

“Jolting Questions”
John 1:29–42
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Some questions are more jolting than others, especially questions asked by children. I will never forget a young child asking her parents at her grandmother’s committal service if her grandmother, who had been cremated, was really in that little box. I will also never forget a child in another setting saying to the children’s minister, “I have a question, it’s about your body.” “OK,” said the minister with fear and trepidation, after which the child asked about her pierced ear, allowing the minister to breathe a sigh of relief. Children are honest and direct, they have few filters, and thus their questions get to the heart of the matter, naming things others are thinking about and in a way that provokes thought.

Jesus asks questions like this too. When some religious leaders try to entrap him with the loaded question, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” Jesus has them bring a coin, and then, looking at the coin, he says, “Whose head is this and whose title?” When they reply, “Caesar’s,” he says, “Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s (Matthew 22:17-21).” It may seem like a simple and direct answer, but as an untold number of sermons have suggested, it is anything but! What does not belong to God? Jesus’ answer avoids entrapment while provoking thought.

In today’s reading, there are many provoking questions. In the first half of the text, John the Baptist gives witness to who Jesus is – the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, the one who ranks ahead of him because he was before him, the one on whom the Spirit from heaven descends, the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit, the Chosen One of God. These are all straightforward declarations, but the second half of the text is filled with questions, one right after the other. It begins with Jesus walking by and John saying to two of his disciples, “Look, here is the lamb of God!” They immediately follow Jesus, at which point he turns around, saying, “What are you looking for?”

The question may seem innocuous, indeed quite reasonable, but it is driven by a concern we rarely address so directly. Jesus wants to know why people are interested in him. We certainly care about why people come our way at the church, but we are hesitant to push too far, and we are more focused on welcoming all people, which is appropriate. The church should reflect Jesus' welcoming and inclusive spirit, reaching out to the marginalized and rejected. But it does matter why people come, and they do come for many different reasons.

People come to the church in search of spiritual care and growth, meaning and purpose, community and a place to belong, all of which are central to the church's mission. In these days, many come seeking refuge from a chaotic world and wondering if there is a reason to hold on to faith, and this is a church that embraces such people, thank God!

People also come to the church in need of financial help, and this too is part of the church's mission, heightened in this time when so many government resources are being stripped away, though the entanglement of financial help with evangelism is tricky. But people also come to the church in search of business connections, to find a spouse (not the worst thing in the world, Dana and I met in the church), to be among the "right" social group, even to find a place where they have influence.

If you have a naïve sense about the purity of the church, I hate to disillusion you, but it's not all about God and Jesus. There was a key leader in one church I served who I never heard mention God or Jesus. It was all about how much money and how many people and how that church compared to others. People join and leave churches for all sorts of reasons, some of which have nothing to do with faith.

In one setting where I served, people were up in arms about a new family with a teenager who were moving to another church. People wondered if something was not going well with our youth ministry. That ministry was fine. The family was not leaving because of any ministry. The man had an affair with a co-worker who had started attending our church with someone else. It was a little too close for comfort, though I could not disclose the real reason they were leaving.

People come and go for many different reasons, though this church has more people who are here for good reasons than any I have served.

It is one of our greatest strengths. But unlike many churches today, Jesus isn't giddy about any warm body who comes along. He wants to know why they are coming. It's partly because he can't know how to minister to them until he knows something about them, but it's also because his mission is to invite people to follow him in a way of life, not simply show up or even believe certain things about him.

John the Baptist says Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. This is loaded language with layers of meaning, but it points to his role as savior, and believing in him in this way is central to our faith. But this is not all faith involves. Jesus also calls us to follow him in the way of the cross, the way of sacrificial and self-giving love, the way of humility, kindness, and compassion.

English minister Leslie Weatherhead put it this way many years ago in his book *The Christian Agnostic* (p. 16).

I believe passionately that Christianity is a way of life, not a theological system with which one must be in intellectual agreement. I feel that Christ would admit into discipleship anyone who sincerely desired to follow him, and allow that disciple to make his creed out of his experience; to listen, to consider, to pray, to follow, and ultimately to believe only those convictions about which the experience of fellowship made him sure.

Some people hear this argument and think it dilutes the essence of Christian faith, but what Weatherhead calls for does not lower the standards of our faith. It raises them. Anyone can believe certain things about Jesus and God. As C.S. Lewis once said, even the Devil believes God exists. Trusting in Christ, relating intimately to God and allowing our relationship with God to change us – these things require more, not less, and because they do, they have the power to transform us.

This is Jesus' concern, not that he have as many people around him as possible but that people follow him in a way of life - the way of love and justice, righteousness and truth, reconciliation and peace. It is not the normal way of life in his time or ours. It's not the way of many who

call themselves Christian in this time. Their way is one of rigidity and exclusion, fear and hatred, lashing out in anger at the world Christ came to save. There may be many followers of this way, but Jesus doesn't care about numbers as much as he does the integrity of his work.

So, Jesus asks two of John's disciples who come to come him, "What are you looking for?" How do they reply? They might say, "Isn't it obvious? John the Baptist sent us to you." Or they might say, "We want to know if you are the Messiah." But they don't respond in these ways. Rather, they say, "Where are you staying?" It may seem like it is an odd response, but Jesus replies, "Come and see."

What the disciples mean is that they are interested in more than an answer to one question. They are interested in Jesus, in getting to know him and what he is about. They are open to learning and perhaps following, though the latter will be a challenge, and Jesus embraces their answer, their interest in something more. He invites them to come and see, not understand it all, but explore. When they do, one of them, who is Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, goes to his brother, saying, "We have found the Messiah!" And this leads to Peter following Jesus as well.

There is a great deal here to inform our ministry. Asking people why they are here can lead to effective work. In fact, asking questions in general is healthy. Inviting people to come and see, to investigate, to probe – and thus, not coercing, badgering, or insisting on immediate decisions – is a generative approach. Most of all, keeping in mind the reality that our basic calling is to make disciples of Jesus, not simply converts to our way of thinking, is essential. It is essential for the witness of the church and for the wellbeing of a world where so much about Christian faith is desperately needed but badly distorted.

To be more specific, in a January 13 posting on Baptist News Global, Rick Pidcock references a prayer offered last Sunday that expresses hostility toward people in Minneapolis. Andy Naselli, lead pastor of Christ the King Church in Stillwater, Minnesota, and professor of systematic theology and New Testament at Bethlehem Seminary, lamented Minnesota magistrates "acting unjustly ... as anti-ICE protesters swarm into Minneapolis."

He described the ICE officials as brave and honorable, while calling Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz and Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey “wicked,” and accusing them of “inciting lawbreaking.” He quoted Psalm 58, asking God to break Walz and Frey’s teeth, to tear out their fangs, to make them vanish, to cause them to fail, to melt away like a slug, and to become like stillborn children.

He then asked for God’s mercy and grace, by praying the ICE officers would be skilled and just faithful servants who could be “a terror to bad conduct” and “righteous avengers who carry out your wrath on wrongdoers.” And he closed by saying, “We ask all this so that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. And we ask all this in the name of Christ the King. Amen.”

People of faith may have different perspectives on some of what is happening, but to express such open hostility toward others, even other people of faith who are doing what they feel called to do, is contrary to the heart of Jesus’ ministry. This is not what it means to follow him.

In this month’s issue of “The Christian Century” Presbyterian pastor Christine Chakoian notes that she has some issues with the people who fund the “He Gets Us” ad campaign, but says she appreciates the hope it expresses, and in their defense, she notes, they say this (p. 28).

How did the story of a man who taught and practiced unconditional love, peace, and kindness; who spent his life defending the poor and marginalized; a man who even forgave his killers while they executed him unjustly... how did this man’s story become associated with hatred and oppression for so many people? And how might we all rediscover the promise of love his story represents? Those are the questions at the heart of He Gets Us.

Chakoian then adds - Jesus gets us, but do we get *him*? That is the most provoking question and the most important. With the two disciples of John, we are invited to come and see who Jesus is, and everything else depends on getting that right, on getting him. May God grant us to wisdom to discern and courage to follow!