

Matthew T. Miofsky  
9/17/06  
John 1:35-51

It was February and it was cold. I was trying to drum up some funding in order to start a new church and in less than a month, I had to get a grant proposal together. As I stared at the rather straightforward application I decided that the notion of sitting down and typing a bunch of long answers sounded as boring to write as I am sure they would be to read. Jesus is not a bunch of long answers, Jesus is an experience. Instead I called a friend, got a video camera, and began to walk around St. Louis to ask people questions on camera. I went to the campus of Wash U., the library, the loop and met all sorts of people that day. I only asked them a couple questions, including this one: When people go to church, what do you think they are looking for? As you sit here this morning, what are you looking for?

I asked some of you that question, what are looking for out of the church. Here are some of the answers I received. I wanted a community in which I could ask and explore tough questions about God and spirituality in our world. Another person answered I am looking for authentic worship that leads to authentic discipleship in the world. I am looking for uplifting fellowship that makes God smile. A place to worship, to heal, to learn, to love, to grow, to make a difference in the community...and maybe even the world – A place to “belong.”

What are you looking for? That is one of those powerful questions because I think it is one that all of us struggle with. What do we looking for in relationships, in our work, in our life. What do we want? It is one of those basic human questions that we all ought to struggle with. Maybe that is why visioning has become such a popular concept

in the work place. With out a clear articulation of what we want, we will wander around aimlessly. I have seen it happen. So what are looking for is a basic human question. So maybe that is why it is the first thing Jesus ever did, the first question Jesus ever asked, the first words Jesus ever speaks in John's story.

What are you looking for? First thing Jesus ever says, in fact if you have one of those bibles with the red letters – they are the first ones you will find. In John, the story about Jesus begins when he is walking and two people, disciples of John the Baptist, begin to follow him. Before we get into the story let me say a couple of things about John. First, John is the most abstract or lofty books about Jesus. One thing John likes to do is use stories that are intended to work on two levels, one literal and one more symbolic, meant to address the life of the reader. It is as if John wanted people to read the story and see themselves right there with each character. So when you read John, you really have to pay attention not only to what he may be saying about the characters in the story, but also what he may be saying to you! Secondly, John doesn't like to give easy answers – in fact, for him following Jesus was a journey in which the disciples discovered for themselves more and more about the story. No easy answers, you get to discover the meaning of this for yourself.

This morning we are at the beginning of the journey, both in the story John tells and in the story of this new community of faith. Jesus was on a journey and the very first thing he does - before he performed any miracles, before he cured any illnesses, before he healed or taught a thing. The first thing Jesus did, was call together some people that were interested in taking this journey with him. This journey of living meaningful lives. And so Jesus one day when Jesus was walking, a man named John began to tell others

that this looked like someone worth following, he called Jesus the lamb of God. Two people heard this and began to follow Jesus. When Jesus noticed that the two were following, he turned around, looked them in the eyes, and asked them, “What are you looking for?”

What are you looking for? Over the past year, I have been thinking about church more than I care to admit. And I will confess, it is not because I am in love with the church – it is because I am largely unsatisfied with it. Just this past week, I heard a radio interview that summed up my dissatisfaction well. The interview was with an actor who had to play Jesus in a recent tv movie. The interviewer asked him if it was a hard role to get into, to understand and to play. It was – the man confessed. I had always thought of Jesus as a rigid, stern, and cold person who sat around making judgments about what I was doing right or wrong. My break through in playing the roles came when I realized that Jesus wasn't any of these things, that is what I had been taught, but that is not the way I had to play the role. I needed to play a Jesus that was actually worth following.

In a funny way, when I heard that interview, it hit home with me. I am a pastor in search of a church that is worth being a part of, a Jesus that is compelling to follow. In this gospel story, it is the beginning of a journey for five different and ordinary people. And each of these persons came to Jesus looking for something different. For the first two men, they were looking for someone to stay with. They called Jesus rabbi or teacher, they wanted wisdom, some better understanding of their lives. For Simon, he was looking for new identity and received it when Jesus gave him a new name. Philip was looking for a prophet, one like Moses. Nathanael, the skeptic of the story, doesn't want

easy answers - he wants something can see and feel and touch. They all want something different, and they all find it in this journey of following Jesus.

So all this begs the gospel question. What brought you here this morning? What are you looking for. Maybe you are like me and you are looking for a church, one that is worth being a part of. Maybe you don't care a lick about church but you are still searching. Some of you might have significant pain that needs healing. For some it is alienation that is need of a place to belong. Maybe some of you want a safe place to ask questions. Maybe some of you want to see if there is more to life than your job. Maybe some of you are looking for meaning, or a date, or friends, or a cause to give yourself to. I imagine the possibilities are endless. But what the gospel tells us is that there is something about following Jesus that addresses these needs, that begins to reveal what we are looking for.

As your pastor, I am looking for things also. I want a community of friends where I find genuine friendship. I want a place that isn't hypocritical. I want a place that asks hard questions, that practices what it preaches. I want a place where talented and passionate people discover what they want their lives to mean. I want a place that is truly welcoming and doesn't just say that it is. I want to experience God in an authentic way. I want place where I don't feel like I am going through life alone. That is what I am looking for.

What about you? Friends, there are a lot of folks in this world that promise a lot of great things, and churches are among them. Easy answers, wonderful lives, a simple God and a right or wrong that is black and white but that is not the Jesus of scripture. This Jesus is not black and white, he isn't easy or simple. Jesus doesn't promise to make

our lives instantly better. It is funny how Jesus answered those first disciples. He does something different.

After asking those first disciples what they were looking for they tell him they want to know where he is staying. He listens but instead of giving answers or preaching to them - he invites us. That is the fundamental purpose of the story. The invitation. I love his response – come and see. Come and see. It is an invitation to come and find out the answer of ourselves.

We are starting a new church and I already promise you it will not be a perfect church. It will not offer easy answers. A lot of people have asked me over the last few months what the church will be like, what kind of worship will you have, what kind of people will be there. I have tried to resist answering them as best I can. Because church is not something that is best described but something that is best experienced. Jesus doesn't teach the disciples a bunch of information, he doesn't begin by giving them lofty explanations of God, or defining all the religious words, or making sure they believe the right things or do the right things. Churches that want to sum up religion in a leaflet or a book, or one well placed sermon – they don't get it either.

He understood that what is most powerful about God is when God is experienced. It is that experience that changes us, that makes us want to tell other. For Andrew it was the experience that made him want to share it with his brother Simon. For Simon it was the experience of Jesus that resulted in a new name. For Philip it was the experience that led him to go find Nathanael. And for Nathanael, the skeptic, it was the experience that made his skepticism give way to belief.

Whoever you are and whatever you are looking for, I invite you to take the journey of life with others who are committed to following Jesus, to asking questions, to discovering answers, to finding renewed meaning, and to traveling together.

A lot of people have asked me what do you expect to happen here. I don't know, but lets look at the end of Jesus' promise.

The story ends with Jesus praising the disciple who was the most skeptical – Nathanael. And he makes Nathanael a promise. You followed me because you found what you were looking for. But I tell you this. What is most profound, is that you will find things that you never would have imagined. You will see things much greater than this. I don't know what those things might be, but I invite you to come and see.