

Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner
January 20, 2008
2nd Sunday of Ordinary Time
John 1:29-42

What Are YOU 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 I sent out a Wednesday 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 that day. “What are you looking for?” Instead of just guessing at what you might say, I decided to really find out for myself. And I am so glad that I did.

All of your responses were so sincere and deeply beautiful. Many of them started off with “I thought this would be an easy question, but it really isn’t.” Many of you thanked me for even posing it to you, because it forced you to step back from the “tyranny of the now and the urgent,” really paying attention to the longings of your spirit. A majority of you responded to the question “What are you looking for?” with words like “peace,” “hope,” “purpose.”

Quite a few of you took the question to mean “What are you looking for in 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 to give thanks for the way God has blessed your life. One young adult 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. A college student responded that she at a new point in her life, no longer going to worship because of family expectations, but because her time in worship gave her strength and a centering for the week ahead.

And a man in his mid-70’s responded that he is not always sure what he is looking for in church or in life—sometimes he is looking for contentment; but sometimes he is so full of restlessness that he just longs for his soul to find rest.

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 to you as you imaginatively looked Jesus in the eye and wondered?”

For I know that when I reflected on Jesus’ question for myself, stopping my busy pace of going from activity to activity, calling a mental “time-out” from “to-do” lists, taking a few deep breaths, laying my soul and heart bare in the silence, unexpected tears came to my eyes. And I wondered if any of you experienced an unexpected welling up too. Then I wondered if those two early disciples felt their souls pricked and their hearts laid bare on the dusty road that day.

John the Baptist had told them who he believed this Jesus to be. And his sermon probably tweaked their curiosity. But John was always so over-the-top dramatic in everything that he did and in all that he said that they might have also been just a bit suspicious of his claims about Jesus. But when Jesus walked by and John pointed him out, those two guys were curious enough, restless enough, soul-hungry enough to start following him.

Jesus knew he was being tailed. And I believe he also knew of their curiosity mixed with slight suspicion, their restlessness and their souls’ hunger. So Jesus turned around and looked at them. “What

are you looking for?," he asked. Not the question I would have imagined. I would have thought Jesus would have turned and said "What do you want?" or "Why are you following me?" But instead, Jesus stopped, turned and said "What are you looking for?"

And I bet 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 opened their mouths and laid bare their souls in response. "*Rabbi,*" they said, "*where are you staying?*" Now to us, that does not sound very soul-baring. To us, it is a weird response to Jesus' intense question. But the word our Gospel writer John uses with those two disciples is the word "meno." Meno does not just mean physically stay. They were not simply asking which hotel Jesus was occupying for the night. Meno means to abide, to remain. It has more to do with one's nature. One's identity. Meno is what Jesus uses when he speaks of himself abiding in the Father and the disciples abiding in him.

To use preacher Tom Long's words, in essence, the two disciples were asking Jesus "Rabbi, Who are you? Where is the 'home' the center of your life?"ⁱ When Jesus asked them "What are you looking for?," they responded "Home—You."

It is no wonder why this story moves all of us so much. For when I am honest and really search my own heart for my reasons being here every day and every Sunday, I find 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 the community of people with whom I can abide, in the fullest sense. I am looking for the place, or rather, the community of the faithful, where I can know and be known. Where I can share my weaknesses and my gifts. Where I can drop anchor and discover my purpose. I am here with you because I have been called to follow Jesus-- the way, the truth and the life-- and I cannot do that in this world alone. 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 know from your email responses that I am not the only one on that search.

And how does Jesus respond? Not with a self-help book. Not with an easy answer. Actually, not with really any kind of answer at all. Instead, Jesus responds with an invitation. "Come and see," he says. "Come and see." And those two guys could not help but go with him. And in Jesus, with Jesus, they must have discovered what they longed 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 saw.

And oh, in those days, what all they saw! First, they saw that 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 others into the bunch. For 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. It was much too difficult a journey to travel alone. So Jesus gathered other 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. And everyone who gathered around him, formed into this community of the faithful, found themselves at home in a way they could not articulate, but in a way that brought tears to their eyes and a deep peace in their soul. Together, following Jesus, they did not find the answer. Instead, they found their way home.

Over the last six years people have asked me, “What is your vision for Woodhaven? Why do you think God called you here?” And over the last six years my response has stayed the same, deepening in intensity, but not wavering in content. My call is to do whatever I can in partnership with you to make Woodhaven a place for **all** of God’s children who are longing to find their way home— no matter age or income, race or sexual orientation, political views or education levels. If your soul is hungry, if your spirit is restless, if you long to give thanks or need to ask why, we can be companionship for you.

But that openness means that sometimes, life together is hard—for when you put all of us in this kind of a mix, things get complicated. Some of us feel the denomination is too liberal. Others feel it is too conservative. Some of us want one thing in worship. Others of us want sometime else. Some of us read the Bible one way. Others of us can read the same passage and hear something completely different. When you are indeed in a faith community that is as messy as ours is (and trust me—you people are messy), life together can be both wonderful and difficult.

But, in the middle of it, we stand with those first disciples—homesick and restless, suspicious and soul-starved. We all stand together, looking at Jesus in the eyes, trying to listen for his voice above the fray. We all stand together, trying to open our hearts and lay bare our souls, longing for an answer but knowing it is a journey. And, just like with those first disciples, the invitation still stands for us.

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

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