

John 1:29-42
Epiphany 2 A
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The Right Question
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The next day [John] saw Jesus coming towards him and declared, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, "After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me." I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.' And John testified, 'I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but 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." And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.'

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!' The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, 'What are you looking for?' They said to him, 'Rabbi' (which translated means Teacher), 'where are you staying?' He said to them, 'Come and see.' They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, 'We have found the Messiah' (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, 'You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas' (which is translated Peter).

This morning, I'm going to begin the sermon by breaking one of the fundamental rules of "good" preaching. I'm going to ask a question: What are you looking for? It's a question we expect on a dating profile or from an overly helpful store clerk. It's a question we expect from our partner or our parent when we're rifling through every closet in the house or standing with the refrigerator door open for too long. It's the question I ask my mother when we set off on one of our marathon antiquing trips. But it's the very first thing Jesus says in the Gospel According to John. And somehow, it sounds different coming from Jesus. Like he's not expecting us to say that we're looking for that special someone, or the peanut butter aisle, or our favorite t-shirt, or another figurine for our kitty cat collection. When Jesus asks it, I think the question goes deeper. Of course, the guys Jesus asks it to don't answer it at all. Instead, they respond with another question, a shallower question: Where are you staying while you're in town? Rather than answering – because Jesus rarely answers a question directly in the gospels, if he answers it at all – he says: Come and see for yourself.

Pulitzer Prize-winning author, reporter, and columnist Thomas Friedman once wrote that, "In the twenty-first century, knowing all the answers won't distinguish someone's intelligence—rather, the ability to ask all the right questions will be the mark of true genius."¹ Our first-century Jesus certainly seemed to know how to ask the right questions. As with so many of them in the gospels, I think this one is really directed at the reader – at us. What are *you* looking for? What are *we* looking for? When we got out of bed, got ready, got into the car, rolled into the parking lot, and came through the doors and to our favorite pew, what were we – are we – looking for?

We'll come back to that question in a moment. The author of John's gospel sets up the question by telling us not what we're looking for but,

¹ Thomas L. Friedman. *Thank You for Being Late: An Optimist's Guide to Thriving in the Age of Accelerations*, New York: Picador Paper, 2017.

instead, what we'll find if we keep reading. We hear titles for Jesus like Lamb of God, Son of God, Rabbi, and Messiah. We hear that, even though he's younger than John the Baptist, somehow Jesus existed before John did. If we go back a few verses, we hear that Jesus was actually in the very beginning with God and was himself the Word of God and that the Word of God *is* God. Then, we hear that the Word of God that is God became flesh – incarnate in time and space, body and blood – and dwelt among us as the man Jesus of Nazareth, a man who would die like a lamb led to slaughter to take away the sin of the world. Is that what the guys were looking for? Is that what we're looking for? I honestly couldn't say what each person here today is really looking for, but I'm fairly certain that each person is looking for something. Do you know what you're looking for?

It's worth asking, but more than asking, it's worth really thinking about. What are we looking for in Jesus, in God, in New England Church broadly and in worship specifically. There is more of a reason for our being here than simply habit. Do we come looking for community, for belonging, for affirmation, for opportunities to serve, for a safe place to be ourselves? Do we look to be challenged, or comforted, or spiritually fed, or entertained? Are we looking for a service that fits our schedule, or our musical tastes, or incorporates our children? What are we looking for in this place with these people? Are we finding it?

I'm asking so many questions this morning that I certainly hope Friedman is right – that genius is asking questions. But I do hope you feel that they're good questions. The truth is, if we know the answer – know what we're looking for and know if we've found it here, then as Jesus does in our text, the next logical step is to invite others to come and see for themselves.

Most church goers don't quite get to this step – the invitation. That leads me to believe that most church goers either don't know what they're looking for in their churches or they haven't found it in their churches because if they did know and had found, they would invite others to come and see for themselves. One of my former professors, Dr. David Lose, writes: “that the decline of our church traditions will stop the day a critical mass – and it doesn't even have to be the majority, just a critical mass! – of our people a) know why they value their participation in church and b) can share that with others.”²

It makes sense, doesn't it? When we know what we're looking for and find it, we invite others to see it for themselves. Here's a case in point. A few weeks back, when we were setting up for our World of Christmas display in the narthex, one of our dedicated members was ironing the textiles for the display. She'd been ironing for what seemed like hours. I felt compelled to admit that I hate ironing. It's truly my least favorite household chore. In fact, I never iron. I don't even own an iron! I steam. And then I proceeded to tell her how the steamer is the perfect answer to a question she didn't even ask. I concluded by promising to send her a link to the steamer model I thought she should buy so that she never had to iron again either -- which I forgot to do -- but the point is that I was looking for a way to never iron again. I found the perfect solution in the J-2000 Jiffy Garment Steamer. And I was, and clearly still am, so excited about it that I'm inviting everybody to get one and see for themselves! That's what we do, though, when we know what we're looking for and we find it. We invite others to try it – to see it for themselves. Word of mouth is still the very best advertising. It's what makes thriving businesses thrive and it works for churches too.

² David Lose. “A Question, Invitation, and Promise,” Davidlose.net, January 9, 2017:
<https://www.davidlose.net/2017/01/epiphany-2-a-a-question-invitation-and-promise/>.

Many of you are already doing this. You're *already* inviting others to come and see and experience New England Church for themselves. You're not doing it because you believe that "heathens" need to be in church on Sundays and you're not doing it to save people's souls from hell. You're doing it because you've found what you were looking for, or at least people to look for it with, and you want to share it with others. That's the best reason in the world to share what we've found and the best strategy for getting the word out.

I'll ask one last time: What are you looking for? If you've found it, share it. Amen.