

January 15, 2012 / Season after Epiphany / David L. Edwards

What Are You Looking For?

John 1:35-51

When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?"

Our community was founded out of the belief, and the experience, that God calls us through Jesus to an intentional life of faith. The life of faith has two interrelated and inseparable dimensions: the inward dimension we call prayer in the fullest sense, and the outward dimension we call ministry or mission. This is the vision we work with as a community of Jesus. It is quite simple to state, but profound and challenging as we live it out. If we make a commitment to our own lives and together as a community, and work seriously and consistently with the practices that nourish the inward and outward dimensions of our lives, we will experience growth, clarity, and joy in our relationship with God, others, the world, and ourselves that we never thought possible.

Call is at the center of the spiritual life as we understand it and work with it in our community. Call means that inherent in life is a "voice", if you will, within us and around us, that beckons us and draws us into the service of life in some particular way. It is difficult to put the meaning of call into words. It can be the sense we have that there is something we are meant or given to do that gives life to us and the world. Sometimes call is experienced as something we cannot rest until we do, an inner compulsion, in the healthy sense of that word, that draws us to itself. Call can emerge in us as a response to a particular need within our community of faith or the world around us. Call is also about being the unique, precious persons God created us to be, using whatever gifts we have been given to enhance and nourish life around us.

The stories of Jesus calling his disciples are of great interest to us as a community. Today's reading contains two stories. What dimensions of call and the called life might they lift up for our attention and reflection?

First story. Jesus has just been baptized by John, who sees his own call as pointing to Jesus and what he is bringing to the world. One day John is hanging with two of his disciples and Jesus walks by. "Look," says John, "there is the Lamb of God,

the one I've been talking about." So these two disciples start walking behind Jesus, which is the literal meaning of "disciple", one who walks behind, learning while following.

Jesus stops, turns around, and asks them a question which at first seems innocent and simple. Yet, when you really think about it, it may be one of the most important questions we could ever be asked: "What are you looking for?" The disciples may have looked a bit puzzled, but then they say, Oh, we'd sure like to see where you are staying. Is that all they are looking for, where Jesus is staying? Well, Jesus lets it go. You get the feeling that Jesus and these would-be disciples of his are coming from two different places. Jesus asks a question or makes a statement, and others don't seem to get it. It is that way all through John's gospel.

Questions are very important to the spiritual life, the life of faith. They are not meant to make us uptight, or put us on the spot, or test us like in school. This week I thought about the term "leading question". A leading question in the courtroom is one a lawyer asks a witness, and it is designed to get the answer the lawyer wants or to put the witness in jeopardy in some way. Leading questions when it comes to the spiritual life are to lead us deeper into insight, understanding, awareness, wisdom. They are like the "wondering questions" in Children Worship & Wonder. After a story is told, the children are asked wondering questions by the story teller. I wonder how it felt to be close to Jesus? Or, I wonder how the children felt when the disciples told them they could not come to Jesus? The children then take these questions and go do their work, individually reflecting on whatever the story or the questions has stirred up in their minds and hearts.

So I'm thinking that "What are you looking for?" is, in this story, Jesus' way of sounding the call to discipleship. What am I looking for? What do I most deeply desire? In what direction do I really want to live my life so that I experience fullness of life? Am I looking for who I really am as a human being and what I am given to do to be fulfilled and to touch the life of the world in a life-giving way? Have I been looking in the wrong places, at the wrong things?

Commitment to membership in our community is, I believe, the way we take that question, "What am I looking for?", into the center of our living. It becomes one of the core questions for our spiritual lives. What we call the inward journey is the way we pattern our daily life so that we explore that question in a serious, consistent, and deep way. And if we are doing that, we will grow more and more into the answer,

or different answers at different points in our lives. When we make time each day for inward silence and listening, for the reading of scripture and other spiritual resources, for reflecting on our lives and what we seem given and gifted to do, that is the way we live the question “What am I looking for?” The answer to this question is not “out there” but “in here”. The spiritual disciplines or practices to which we commit ourselves help us live from the inside out, from a growing awareness of who we really are as God created us and what God is calling and gifting us to do for others and the world. This story in John's gospel, it seems, leaves us with that question--What am I looking for? What am I really looking for?

The second story. Jesus decides one day to go to the region of Galilee, where he finds Philip and calls him to follow. Philip goes and tells Nathanael that they have found the messiah pointed to by the law and the prophets. Philip mentions that Jesus is from Nazareth. Now, I don't know what all was going on in that little region, but I suspect there were the same kinds of attitudes we find most anywhere. Folks from one place think their place is better than that of other folks, and take on attitudes toward folks from that “other place”. I can hear Nathanael give a contemptuous chuckle: “Nazareth, you say? Hmph. What good can come out of that po-dunk town?!” If Nathanael is nothing else, he is honest about how he feels.

That seems to be what catches Jesus' attention. When Jesus sees Nathanael coming, he says, “Look, here comes an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” I really noticed this for the first time as I worked with this story. Jesus sees something in Nathanael that he really likes and values. Lack of deceit. A lack of guile or pretense. Old Nathanael just seems to say what's on his mind and what comes out of his heart. He is wide open.

Do you think that Jesus might just want us to be REAL? I mean, wouldn't it be wonderful if Jesus calls us not to be pious, religious sorts who are always uptight and moralistic, trying to be something other than our simple, true selves? I may be making too much out of this little episode, but I think it is important. One of Jesus' beatitudes is “blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth”. Meekness means a kind of humble acceptance of oneself and one's place in the wide and great scheme of life and the universe. Not pretentious. Not grasping. Not trying to impress anyone. I think the church has messed a lot of us up by trying to make us religious rather than true human beings. Meek human beings in whom there is no deceit, no guile, no manipulating or pretending.

“How do you know me?” asks Nathanael. “I saw you sitting under a fig tree before Philip called you.” This amazes Nathanael so much that he exclaims that surely this rabbi—even if he IS from Nazareth!--is the Son of God, the King of Israel. So this is what I thought about: Nathanael's honest heart and lack of pretense draws Jesus' attention. But also, Nathanael is willing to “come and see”, to be open to what he might learn. He had thought that nothing worthwhile could come out of Nazareth, but he is willing to take a look. And he is willing to acknowledge a new truth, a revelation of something beyond his small range of vision. Lack of pretense. Being open to seeing something new. There are two things for us to think about and work with.

Finally, Jesus asks Nathanael: Did you believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree? The comment was made in our discussion of this passage Wednesday morning that Jesus is questioning Nathanael more deeply. Did you believe because of a parlor trick? Forget parlor tricks. Forget all those so-called miracles that people get so stirred up about, that don't lead to a life of faith that is ongoing, steadfast, and real. Jesus tells him, You will see heaven open up and the angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. This is a reference to a story in Genesis 28. Jacob is on the run from the wrath of his brother Esau. He pulls up for the night at a place called Bethel. He goes to sleep under the stars and dreams about a ramp reaching from earth into heaven. The angels of God are “ascending and descending” it. Then he hears God's voice promising to be with him and to make him a great nation. When Jacob wakes up, he says, “This place is awesome! It is nothing else than the house of God (Beth-el), and the gate of heaven.” In his dream, Jacob glimpses the connection between earth and heaven, where the power is flowing, we might say. It is “command central”.

So, it seems as though Jesus is saying, Do not be distracted or amazed by parlor tricks. That's small potatoes. Stick with me and you will see life as it really is, the connection between heaven and earth. If you follow me, you will come to know what life is really about.

What are you looking for? What am I looking for? Having hearts that are honest and open, being able and willing to seek and find. Coming to see the truest and deepest nature of life. That is why we make our commitments and work with them the best that we can.