothing. I’m fine.” The woman stared, somewhat perplexed, and said, “No, I would be very happy to help you if you would just tell me what it is that you want.” My friend, much relieved, told her what he was looking for; she gave him directions; he said thank you; and off they went on their merry, separate ways. What my colleague had mistaken for rudeness (“whaddaya want?”) was actually kindness wrapped directness.

So here we are with Jesus today, and he does the same thing. At this point, it’s early in his ministry. He has not called any disciples yet; in fact, it’s so early in John’s gospel that Jesus hasn’t said *anything* yet. John tells two of his disciples, “There goes Jesus. *That’s* the real deal. *That’s* who you want to be following.” They leave John to take after Jesus, and the first words to come out of Jesus’ mouth in this entire gospel are as direct as that New Yorker stopping mid-stride in midtown Manhattan: “What do you want?”

I say this is one of the most important questions of the Christian spiritual life not just because Jesus asks it here, but because Jesus seems to ask it all the time. In another gospel, when a blind man named Bartimaeus comes to Jesus hoping to be healed, Jesus starts by asking, “What do you want?”⁴ When two of his own disciples have questions and are being sheepish about approaching him, Jesus turns and asks, “What do you want?”⁵ It is the million dollar question, and Jesus still asks it of us, even today. Why? Not because *he* needs the answer, but because *we* need the answer.

Have you ever struggled to figure out what it is that God wants from you? Have you ever found yourself spinning your wheels, looking for direction, thinking, “Maybe I’m supposed to do *this*. Or maybe God wants me to *that*.” If Jesus were physically present in the room at those times, I think he would stop us and ask, “But what do *you* want?” He would ask that because he knows that the deep-down desires of our hearts tell us something true about who we are, and who God is calling us to be. Psalm 37 says, “Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart,”⁶ but you first have to *know* the desires of your heart if he is ever to give them to you.

When I was a university chaplain, I remember talking to a young woman who was really struggling to find direction for her life. One day, she came to me all in a tizzy and said, “I’m dropping out of college. I’m moving to Africa. I’m gonna be a missionary.” “Okaaaay,” I said, but I could tell from the tone of her voice that it really was *not* okay. I told her to sit down, and I said, “This is sudden. Why Africa? Do you *want* to go to Africa?” “No,” she said with a sigh, “that’s just where missionaries go.” “Hmm,” I said, “and do you *want* to be a missionary?” “No, not really,” she said, “but that’s what people do when they want to help Jesus.” I reminded her that *I* wasn’t a missionary and *I* didn’t live in Africa, yet I felt like I was doing something for

⁴ Mark 10:51

⁵ Mark 10:36

⁶ Psalm 37:4 (NASB)

Jesus. Then I asked her, “What do you *like* to do? What makes you happy? In other words, what do you *want*?” As she stopped to really consider the question, her face began to light up as she talked about her love for children. Her love for teaching. Her love for making a difference. You see, the desire of her heart was to be around children; it had been there all along. Not long thereafter, she changed her major to early childhood education, and now she is a fantastic elementary school teacher who has every sense that she’s “doing something for Jesus.” She just needed someone to ask her the question, “What do you want?” which allowed her to discover in turn what Jesus wants for her.

So . . . are you searching? Are you unsure of where you going? Does the future ahead look like a big, blank, intimidating canvas? Then today may be the day for you to let Jesus ask you the question, “What do you want?”

Or . . . are you stuck? Do you feel “itchy?” Are you in a place in your life where everything’s fine, everything’s good enough, but you just know you’re supposed to be doing something else? Then today’s a great day for you to let Jesus ask you the question, “What do you want?”

Or . . . is your heart hungry? Is everything great, but you know you have a deeper longing, a desire to follow Jesus more closely? Then, for God’s sake, let Jesus turn around and ask you the question, “What do you want?”

This is the season of Epiphany, a time for finding Jesus in the mundane, ordinary things of this world. The grace for us today is that we don’t actually have to look far to find him. He’s already working in us, near to us as the deepest desires of our own hearts.

Amen.

Want to know more about how the desires of your heart and the discernment of God’s will can go hand-in-hand? I recommend James Martin’s book The Jesuit Guide to Almost Everything: A Spirituality for Real Life. New York: HarperCollins, 2010.