

## The Heart Knows

Psalm 27:1, 4-9 & John 1:29-42

*Second Sunday after Epiphany/ 19<sup>th</sup> January 2020*

At this point in John's Gospel, Jesus is something of a celebrity. People are talking about what happened the day before when he arrived along the River Jordan looking to be baptized. When John saw him approaching he knew who he was, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (Jn. 1:29). John saw "the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove." Twice in the text we're told that John, himself, did not know Jesus when he appeared, he had never met him before. But something stirred in John. "The one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit'" (Jn. 1:33). That was enough for John, "I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God" (Jn. 1:34).

Then word starts to spread about this Jesus. The next day John is standing with two of his disciples—and it's important to remember that John had his own disciples before Jesus had his. They were hanging around with John. Perhaps John was telling them what had happened the day before at the river when the heavens opened up over Jesus. It was while they were talking that John saw him again. Jesus—Jesus was coming near *them*, toward them, about to walk right past them—*him*, the one carrying the Holy Spirit, the Lamb of God, the Son of God. John says, giddy with excitement, "Hey, look, there he is. Look, here is the Lamb of God" (Jn. 1:37)! The one we've been waiting for. So the two disciples, inquisitive, decide to follow him—not with their lives, not yet. They just want to know more about him. So they walk behind him with curiosity.

Then, at one point, Jesus happens to turn around. Did he know he was being followed? He turns, sees them and asks with piercing precision: "*What are you looking for?*" (Jn 1:38). It's a zinger of a question. It goes straight to the heart of everything, doesn't it? I never noticed, until this week, that these are the first words voiced by Jesus in John's Gospel. Jesus appears on the scene as an enigma. We have John the Baptist startled by his presence and John's disciples are curious. And when Jesus finally appears on stage of this drama, his first words are in the form of a question which is fitting for a rabbi, a teacher. Consider this. His first encounter with Jesus is mediated through a question. That's what it's always like with Jesus, isn't it? His presence, life, ministry always meet us in the form of a question, questioning our priorities, questioning our assumptions about life and God and who we are and how we are to live, questioning our values, questions what we value most and invest with our lives. *What are you looking for?*

Now, like most things in John's Gospel, there are multiple levels of meaning in the text at the same time. What are you looking for? This question can be heard from different angles. On the surface it can mean, *What are you curious about?* They answer, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" In other words, where did you come from and where are you going? Who are you? Are you from around here? Jesus responds to their level of understanding and says, "Come and see" (Jn. 1:39). So they go to the house where he's staying. A house: concrete, tangible, real. One dimension of the question was answered: they got to see where he was going, they got to see the house. They remained with him that day (Jn. 1:39), until 4 p.m. And as they remained with him

that day they discovered not only where he was staying, but where he was *going*, where his entire life was going as God's Messiah, God's anointed. Andrew, and later Peter, stayed with him, and followed him, and suddenly that first question—what are you looking for?—takes on a whole new dimension, meaning so much more than a house.

So, what are you looking for? Really looking for. I'm struck by the fact that Jesus didn't ask, "Who are you looking for?" But *what*. It's a question asked of every follower of Jesus, not once but over and over again throughout one's journey. What are you looking for? In the depths of your soul, in the secret desires of your heart, what's really driving you? What's directing your choices and your energy? What do you hunger for? Where's your passion, your fire? What matters most? And what's giving life to your faith? Why are you here in worship? Why are you a Christian? Are you looking, searching for God, searching for some sign that the Spirit has descended upon you or your world? Last Sunday we affirmed our baptismal vows, confessed what we believed, but how is your belief being converted into action? What are you hoping for, asking for? What are you looking for—or are you afraid or reluctant to say it or name it?

It's not an easy question to answer. On the surface, we can say to Jesus, "I just want to see what kind of house you live in" and be done with it. Or you realize that to say "I just want to see what kind of house you live in" is a profound desire to enter an entirely new and wondrous and scary and unknown world, the "house," the life, the way of the Messiah.

I think Jesus asks the difficult question because it's in the asking—in our struggle to come up with an honest, heartfelt answer, our suffering through to an answer (or answers)—that we discover that wrestling with this question is what life with him is all about. And we realize that his demanding question is really a question of grace. The question graciously creates a space, an open space that beckons us and calls us and invites us to step in, step in with an answer (or answers) from the heart—not someone else's answer, not the answer of your family, tribe, or clan, not the answer of your parents or grandparents, not the answer of the collective or the crowd or the church. *To risk entering into the space created by his question and answering from the heart is the way we grow and grow up into the people we were created to be—the people God needs us to be.*

At a very deep level, at the core of the self, at the center of who we are, we know what we really want. The heart knows. The prayer of the psalmist reflects this wisdom, "'Come,' my heart says, 'seek his face!' Your face, LORD, do I seek. Do not hide your face from me" (Ps. 27:8-9). The heart desires to see the face of God and to have reflected back from that face, the light and love and grace and joy and strength of the Living God.

But can the heart be trusted? It's true that Jeremiah said, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure" (Jer. 17:9). That's tough to hear. Maybe Jeremiah was just in a bad mood. Sometimes the heart is full of deceit. But we could say that a deceitful heart is a false-heart, not a true or healthy heart. A deceitful heart is a heart that is wayward, forgotten its first true love, gone astray; a deceitful heart is a heart divided, fearful, a heart turned in on itself, which was Martin Luther's (1483-1546) definition of sin (*incurvatus en se*); it's a heart with a bad memory that cannot remember the source of its life; it's a broken heart, a small heart.

Underneath all of this, however, I side with the psalmist: nevertheless, the heart stills knows what it wants, the heart knows what brings it joy, the heart knows what brings it life. The psalmist speaks to his heart—which means all that he is, thought, feeling, action—he speaks to himself and summons his heart, all that he is, to see the face of God. That’s what we want, to draw near to God, to remain in the house of the Messiah. “One thing I asked of the LORD,” the psalmist said, “that will I seek after: to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in [God’s] temple” (Ps. 27:4). To live with, to live *in* the presence of the Living God—that’s what the heart wants. Did not Augustine (354-430) long ago acknowledge in his *Confessions*, “Thou has made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless, until they find their rest in Thee”(Book 1)?

What are you looking for? What does your heart say? I believe Jesus wants us to answer this question from the heart. Because, when it comes down to it, Jesus is concerned about the health of our hearts. We can think of Jesus as a kind of cardiologist, who wants disciples with whole hearts, full hearts, generous hearts, hearts given in service to the things that matter most, such as mercy, healing, and justice.

But it isn’t easy listening to the heart. There are so many things pulling us apart, distracting us, discouraging us. That’s why we have to answer this question again and again, not just once. What we’re searching for in one season of our lives might not cause our heart to sing in another. Thomas Merton (1915-1968), the Trappist monk, once said, “People may spend their whole lives climbing the ladder of success, only to find once they reach the top, that the ladder is leaning against the wrong wall.”

A whole heart is a heart aligned with God’s will, with what God desires. And we know what God desires: beauty, love, justice, wholeness, righteousness. These are holy. When our hearts are aligned with these ends—beauty, love, justice, wholeness, righteousness—we come alive, and when we are alive in this way, then and only then are we free to give ourselves away in love, which a divided or deceitful heart can never do.

What are you looking for? About twenty-five years ago I had an ongoing debate with my good, dear friend, Chuck Coblentz. We were seminary classmates, we lived on the same floor in Alexander Hall. He’s a brother. He’s a Methodist—but he’s still a brother. He preached in this pulpit the weekend I was installed as your pastor, back in 1999. Years ago, we drove from New Jersey to Bar Harbor, Maine for vacation. We had a lot of time in the car and talked about a lot of things over those miles, thinking about our respective calls and futures. He said to me at one point, citing Joseph Campbell (1908-1987) the scholar of mythology, that we need to “follow our bliss.” We need to follow our joy, what makes us happy. Something in me didn’t like this saying and so I pushed back against it. I had some suspicions about joy and bliss being faithful guides. I’m all for joy and bliss, but maybe it was the Calvinist in me who had problems with this notion. It sounded too self-indulgent. I remember saying in response to him, “We need to follow our pain, we need to follow our wounds.” We need to honor and listen to what the pain and wounds of our lives have to teach us, because they might be more faithful guides. After all these years, I still believe this to be true—all the more so. At least for me. But I’ve also come to see that joy and bliss are equally valuable. It’s not a matter of either-or, but both-and.

That conversation came to mind on Thursday afternoon, upstairs at Atwater's as I was working on this text. Chuck was in my heart that day, as his father died the day before. He was 90 years old. Chuck and I had a long talk on Thursday night. At the end of our conversation, he asked, "So what are you preaching on this Sunday?" John 1 and Psalm 27, I told him, Jesus' question and the need to listen to our heart. His first response to me was, quoting Jeremiah, that the heart is deceitful above all else. I found it ironic that Chuck, Mr. Follow-Your-Bliss, a guy who is perpetually optimistic and hopeful, was reminding me that the heart can't be trusted. So I said, "I was just thinking that afternoon about our follow-your-bliss debate from years ago." He laughed. And then he reminded me that I told him that his problem is that he's not depressed enough. And we laughed.

It's both-and, not either-or. Sometimes joy, bliss, happiness can be our guide. Howard Thurman (1899-1918), the mystic/preacher/theologian/civil rights leader/professor at Howard Divinity School in Washington, DC, is right, "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who come alive." There's a lot of truth here, a lot of wisdom.

From what I've read about the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968), though, he knew what the world needed and still needs: justice, equity, fairness, righteousness. Dr. King served with passion, and I guess you could say he came alive, more alive as he stepped into the role of prophet and preacher to the nation, but self-actualization wasn't what was guiding him or driving him. It was pain. His pain. It was the wound, his wound—and the national wound—inflicted by racism that needed to be named, faced, and healed. That's what was leading him. He wasn't led by bliss. He was summoned by the question—what are you looking for?—which called him and thrust him into the difficult work, the impossible task of taking on the injustice and sin of slavery, and racism, and the legacy of Jim Crow eating away at the heart—the deceitful heart—of American society. Dr. King knew, "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter."

Jesus asks, "What are you looking for?"

Don't be afraid.

Go on.

Tell him.