

Sunday, January 17, 2021

Rev. Robert W. Brown

What are you seeking?

Today's Scripture comes from the first chapter of the Gospel of John. I know that our Monday evening Bible Study group just began reading John's Gospel and immediately found a distinctive richness in his approach to the story of Jesus. John urgently wants us to understand the fullness of who Jesus was and how he embodied God with us. He writes, "The word became flesh and dwelt among us." (Jn 1:14)

So before the narrative begins, we already know that, for John, Jesus is the Messiah. Once he establishes that point of view, the curtain opens on the narrative story. We find John the Baptist attracting large crowds to the banks of the Jordan river. Many thought it was very likely that John the Baptist was the awaited Messiah, but John set them straight, "I am **not** the Christ." He insists, "I baptize you with water, but...he will baptize with the Holy Spirit!" (Jn 1:26 & 33)

I always imagine John the Baptist as kind of spiritually electrified with enthusiasm and unbridled anticipation. He is all about emphatically pointing to Jesus. LOOK, HE IS RIGHT IN FRONT OF YOU!!! He even brings his own disciples to see Jesus, hoping that they too might see and follow Jesus the Christ.

What do you think it was about Jesus that allowed some people to recognize Jesus as the Messiah while so many others were either ambivalent or antagonistic?

How might we recognize the Living Christ among us today?

Hear this reading from the Gospel of John, chapter 1, verses 35-51.

John 1:35-51

The next day, John [the Baptist] was standing with two of his disciples, and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. Jesus turned and saw them following and said to them, "What are you seeking?" And they said to him, "Rabbi" (which means Teacher), "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and you will see." So they came and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day, for it was about the tenth hour. One of the two who heard John speak and followed Jesus was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his own brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which means Christ). He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon the son of John. You shall be called Cephas" (which means Peter).

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael said to him, "How do you know me?" Jesus answered him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." Nathanael answered him, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus answered him, "Because I said to you, 'I saw you under the fig tree,' do you believe? You will see greater things than these." And

he said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”

Imbedded in every great story, Imbedded in every great story, every piece of fiction, every movie you see, every drama you watch on TV or on the stage is the same critical question. It’s asked over and over and over again. Quite often this essential question is asked out loud because the answer is what moves the story forward.

Can you guess what that question is? ...

The indispensable question that propels all drama is, “What do you want?” Test that out for yourself the next time you’re watching *The Queens Gambit* or binging old episodes of, *Law & Order*. The question, “What do you want?” drives all of Dickens work, and also our very own Louisa May Alcott.

It is the dramatic need of each character that drives the story.

The reason this is so critical to every story is quite simple. We all want something – all the time and our desire motivates our behavior. We are always in pursuit of... what?

“What do YOU want?”

What I want right now is to pray, please join me.

Divine Light of the World, shine within our hearts this morning. Let the pure light of Your Holy Spirit flood us with understanding and wisdom so that we may become Your light here on earth as it is in heaven. Draw close to us in our pursuit to know you more and more. And, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you our Rock and our Redeemer. -Amen

In my younger years I wrote and directed TV commercials. It’s tricky business to communicate in thirty-seconds so effectively that you provoke people into some kind of action. I remember one time I was working with a well-known writer in the Ad world. This guy was the creator of many iconic ads that many of you would still remember decades later. Over dinner one night I asked him how he came up with such long run of successful campaigns? He told me that the first critically important step, before anything else, is to specifically identify the actual intense emotional need that the product addresses.

It’s not about the thing you’re selling at all. It’s about the real underlying need that the thing promises to resolve. “No one wants to buy a drill.” he said, “What they want is a hole.” I have never forgot that. We may think we want a drill because we have seen how well they work, but the drill is not the underlying need.

Later in my career, I moved away from commercials into directing scripted dramas for TV. I would study the script carefully to uncover what the emotional, dramatic need

was. It's not always explicit, but having a clear sense of what the deep dramatic need was always informed my approach to making the show. Working with actors, I would insist that they know what their character wanted in each scene. Even when they had no lines! Everybody wants something all the time and our need translates into behavior. Working on this sermon, for instance, I stopped writing for a while because I needed to eat more urgently than write.

Our need is what drives our behavior and our behavior drives the plot points of fictional drama and also the real-life non-fiction drama that is our life. Being aware of what you want is a very important thing because it actually shapes the way we see the world. We define our place in the world by what we want and if we can get it. I think we should always be asking it of ourselves and everyone we meet, "What do you want?" The answer to that simple nonthreatening question can actually reveal the dramatic need that dominates someone's attention. It can expose the essential motivation in any discussion and be the gateway to compassion.

Jesus had an uncanny way of knowing what people wanted. He knew that whatever it was a person was seeking would explain why they acted the way they did. "*What you want*" reveals the condition of your soul. When two of John's disciples leave him to follow Jesus, they shyly tag along behind without a word. They are not sure if this was the right thing to do or, if it was, would they be worthy.

As is his habit, Jesus cuts to the essential question, "What are you seeking?" Neither of them has a clue what they are seeking, so they awkwardly deflect the question. "Where are you staying?" The great teacher simply says, "Come and see." Somehow, being in Jesus presence, these rookie disciples felt a profound relief in their soul. In Jesus presence there was a soothing of a deep yearning desire that they didn't even know was there. They may have thought they were looking for a drill, but what they really wanted was a hole.

The next day, Philip from Bethsaida had the same experience. He's so excited about his experience with Jesus that he finds his friend Nathanael. Old Nate is not impressed. He probably thinks gullible Phil has been duped again. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Nazareth is to Bethsaida like Iowa is to Massachusetts. I love what comes next. Philip does not challenge his snarky bigoted friend at all! He simply uses the exact same line that Jesus did the day before, "Come and see!" Old Nate agrees, probably thinking how sweet it will be to debunk Phil's innocent delusion. But then he meets Jesus and quickly comes to see what a narrow-minded, bitter cynic he has been. Suddenly his great need has changed. His deepest desire now is to find forgiveness. Knowing what he is really seeking leads him directly into experiencing the grace of God.

Now his deep need for acceptance has been soothed and, in its place is a burning desire to know this gracious God more. His need propels him to become a disciple. What you want dictates how you behave.

As Jesus encounters other would-be-disciples, each one appears to be as confident as Nathaniel was about their assumptions. They assume their life is already mapped out. Over time, loose opinions solidify into what we assume to be facts. The need to be right motivated their behavior more than opening to a new way of imagining. In each case, as Jesus calls his disciples, it wasn't heated debate or accusations or a matched escalation of aggression or emotional manipulation that changed them. It was always a simple invitation. "Follow me," Jesus says, "come and see." For those who did, they found their fixed assumptions dissolve in the light of personal experience, disrespect transformed into mutual admiration, judgmental intolerance into sincere love. Radical, reorienting change like this will never happen at the legislative level; real change begins through one-to-one personal experience that speaks directly to personal need. Change happens when we are able to somehow see that what we thought we knew and what we thought we wanted is actually a reaction to a deeper unfulfilled need. Jesus simply says, "Come and see." The rest is up to you!

Not everybody will do this. When the invitation to come and see comes, many won't do it, because it takes real courage to challenge your assumptions about what is really important, to really reevaluate who is worthy and who is not. The threat is that you may have to completely deconstruct your life. You will have to humble yourself and admit that you were flat out wrong. You will have to confront the guilt in knowing that the very same people you blame and despise are valuable human beings, worthy of respect and dignity. Dr. King rightly said, "There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies." But here's the catch. To turn in this new direction, we are confronted with the horror of knowing that our behavior directly contributed to the pain and suffering of these same people we now care about. It is a terrifying prospect to engage. The crushing guilt is brutal, that is until grace appears.

When grace appears, the heavy burden of culpability is suddenly lightened. Grace liberates us. Forgiveness floods those hidden places where loathing, hatred and victimization once poisoned our soul. It may take time but resentment and hatred will always be neutralized when and if you stick around long enough for grace to come about.

Things are really hard right now. I've noticed, in myself and a lot of others around me, an escalating tension born, I think, out of unresolved, free-floating anxiety. We are looking for relief. For me, feeling edgy and angry is a signal that it's time to step back for a minute and ask the essential question; what do I think I want and what do I really want? What am I truly seeking? What am I afraid of losing?

Jesus invites us all to come and see. If we dare follow him, I am certain that we too will experience what those first disciples did so long ago. Not angry, judgmental condemnation but rather grace upon grace, understanding, patience. In Jesus we find complete and total forgiveness. And we begin again.

What is the deep dramatic need of your soul? What are you truly seeking? What do you really want? Also, what do you think the other people in your life want?

In every interaction we encounter, no matter how benign or intense, our underlying desires provoke behavior and drive the ever-unfolding drama of our lives.

No matter what the condition of your soul is today, Jesus asks,

“What are you seeking?”

And challenges us to come and see. The rest is up to us.

Last fall, on a foggy gray day, outside in the courtyard at TriCon Church, Bob and Sawyer Lawson recorded a song of hope. It’s a modern-day psalm of sorts that speaks to God’s never-ending grace and steadfast love. May we all find the courage to experience the power of God’s grace. AMEN

(play *His Eye Is on the Sparrow*.)