



WHERE WESTMINSTER  
GATHERS FOR WORSHIP

## A Homily on John 1:29-42

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Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

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John the Baptist points two of his disciples in the direction of Jesus. They follow Jesus, who looks over his shoulder at them and asks, “What are you looking for?”<sup>1</sup> “What do you seek? What do you want?”

It’s not a question that is held captive by its first century context. It echoes down through the years and bounces around the walls of this sanctuary every Sunday. Every Sunday! I don’t ask myself this question because I work here. It’s my job to be here. But I do wonder about you. What are you looking for?<sup>2</sup>

John makes it clear in the opening verses of his Gospel that Jesus was not what some people were looking for. John says,

The true light that enlightens every person was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world...knew him not. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not.<sup>3</sup>

Even John the Baptist didn’t really know what he was looking for. Did you hear what he said? “I myself did not know him, but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.”<sup>4</sup>

John spouts off a whole lot of theology:

- Here is the Lamb of God...
- This is he of whom I said, “After me comes one who ranks ahead of me...”
- He will baptize with the Holy Spirit.
- He is the Son of God.

He’s got some theology, but he doesn’t know what he is looking for.

So what about you? What are you looking for? On Jesus’ lips this question is disturbing. One person has said to me a number of times, most recently in a Bible study group this past week, “For years I’ve been asking for a simple explanation of what I am supposed to do as a Christian; several bullets on one side of a page of notebook paper.” That’s what he’s looking for.

What are you looking for? Why do you come to church? Is it as my friend Patrick Willson speculates?

- You come because you always have.
- You come because of the kids.
- You come because of your parents.

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<sup>1</sup> John 1:38. Subsequent citations are of John, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Patrick Willson in a paper prepared for *The Moveable Feast*, Louisville, KY, January 7-11, 2008. This homily leans heavily upon Patrick’s insights.

<sup>3</sup> 1:10-11.

<sup>4</sup> 1:31.

- You come because you have heard the possibility of something out of the ordinary.
- You come because the silence of the Sanctuary and the music of the choir speak to you as no preacher could ever.<sup>5</sup>

What are you looking for? Knowledge of God? Peace of mind? Forgiveness? Instructions for living your life? Answers?

One of the disciples thinks he knows what he's looking for. "Rabbi," he says, "Teacher, where are you staying?"<sup>6</sup> A strange question unless you know that in that day rabbis had places, gathering places, schools if you will, where they taught. Perhaps this person is looking for knowledge. But John in his own subtle way suggests that this follower is looking for so much more.

"Where are you staying?" On one level it's a question about a location, a place. But if you know John, you know that his stories and his language are freighted with meaning. They are layered. There is always more than at first meets the eye. "Where are you staying?" On one level that word "stay" means "to dwell," of course; but it is also sometimes translated "abide." And that takes us to a deeper level. So when you get to chapter fifteen, you run into this passage.

Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.<sup>7</sup>

"Where are you staying?" they ask. And when Jesus says, "Come and see," he is inviting them not simply to the place where he dwells, but to abide in him. His answer is layered, nuanced, indirect. It allows them to come into a relationship with him and find the answer for themselves. This is characteristic of Jesus in this Gospel. He answers questions with indirection in order to allow those whom he encounters to discover the truth for themselves.<sup>8</sup> "Come and see," he says to them and to us, "Come and see."

He's more than a rabbi. He is a teacher and will become their teacher. But he will become so much more to them. He's inviting them to seek and to discover a deeper truth.

There is an old story, a parable really, about Presbyterians. It is said that all across the country this has been tested and found to be true. If you put up two signs in the church parlor on a Sunday morning, one that reads, "This way to a class about God," and another that reads, "This way to God," Presbyterians will always go the class *about* God!

"Rabbi," "Messiah," "One for whom we long," even "Son of God," are all titles, descriptions that tell us *about* Jesus. But when Jesus says, "Come and see," he is inviting us to come to know him, not simply to know *about* him. And that is precisely what happens as the Gospel story unfolds. As his followers experience Jesus, the titles, the names, the descriptions are transformed, replaced, expanded, redefined by Jesus' words and work, and ultimately by his life and death.<sup>9</sup>

"Come and see." Jesus was extending hospitality of the most important kind.

In his book *Reaching Out*, Henri Nouwen describes this kind of hospitality. "Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place."<sup>10</sup>

"Come and see," Jesus invites.

Dan Wakefield was a man who sought meaning in all the wrong places: drugs, alcohol, promiscuity. It happened by the grace of God, and at first tentatively, he started attending church;

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<sup>5</sup> Willson, *op.cit.*

<sup>6</sup> 1:38.

<sup>7</sup> 15:4-5.

<sup>8</sup> Gail O'Day, *John: The New Interpreter's Bible (electronic edition), Vol. 9, p. 531.*

<sup>9</sup> O'Day, p. 533.

<sup>10</sup> As quoted by Thomas G. Long, *Testimony*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), p. 122.

and at the recommendation of a pastor, he got hold of several of Henri Nouwen's books and became fascinated and began to find real help. By an unusual coincidence Wakefield had a chance to meet Nouwen and have a meal with him. During lunch he explained that his spiritual journey was difficult. It was sometimes exhilarating, but sometimes like being caught in a terrible thunderstorm, tossed this way and that, carried to the heights, and then dashed down into the depths. It was discouraging, he explained. Nouwen shared with Wakefield that he, too, wrestled with doubts and anguished over his faith. This was not helpful. It caused Wakefield to wonder out loud if a spiritual giant like Henri Nouwen had such struggles, what hope was there for a person like himself.

Nouwen could have patted him on the hand and said something like, "There, there, my son; you'll get stronger by and by." Instead, he looked him in the eye and said, "Christianity is not for getting your life together."<sup>11</sup>

It's not about several bullets on one side of a sheet of notebook paper. It's not about programs or recipes or prescriptions. It's not about knowing the right place to look in the Bible or *The Book of Confessions*. It's about accepting Jesus' invitation to "come and see."

We may have all kinds of reasons for coming to worship; but by the grace of God at the very heart of worship is that invitation, "Come and see." Worship makes a space for us to "abide" in God and God in us. It doesn't always calm us down or soothe our fears or answer our questions or give us fifteen simple rules to live by. Worship isn't meant to help us get our life together. The purpose of worship is not to know about God; it's about knowing God.

And that is why we have *Disciple* and other Bible study groups, and prayer groups. It's why we are so serious, we Presbyterians, about doing theology, exploring the what's and the why's of our faith, in a systematic way. It's why we have mission projects and trips. "Come and see." Get involved, struggle with your faith. Get your feet wet, rub up against some ideas that are different from your way of thinking, that are challenging, and maybe just a little threatening. Let your mind and your soul be stretched. Dare to be open not just to knowing about God, but to knowing God. "Come and see." The way we know Christ is to follow Christ.

Do you remember those wonderful words at the end of Albert Schweitzer's book *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*? It's a long tract on the efforts of scholars to dig behind the Biblical accounts and secular historical accounts and find the *real* Jesus. It's a book that seeks to know in a disciplined and scholarly way about Jesus. Here is how the book ends.

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: "Follow me!" and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.<sup>12</sup>

What are we looking for? We come for all kinds of reasons, driven by a multitude of motives - we are sometimes confused and needful, and always aware of the inadequacy of our faith. Jesus doesn't pat us on the hand and say, "Now, now, child; it'll be better." Jesus says, "Come and see." He offers hospitality, a space in which those who come to him may grow, change, mature. The way to know Christ is to follow him. "Come and see."

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<sup>11</sup> Long, *op.cit.*

<sup>12</sup> Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, (New York: Collier Books, 1968), p. 403.