

01/19/14 -- Second Sunday after Epiphany

“Following Jesus?” -- Rev. Seth D. Jones ©

Scripture: Isaiah 49:1-9; 1 Corinthians 1:1-12; John 1:35-42

Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658), the former Lord Protector of the Commonwealth of England, was a Puritan. In a letter to his daughter, he wrote, “*To be a seeker is to be of the best sect next to a finder; and such an one shall every humble seeker be at the end. Happy seeker, Happy finder!*” Cromwell was speaking to the spirit of John the Baptist when he wrote this. The seeker, if s/he is serious about their quest, is always looking beyond, seeking to find the truth. Cromwell calls it “the best sect”. Think of all the sects and denominations in Christianity. They number in the thousands. Cromwell says the best sect is the one which encourages the seeker.

John the Baptist, it appears, is doing this as well. At every point, when we hear about John the Baptist, he is always pointing away from himself. When people ask him why he is baptizing by the river Jordan, he tells them he is doing it for repentance and the forgiveness of sins, but there is someone greater coming who will baptize with the Holy Spirit. When Jesus walks by, John points to him passing by and says, “*Look! Watch! There goes the Lamb of God!*” And then Jesus strolls by again and John again points to him. Then John’s disciples leave him to follow Jesus.

I have always wondered what it was in Jesus that caused the disciples to drop their livelihood without a second thought, to leave hometowns and to leave a teacher. Leaving your teacher in Jesus’ time was actually a big deal. When a student came to a Rabbi to study with him, the student was bound to the teacher by a ceremony not unlike a wedding ceremony. To leave one’s Rabbi was not an easy task. People noticed a thing like that. It was a big deal for the student, for the teacher and for those who remain with the teacher. Back in Jesus’ day, the student lived with the teacher. The student cooked and provided for the teacher. The teacher lived with the student and provided the house and living quarters. Most importantly, the teacher taught and guided the disciple toward the truth.

Speaking as someone who has had several close teachers, I can say the difficulty is not just in finding something else to follow. It is disentangling the relationship and the feelings which have been invested with so much sharing and self-disclosure. Promises have been made and expectations have been set. These are all severed in some way. It has always been that way. For the student, it is very difficult. The easiest way to separate is to deny and reject. But a few years down the road, that approach begins to look arrogant and self-driven. For the teacher, it is also difficult. Somehow, a good teacher must find a way to release the student without projecting disappointment or denigration.

We have no idea what the relationships were like between John the Baptist and his disciples. We can imagine they were as strange and bizarre as he was. I want you to see, however, that this sort of leaving of teachers abruptly and just following another one is not the way it was done in Israel. It is not the way it is done with most spiritual teachers even today.

John the Baptist, however, is always pointing his disciples toward Jesus. When they do follow him, Jesus turns around and asks them, “*What are you looking for?*” This is the question every spiritual teacher must ask his or her student - “*What are you looking for?*” It is the question Jesus is always asking us as we seek to follow him in our Christian lives.

I am not sure the answer matters. What matters is that we are looking for something. When we are looking for something, we care about what we are looking for. We are passionate about finding it and the world begins to shine with a more spiritual light. When I was growing up in Wisconsin, there were still fireflies - a lot of them. My friend and I would camp out in the woods behind the house. We were in the country so it was very dark at night. We would wake up in the middle of the night and the woods would flicker with little lights. The amount of light one of those fireflies put out was amazing, but when we went looking for them, we couldn't find them. The light was not constant, they flew silently and then, a few feet away, they would flash again.

Answering this question from Jesus is a little like hunting fireflies. Sometimes we have an answer. Sometimes we know what we care about. And sometimes we don't. Whatever it was that drew the disciples to Jesus, however, caused them to simply want to be around him. So they don't answer Jesus' question. Instead, they ask where he is staying. These new disciples want to be good students and it may be all they really know for right now is that they only want to be students and have no real idea what they are looking for. They are exceptional followers in that way.

But Jesus doesn't give them straight answers. Jesus never does. I think there is a reason for that. Just like John the Baptist points away from himself to Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, Jesus points away from simple answers to deeper truths. Shouldn't that always be the case with our lives of faith? Shouldn't the answer to the question, "*What are you looking for?*" always press us deeply into more truth? Shouldn't the spiritual answers Jesus leads us to always lead to more and better questions about what it is we are looking for?

This is why, I think, Jesus answers the disciples question about where he is staying with the answer, "*Come and see.*" Follow me and see what happens, he tells them. Notice here that there is no call to a certain doctrine of belief. Jesus does not say, "*Look, here is the Westminster Confession, or the Savoy Declaration, or the Heidelberg Catechism, or Calvin's third book of the Institutes of Christian Religion, or Pope Francis' Lumen Fidei. Read those and then tell me if you agree. Then we will get started.*" Nor does he say, "*Here - pray this prayer so you can be saved, then come on over and we can talk.*" Nor does he say, "*Come to these three classes and this special ceremony and we will make you a member and then we can teach you.*" No. All Jesus says is, "*Come and see.*" This is the invitation to follow him.

The teaching of God, in Jesus' way, is no longer about teacher-student dynamics. It is not about special rituals of bonding which require allegiance to a particular perspective toward the faith. In fact, Jesus' call to the two disciples is a spiritual discipline in and of itself. Really, what Jesus is saying is, "*You are looking for something and you care about what you are looking for. All I ask of you is that you trust that desire enough to see what I am up to and what God has in store for you.*"

"*Come and see.*" Sometimes, when I am preparing for Sunday, I think we, all of us, know too much about the way of Jesus Christ. We have 2000 years of this behind us. Last week, I talked about intentionality in our faith lives, being deliberate about how we approach our relationship with God and Christ and the Holy Spirit. I wonder sometimes if the habitual practice of coming to church on Sundays and doing what we do here erases our ability to just "*Come and see.*"

Because the truth of the matter is that much of the time we are in the same position as the disciples. Jesus is always asking us, "*What are you looking for?*" And much of the time, we simply don't have an answer. We don't know what we are looking for. We follow because our parents followed, because their parents followed, because we admire someone who followed. None of these are wrong. There is great power in following in the

footsteps of teachers and leaders who have tread the path before you. But it is not at the expense of this simple question Jesus asks: *“What are you looking for?”*

We come to Jesus, however we were pointed toward him, for all kinds of reasons. Some of you are like Isaiah today. You feel like you have toiled for nothing your entire life. You feel like you spent your strength for nothing at all. You feel useless. This is often where God finds us and then pulls us up out of the mire. But it may not seem like that.

All kinds of things are happening in these beginning moments of Jesus’ relationship with his new disciples. Behind the question, *“What are you looking for?”* is another question. That is *“Why are you looking for it?”* And behind that is yet another question: *“In whom or in what do you or will you place your soul, your trust?”* No relationship between teacher and student, no relationship between learner and guide, no relationship between God and person can be formed without first trusting the one in whom we follow.

When Jesus says *“Come and see”*, he is saying - gently, without any kind of provocation, without any force - *“Come with me and see if you can trust again what God has promised to you.”* Jesus is asking his new disciples and each of us to trust that, as Isaiah says, *“The Lord has called me before I was born; while I was in my mother’s womb he named me.”*

In the early church, upon being baptized, when you came up out of the water, you would be dressed in very white clothes and you would come to the front of the church. The minister would then ask you what your name was. Being found by God, being called to follow Christ, is a great and powerful thing. From this moment forward, you knew nothing would be the same because you have given over your entire life to the inheritance God has entrusted you with. It was back then deserving of a new name, and so, in front of God and in front of your new family of Christ, you would state your new name. You would do this because you now knew, with Isaiah, that *“I am made glorious in the sight of the Lord and my God is now my strength.”* You would do this in the same way Andrew’s brother, Simon, accepts the new name Jesus gives him, Peter, the rock.

Following Jesus will change us. Just coming on down and seeing what is going on should change us. Jesus is doing great things. More importantly, in following Jesus Christ, whether your parents did and you are following what they did or you have intentionally chosen to do so or you want to do so today or very soon, we will find what we are looking for, and in finding it, we will have even better and even more questions. Come and see. Join that greatest sect of the Christian faith - the church of those who are seekers after what God is offering through God’s son, Jesus Christ. What are you looking for? Amen.