

COME AND SEE

**Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Union Church of Pocantico Hills
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Isaiah 49:1-7

John 1:29-42

One day, not long after his baptism by John the Baptist in the River Jordan, at the very beginning of his public ministry, Jesus and John meet again. It's an odd little story. The Fourth Gospel, the Gospel of John, tells these stories differently from Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John puts an intriguing twist in here and there, a twist that makes us think. The other three gospel writers tell it straight: Jesus sees potential disciples, tells them to drop what they are doing and follow him, and they do just that.

But John gives us a dialogue. Jesus is walking by; John the Baptist is standing there with two of John's followers. John says, "Look, . . . there goes the Lamb of God." What a peculiar thing to say. What does that mean? God's lamb, a small, weak, vulnerable little lamb? Whatever it means or does not mean to us, John's two friends turn around and start to follow Jesus. And instead of saying "Follow me," Jesus asks them a question: "What are you looking for?" And instead of giving him an answer, like "We're looking for the meaning of life," they ask him, "Where are you staying, Rabbi?"—which sounds suspiciously like they're angling for an invitation to lunch. That's essentially what they get. "Come and see," Jesus says, and they go with him and spend the day there, and at the end, one of them, Andrew, finds his brother Simon and tells him the most astonishing thing: "We just found the Messiah." And he persuades Simon to come and see, and he does, and Jesus renames him Peter, and the rest is history. The Christian enterprise begins.

Notice that faith here starts not with a creed or a theological argument or a liturgical act but with an invitation to lunch and a conversation, a relationship. Evangelism, the sharing of the truth of who Jesus is, happens here not by preaching or compelling intellectual argument, but with an act of hospitality, "Come and see." Sadly, over the ages, evangelism has gotten a bad name. It's too often been heavy-handed. Even good works of Christian mission have been tainted by intense proselytizing. In some places, that still goes on today. In mainstream churches, however, evangelism as bullying is out of favor. It's seen as inappropriate and inauthentic witness. We are called to witness to our faith by our hospitality, with no strings attached, no conditions, no secondary agenda. You're not supposed to use kindness as a way to convert, make saying a prayer the condition for giving a sandwich. You are supposed to just give the sandwich. "Come and see"—that's enough. We don't have to do more than that.

And the reason, I think, is that "come and see" is the natural follow-on to the question Jesus asks, "What are you looking for?" It is the right question. It is the basic question: What are you looking for?

What many answer to the question is "happiness." What do I really want? What do I want more than a million dollars or perfect health or to go to heaven when I die?

Happiness, now. The answer used to be “heaven.” Back when life was shorter and harder, heaven sounded like a great idea. The greater Reformation leader John Calvin had an argument with himself about the subject. Christians ought to focus on eternal life with God, he said, and yet they can’t seem to stop thinking about their lives now. “Even though nearly all people want to appear to be striving after immortality,” Calvin wrote, “if you examine the plans, the deeds, the efforts of anyone, then you will find nothing else but earth.”¹

It is not easy, maybe not possible, maybe not appropriate, to try to convince people that their current state of happiness or unhappiness is not important. “The pursuit of happiness” is one of the unalienable rights written into our Declaration of Independence.

What are you looking for? A lot of people still answer simply, “Happiness.”

Time magazine some time ago presented one of those lengthy special features they do called “The New Science of Happiness.”² The editors noted that while something like 78 percent of us say we’re basically happy, there’s evidence of creeping dissatisfaction. “Why else are so many of us [clinically depressed]? Why do so many reach midlife with a surprising sense of emptiness? In a society as wealthy and privileged as [our own], what, after all, does it take to find real satisfaction in life?”

That is the basis of a whole new field of serious scientific inquiry called Happiness Science. University of Pennsylvania psychologist and former president of the American Psychological Association, Martin Seligman, says that psychology should be focusing not simply on helping people cope with unhappiness but on “what makes human beings flourish and experience happiness. Instead of helping people get from minus five to zero, we should be helping them get from zero to plus five.”

Seligman and his team have identified what makes human beings happy, and the reasons are overwhelmingly relational: other people. And at the very top of the list, the single most efficient producers of happiness are...grandchildren. Now, not everybody has grandchildren, but there is something deeply satisfying about relationships, human relationships; close, personal relationships, science knows, are related to happiness.

One thing that doesn’t work is money. Once you have your basic needs met and can pay basic bills, incremental amounts of income, while nice, do not produce commensurate amounts of happiness, nothing nearly as dramatic as gratitude and relationships.

And the article turns to religion. There is, everyone knows, although scientists have often found it awkward, a connection between religion and happiness. Now science, instead of dismissing, is evaluating. Why are religious people happier? The answer seems to be that religion, for many, provides social and spiritual support, a caring community, hospitality, a place to be—that is, many of the things people say they need to be happy.

Now I’m not suggesting that you should join our church so that you’ll be happy!” There is no quid pro quo here. There are, evidently, techniques, things to do, that for

¹ George W. Stroup, *Before God* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 130.

² Claudia Willis, “The New Science of Happiness,” *Time* 165, no. 3 (January 17, 2005), A2-A9.

many people produce happiness. That text however, “What are you looking for?” forces us to refocus on the question.

I’m reminded of something the Austrian poet Rilke said in his famous advice to a young poet: “Questions. Live your questions. Love your questions.”

Jesus asks, “What are you looking for?” It’s the basic question. Presbyterian theologian George Stroup writes,

The issue . . . is not finally whether one believes, but, as the Bible recognizes, what one loves most fervently and what the heart yearns for as its final happiness. . . . There is a great deal at stake in the question of what finally will satisfy the deepest longings of the human heart.³

One of the most intriguing ideas I know, an idea I have come to love, is that God is the source of the basic question we ask, the idea that God has created us to look and seek and search.

God has created us, someone noted, with a God-sized hole in our hearts” that nothing but God can fill.

“Thou hast made us for thyself, so that our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.” Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, Saint Augustine, said that 16 centuries ago. The longing we experience, the emptiness, the incompleteness, the looking for something, is built into us by God.

Medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas, centuries later, said it again in an essay on desire: the basic human desire is for God.

That is what we’re looking for—for God, for truth, for relationship with that which is ultimate, for some sense that my life matters to God and in some way fits into a pattern God knows.

We live precariously in a world very different from anything in memory. Optimism and confidence in the future are on the wane, while volatility and danger seem more palpable and threatening than ever. In the meantime, we live in a culture that measures us by the clothes we wear, the cars we drive, the schools we attended, the size of our homes, a world in which a sudden downturn in the market, an unfavorable personnel review, a “no” to a college application, the wrong lab report, the end of a relationship, can be a devastating blow and a threat to everything that has meaning and hope for us.

So yes, indeed, there is not a one of us who, in some way or another, is not looking for something.

So let’s return to our odd little story:

Two men standing with another, John the Baptist, compelling preacher, religious leader, Jesus walks by.

“Look,” John says. “Look, the Lamb of God. He’s what we’re all looking for.”

³ Stroup, *Before God*, 137-138.

The men leave John and start to follow Jesus.

“What are you looking for?” Jesus asks. They respond, “Where are you staying?” “Come and see,” he says.” No ethical teachings. No social preachings. No spiritual guidance. No call for a confession of faith in his name. Just “come and see.” Come and hang out with me for a while. Get to know me. And it appears, from John’s account, that discipleship is nothing more than this willingness to follow along and have a look. To become a part of the circle around Jesus. To develop a relationship with him and with one another. And notice how the circle keeps getting bigger. In no time at all, one of these two, Andrew, has gone off to find his brother, Simon, tell him the news—“We have found the Messiah”—and bring *him* to Jesus. And so the chain of witnessing continues, right down to this day.

Discipleship, John tells us, is always an active engagement with Jesus. Yet it’s never just “Jesus and me.” We rely on one another to hear the gospel and to show forth the love and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. We’re called together as a people to be the church of Jesus Christ in this time and this place, to spread the audacious claims about who he is and what he has done, and to welcome as sisters and brothers all those who want to come and see for themselves: to make them feel seen and heard and an important part of this great motley crowd that’s trailing after Jesus.

We are all, in some way or another, looking for God, looking for a place to be, where we are welcome and at home, looking for someone to follow, something big and important enough to commit our lives to...And when all is said and done that means Him: the one who showed us what love looks like, what love does, the one who showed us that God is love, the Lamb of God is who we are looking for, the one who gives us a place to be and a person to follow all our lives, and a cause big enough to live for and work for and serve for and love for and die for. Jesus Christ.

To the Lord who speaks to us, strengthens us, and blesses us with peace, be all glory and honor forever. Amen.