

“Creating Space for the Deeper Questions”

John 1:29-42

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In this month’s issue of *The Christian Century* Lutheran Bishop Michael Rinehart tells a story about a time some years ago when he was required to take a defensive driving course (January 2023, p. 25). He had received three speeding tickets in one year, and thus he landed in class. He sat on the back row and tried to keep his head down and his mouth shut until the instructor called on him and said, “What do you do? Where do you live? Why are you here?”

He says he knew then he was in a recovery group. He said, “My name is Mike. I’m a pastor. I drive too fast.” There it was for all the world to see. At the end of the second class, the instructor pulled him aside and asked him more personally, “Why are you here?” “Because I got three speeding tickets,” he replied. “No, really,” the instructor repeated, “*Why* are you here?” It was a deeper question, an existential one that he wasn’t prepared to answer. Why was he in such a hurry?

“Well, the first time I was going to...” “No,” the instructor said, interrupting, “Where are you *going* in such a hurry?” He meant in life. Mike had no answer. “Life is short,” the instructor said, “Take your time and enjoy it. There is just a grave waiting for you down that road.” Ouch... Finally, the instructor talked to him like a pastor, saying, “What are you looking for?”

It was a familiar question for a pastor, one that ought to be familiar to us today, since we have read the verses we have from John 1. When John the Baptist tells his disciples Jesus is the Lamb of God, two of them follow Jesus, and so he turns to them and says, “What are you looking for?” It might be just a simple question about their immediate need, but it is not. Jesus rarely asks simple questions with just one level of meaning, especially in the Gospel According to John. There are always many levels of meaning, and his questions are often existential, they push people deeper in thought. This is the case here.

When Jesus asks these inquirers what they are looking for, the possibilities include – an immediate need to be met, to know whether he is the Lamb of God or Messiah, someone to believe in or someone to follow, easy answers or the transformation of life, a safe and simple word of assurance or some risky venture into the realm of God. What are you looking for, he asks, what do you really want from me?

It is the kind of question we ask from time to time, or at least need to ask. What are we looking for – in life and faith? Why are we here – in church, on this earth? Why are we here today? Are we seeking community or meaning? Are we just going through the motions without any particular motivation either because we haven't thought about it recently or because we don't really believe anything will change in our lives? Do we need healing and hope? Are we searching for a sense of peace? Do we want simple answers or might we want a prophetic word of challenge on MLK weekend? Are we hoping to find God in some way or that God will find us? What are we looking for?

No one can read anyone else's mind here. So, it is a safe question to ask or at least a safe place to ask it. And even people of faith still search for things – a deeper understanding, a renewal of hope, some way to live with tensions created by the presence of evil in this world or our own personal suffering. There are those who think we always have to know that we know that we know. There are churches where certainty is confused with faith. But that is not what we are about here.

Many of us know the U2 song "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For" which says.

I have climbed highest mountains
I have run through the fields
Only to be with you...
I have run
I have crawled
I have scaled these city walls...
Only to be with you
But I still haven't found what I'm looking for...

I have kissed honey lips
Felt the healing in her fingertips
It burned like fire
This burning desire
I have spoke with the tongue of angels
I have held the hand of a devil
It was warm in the night
I was cold as a stone
But I still haven't found what I'm looking for...

I believe in the kingdom come
Then all the colors will bleed into one...
But yes I'm still running
You broke the bonds
And you loosed the chains
Carried the cross
Of my shame...
You know I believe it
But I still haven't found what I'm looking for

I had a doctoral classmate who asked if those guys ever found what they were looking for, as in – don't they profess to be Christians? They do, and our faith offers assurance in God's love, but that doesn't mean there is nothing more to look for. There are always more questions.

How do John's disciples respond to Jesus' probing question? They say, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" What kind of answer is that?! Jesus is the one who answers questions with questions! But there is a statement underneath this question, something like – we'd like to talk more, spend time with you; our interest is deeper than we can explain with a quick reply. Jesus honors this response by saying, "Come and see," and they do come and see, not just where he is staying, but the beginning of the rest of their lives. Jesus honors their vague answer because it signifies curiosity, and curiosity leads to faith.

One of the two is Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, and the first thing he does is find his brother and say, "We have found the Messiah."

Simon meets Jesus who immediately gives him a new name – Cephas in Aramaic or Peter in Greek, meaning “rock.” At this point, it seems safe to assume the two people Jesus asks his question of are looking for more than a way to address an immediate need. They had better be, they are certainly in for a great deal more.

The implication for us on a personal level is that there is value in taking time to reflect on deeper questions of being and purpose rather than simply functioning on autopilot. We may feel like we don’t have time to reflect. We have too much to do every day. For goodness sakes, we don’t make time for silent reflection in worship because we feel like we have to be doing something active all the time... and because we don’t know what to do with silence.

But the truth is we don’t have time not to reflect. Life needs purpose. Spiritual life requires clarity, intentionality. And on a practical level, we benefit from stepping back and asking questions like – do I have to do everything thing I am doing, who says I do, is it my assumption or the expectation of others, and if it is the latter, do I have to accept the expectations of others?

A dear friend in the last church I served, a former pastor and Director of the Department of Pastoral Care at Baptist Hospital in Winston-Salem, Dewey Hobbs, had a rehearsed response to people who tried to unload work on him. He would hold out his oversized hands like this... and say, “My plate is already full. Tell me how you get along with that.”

Busyness is not an adequate measure of faithfulness or success. In fact, at times it is a symptom of dysfunction, a way of covering up feelings of inadequacy. But most significantly, it is a barrier to a more contemplative and centered life. We need time to reflect on the deeper questions, and then we need courage to ask them, to realize they are not the enemy of faith but the strongest of allies.

But the story from John has another implication for us as a church. There is great value in shaping the kind of community where people are encouraged to ask questions and reflect deeply on how they view God,

the world around them, and their own lives. In the story from John, like so many others, Jesus meets people where they are and honors their questions. He values their interest in him and search for truth. He realizes that it is these very qualities that lead to enduring faith.

This is how we meet people in this church. This is the kind of community we seek to shape, one that is open and inviting. This is the kind of community people need and are willing to embrace, even in this time of disinterest in institutional religion.

No matter how many issues people have with the church - and let's be honest, thinking people are going to have issues with an institution that over time has treated women as inferior, tried to justify slavery, used guilt to control people, been afraid of new learning, and covered up all manner of unspeakable transgressions – but no matter how many issues with the institution people have, people will always ask spiritual questions. Is this life all there is? Does some God or Ultimate Being exist? Does my life really matter? And people will always need community, genuine community, other people with whom they can be themselves and ask their questions.

We are here at least in part because we have felt free to ask the deepest questions of our hearts and we have found people with whom to share this honest, painful, and rewarding journey. Whatever our future path involves, whatever physical spaces we eventually decide to build or enhance, as long as others are always invited into this kind of experience, this church will play an important role in God's realm.

I wandered into church for the first time as a long-haired fifteen-year-old in blue jeans and a t-shirt with a long list of questions and a genuine interest in spiritual things. If I had been offered a set of quick and easy answers that didn't hold water, I would have been out the door as quickly as I came in. But fortunately, or perhaps providentially, I found a church that created space for deeper questions. When I asked my questions, they said, "Come and see. Stay a while. Ask away!" As a result, I stayed, and in time, found what I was looking for, or at least Whom I was looking for. I am thankful that this is a church like the one that embraced me, and I pray that it will always be this kind of church.