

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas - What Are You Looking For? January 19, 2020 - Psalm 40:1-11 and John 1:35-42

One week ago, we celebrated Baptism of the Lord Sunday. As a part of that occasion, we noted that Jesus was originally a disciple of John the Baptist, that Jesus sought John's company in the wilderness, and that Jesus was baptized by the prophet in the Jordan River. Undoubtedly, John held an influential position in Jesus' life. But if we are tempted to take this rationale further and assume that John was actually greater than Jesus, then we soon learn that, on this point, Scripture allows for no ambiguity.

Throughout his ministry, John had plenty of opportunities to claim for himself the lofty status of the Son of God. But he never did. Instead, he insisted that he was the forerunner, the one who would prepare the way for the light that is coming into the world. At Jesus' baptism, the heavens are opened, a voice is heard, the Spirit descends. John has his answer. Jesus is that light. And now, confident in this belief, the Baptist endeavors not to cling to relevance, but encourages his followers to turn and follow Jesus instead.

Presently, America is in the midst of a presidential primary season. A number of the Democratic candidates, lacking the support necessary to continue, have

already dropped out of the race. Some of these politicians are declaring their support for another candidate. And while one's supporters may or may not switch their allegiances as suggested, the truth remains that their preferred candidate was originally seeking the position. Right?

At first glance, John's newfound support of Jesus may strike us as similar. But we need to remember that John was no politician. Instead, he was a prophet "sent from God with the sole purpose of testifying to another who will be the very Light of God."¹ In other words, it was never about John.

And so it goes, between these two men, that there is never any squabbling. There is no bickering. No animosity. No half-heartedness. For John, it is an easy choice to encourage his disciples to follow Jesus because this was his purpose all along - to testify to the light. "Go and follow him," he tells them, as he recedes into the background.

You may recall that the New Testament begins with three synoptic gospels. They are called synoptic because they share so many things in common. In each of these three - Matthew, Mark, and Luke - we find a hierarchical understanding of

¹ Gerard Sloyan, *John, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, ed. James Luther Mays (Westminster John Knox Press: 2009), 26.

discipleship. The twelve disciples are named. And then, even among the twelve, there appear to be insiders. Specifically, Peter, James, and John seem to have a very close relationship with Jesus. They are the ones who are present at the raising of Jairus' daughter and who are invited to witness the Transfiguration. Later, they are the ones at Jesus' side in the Garden of Gethsemane.

But John's Gospel is different. Here the "circle of disciples is broader. There is no formal catalogue of the twelve."² We simply find Jesus engaging with a series of individuals, inviting each to participate in the Way. In our second lesson this morning, Jesus is speaking with John's disciples, and he asks them a very simple-sounding question: "What are you looking for?"

We've heard this question many times before, haven't we? Just imagine entering a gift shop, either here locally or in some distant corner of the globe. In my travels to South Africa, and Latin America, and Western Europe, I have always visited the local shops. And while the accents and words vary from place to place, the reception is similar: "Hello. Welcome. Thank you for visiting my shop." A brief presentation may follow regarding the artisans who made the goods. In particularly touristy areas, we may receive questions about where we are from. Oftentimes, the

² Gail R. O'Day, *John, The New Interpreter's Bible Volume IX*, ed. Leander E. Keck (Abingdon Press: 1995), 531.

shopkeeper will ask, “Are you looking for anything in particular? May I help you find something?”

The shopkeeper’s role is to draw the customer in, to make you feel comfortable, to encourage you to linger for a while. They do this by asking a question that sounds very open-ended, “What are you looking for?” But it’s actually very specific - very focused. And whether the question emerges in a gift shop or a restaurant, in a hospital or a concert hall, context is everything.

For the most part, these conversations are transactional. Goods or services are rendered. And then, following a brief encounter, it’s possible that we may never even see that person again. But when Jesus asks that same question, “What are you looking for?” it has an entirely different meaning. There is nothing transactional about it. Instead, we find him wondering aloud about the spiritual and ethical dimensions of our lives. And in place of goods or services, we find in him an invitation to engage with a lifelong conversation partner.

We could all use more invitations like this, couldn’t we? More extensions of friendship from people who will love us unconditionally? More models of faith from those who are vulnerable enough to insist that they wash our feet? More examples

of service that are so compelling that we might be inspired to go and do likewise? Wouldn't that be incredible?

And what if these special people assured us that they would be there with us for life? What if they said that we could talk to them anytime and they actually meant it? Friends, this is the new life that we have in Christ. And this is the opportunity that we have as disciples in his name. Yes. "What are you looking for?"

From the beginning, discipleship is firmly rooted in a series of questions. Following Jesus' question, the disciples respond with a question of their own: "Where are you staying?" Jesus' response contains no physical address, but just three simple words: "Come and see." And with this, he "issues an invitation that will allow them to find the answer for themselves."³

Friends, God will never force us to be in relationship with the divine. We are free, always, to accept the invitation or to leave it behind, to engage or to disengage. The conversation may be brief or it may last for decades. But, it always begins with a question. May it be so and all thanks be to God. Amen.

³ O'Day, 531.