

QUESTION

Sermon, January 19, 2020

Text: John 1:29-42; I Corinthians 1:1-9

As you can see in your bulletins, the sermon title is a single word. I thought about adding punctuation, either an exclamation point implying an imperative (*after all, asking honest questions to get answers is a good thing to do and really the best way to learn!*) or a question mark implying uncertainty about the subject at hand (*"Question? What does THAT mean?"*) but left it just as one word. I don't know if you've ever thought about it, but the word "Question" has at root the word, "Quest" which is defined by Merriam as *"The act or an instance of seeking or pursuing something."*

In the Gospel according to John, the very first words from the lips of Jesus are a question, John 1:38 -- *"What do you want?"* (the RSV and other translations have *"What do you seek?"*) Some think the two men who got this response from Jesus weren't quite sure how to respond, so they stutter out, *"Uh, where are you staying?"* but I think there's more to this conversation than that. I think John is implying something significant is taking place in this conversation. He uses some literary license to create his persuasive evangelical account of the Gospel; his whole style is radically different from Matthew, Mark or Luke. John is writing thematically. He IS writing factually, but he is not necessarily writing chronologically ... the chronological order of events in Jesus' life are rearranged in John's literary style to convey a persuasive and philosophically convincing account of the Gospel (a few quick examples: In our reading, Simon was called Peter by Jesus, something Matthew and Mark tells us happened two and a half years into Jesus' public ministry. In John 2, Jesus drives the moneychangers out of the Temple, an event the other Gospels have just days prior to His crucifixion. It would take a few hours to explain this fully, but suffice it to say for now John is not contradicting the other Gospel accounts; he is not writing chronologically so much as he is presenting a thematic, persuasive, evangelical overview). For John, it is not so important *when* Jesus did or said something as it is *THAT* Jesus did or say it. He begins his Gospel with this grand, sweeping, majestic introduction that goes back before the beginning of time itself introducing this Word that was with God and was God, through Whom all things were made, how this Word became flesh and dwelt among us ... and then the very first words John has the Word speaking are a **question**. That's significant!

He is not a writer who wastes words on "chit chat;" again, he is writing thematically and has Jesus asking this question in a more philosophical and/or existential manner, as if to say, *"What is it you are seeking? What is your quest, what is your search, what are you looking for in your life?"* And I think these two men reply, in so many words, *"Our answer will take longer than a few moments. Where are you staying? Can we come over and talk?"* The next words John has coming out of The Word's mouth are, *"Come and you will see."* Perhaps as if to say, *"Come meet with Me. Spend time with me. Speak with Me, and you will see. Engage with me, and you will find answers to your quest, you will find what you are looking for."* John tells us they went with Him, and spent a day with Him ... and that day changed everything for them. Thus, John in this first chapter sets the stage for his persuasive account which we know as the Gospel of John, inviting his readers and all who seek to come and see and learn about this Word of God become flesh in Jesus.

Once again, being a product of my generation, I'm reminded of the lyrics of another sixties pop song, one by the Moody Blues: **"QUESTION"** Some lyrics: *"Why do we never get an answer, When we're knocking at the door, with a thousand million questions, about hate and death and war? - and then this mellow refrain:- "I'm looking for someone to change my life, I'm looking for a miracle in my life!"* Those lyrics struck a deep chord (*pun intended*) in many and that song shot to the top of the charts in 1967 because that is a universal quest ... looking for someone or some thing to change our lives, someone or some thing who can work miracles in our lives, someone or some thing who can help give our lives stability, meaning, purpose, hope. Well, John has Jesus leading off the "concert" of his Gospel account with "THE Question" -- *"What do you seek?"* Everyone seeks; everyone is on a quest for meaning and purpose. Putting Jesus' invitation, *"Come and you will see"* at the beginning of his account, John is intimating, *"Come and see this Jesus about whom I write, come have an encounter with Jesus, come and meet with this Jesus to find what you really seek ... the rest of this written account is all about this Word."*

Now hold that thought.

In I Corinthians 1:1 we read, *"Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes."* Who is Sosthenes, the co-signatory of this letter? We are introduced to him in Acts 18, at that time Sosthenes was the head of the large and prestigious synagogue in Corinth. Under Sosthenes' leadership, the synagogue had taken Paul to court, initiating criminal proceedings against him. The judge was Gallio, a famous Roman judge (*for you history buffs, Gallio was the elder brother of Seneca*). Gallio dismissed the case, publicly ridiculing the Jewish community by ejecting them all from his court, and the angry Jewish community in turn apparently took out their frustrations on Sosthenes by beating him up for having led them into this public debacle! We are not told what happened to Sosthenes after this beating, but we can make an educated guess. It seems he went on to become a believer under Paul's ministry and a colleague of the man he had tried to harm! It's quite possible

Paul had put into practice what he wrote in 4:12 of this same letter: *"When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it, when we are slandered, we speak kindly."* In all likelihood, Paul treated his former persecutor Sosthenes with grace, perhaps even visiting him while he recovered from his beating, and Sosthenes apparently found an answer to his quest in the Jesus Paul talked about ... and became part of the Christian community.

Now, having been head of the large and prestigious Corinth synagogue, Sosthenes naturally would have a wide circle of friends and acquaintances who would be intensely interested in what was going on with him and what was happening in his life. His public endorsement of Paul displayed in co-writing this letter would give Paul instant credibility with those who knew and respected Sosthenes. Sosthenes apparently wants his friends and fellow Jews to learn about the grace and goodness of Jesus Christ, just as he has, through the ministry of Paul. Being named as a co-author and/or endorser of this letter, Sosthenes says to all those in his circle of influence, *"Listen to this man! He will tell you about Someone who will change your life as He has changed mine!"*

Like Sosthenes, John the Baptist had a circle of influence, people who listened to him, people who followed him, a group of disciples he had gathered in his ministry. Like Sosthenes, John the Baptist wants those in his circle of influence to see Jesus, he wants them to learn about the grace and goodness of Jesus Christ. So in our Gospel reading today he says in so many words, *"Look, the Lamb of God! Take a good look! Listen to this man!"* See yourself as Sosthenes. See yourself as John. Whether you realize it or not, there are people in your life who know you and who trust you and who respect you. There are people who might even follow your example, people who listen to your words and observe your life and may be curious about what makes you tick. They are on a quest, too! A quest for meaning, purpose, stability, hope! Like John and Sosthenes let's do what we can to bring those people in our lives to a place where they, too, can take a good look at the Lamb of God.

This is what Andrew did. According to our text, Andrew was the first of the twelve disciples of Jesus. First he was a disciple of John, and then he decided to follow Jesus. In the Orthodox tradition Andrew is called *Protocletos*, or the *First-called*. The first thing this first disciple did was to introduce his brother to Jesus. There was something about Jesus that sent Andrew running to find his brother and say, *"You have to meet this man!"* So Simon Peter became a disciple because his brother brought him to Jesus.

When we've looked at this lectionary passage in years past, I've asked, *"Who were the Andrews, the Sostheneses, the Johns, in your life? Who brought you to a place where you could meet and/or learn about Jesus?"* Maybe it was one or both of your parents; maybe it was a friend. Maybe it was a sibling, a grandparent, an uncle, an aunt. Maybe a Sunday School teacher, a youth leader, or some celebrity who publicly displayed his/her faith. I know I can name many faithful Andrews, Johns, and Sosthenes in my life, people who brought me to a place where I could see and meet and learn about Jesus for myself. And an important related question is this: *"Whose Andrew, John or Sosthenes are you?"* I hope all of you can enjoy the immense satisfaction of knowing that someone is in some church worshipping today because you have been a faithful Andrew or Sosthenes or John and brought them to a place where they could come and see, come and meet, come and learn about, Jesus.

This is the essence of evangelism. Inviting others to come and see and learn about Jesus, just as Andrew invited his brother, just as John invited his disciples, just as Sosthenes invited his circle of friends and acquaintances. Studies have shown some 80% of those who come to a new or a renewed faith in Jesus and join a local church do so because someone simply invited them to *"Come and see."* Perhaps the person doing the inviting didn't know a lot about the Bible, maybe he or she couldn't really articulate the faith well or explain the doctrine of the Trinity, but the person simply said, *"Come and see. Come and hear our choir. Come join us at 39ers or youth fellowship. Come and enjoy the company of a friendly congregation. Come and sing with us. Come and see!"* That's something every one of us can do, inviting people to come and see.

But to clarify: The invitation ultimately is not *just* an invitation to come and see and hear our choir, or to come meet a wonderful group of people; nor is it to come and meet a potential mate, or come and be relieved of your kids for an hour or two. Yes, it may be all these things and more, but the *ultimate* invitation is to come and see Jesus, Who is always present where His people are gathered, and Who is the reason for and the ultimate focus of just about all we do around here. I simply do not believe people are not interested in matters of faith today. Everyone is on a quest for meaning. I believe there are many who are just waiting for someone to invite them to "Come and See." This does not mean you have to be perfect (*good luck with that*), nor does it mean the church has to be perfect (*and good luck with that!*). The One we worship is perfect, not us. People are not on a quest for perfection so much as they are looking for Someone who can change their lives, work miracles in their lives, bringing genuine hope, authenticity, community AND a genuine sense of God's presence and reality. They really are. And whether you think so or not, there are people who listen to you, who respect what you have to say, who have noticed the way you live, who have admired you, who respect your integrity, who might love to know what help makes you tick.

Don't be afraid to use your influence. Through your deeds, through your words, through your answers to their questions ... be a Sosthenes, a John the Baptist, an Andrew, and invite them to "Come and see."