

Have You Found It?
A Sermon for Every Sunday
Second Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A
John 1:29-42

The next day [John] saw Jesus coming toward 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."

Have you found what you're looking for?

There's a song by the Irish rock band U2 that begins with these words: "I have climbed the highest mountains, I have run through the fields...but I still haven't found what I'm looking for."ⁱ That song has haunted an entire generation, because it makes them wonder, "What about me? Have I found what I'm looking for?" It probably haunts young people the most, the "twentysomethings" among us, because they are the ones who are most actively searching for three things: a person, a place, and a position. Do you know what I mean? They're not just looking for a job; they're looking for a career. And they might wonder where that career will take them. Can they stay where they are or will they have to go somewhere else? And if they go somewhere else will that special someone go with them? Or do they even have a special someone yet? Maybe they still haven't found what they're looking for. But the twentysomethings aren't the only ones asking those questions. Sometimes the thirtysomethings, the fortysomethings, and even the fiftysomethings ask them, too. They pull into the driveway at the end of a long day and wonder: "Is this it? Is this all there is? Or should I keep looking?"

In today's Gospel reading Jesus asks the question directly: "What are you looking for?" And there's the problem. Most of us don't even know. We know we're looking for

something. We're fairly sure we haven't found it yet. But we don't know what it is. John the Baptist, on the other hand, knew exactly what he was looking for: he was looking for the Messiah, also known as the Christ, the Anointed One, the Son of David, the Son of God, the Lamb of God. He had been told that he would find what he was looking for by baptizing, that when the right one arrived the Spirit would descend and remain on him. "I myself did not know him," John says, "but the one who sent me to baptize with water said, 'The one on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.'"

If you heard last week's sermon you heard me say that you have to let each of these Gospel storytellers tell the story of Jesus in his own way, and today's passage is a good example. Don't confuse John's story with Matthew's, where John the Baptist tells Jesus, "You should be baptizing me!" In this Gospel John the Baptist doesn't know Jesus yet. He has to wait for him to be revealed in baptism. And so he baptizes every person who comes to the Jordan, one at a time. Can't you picture him standing there, waist-deep in the water, looking into each person's eyes just before he baptizes, searching for some glimmer of divinity, and then, when they come up out of the water, looking toward heaven to see if this will be the one on whom the Spirit descends and remains?

I was trying to think of a good analogy for that search process last week when my intern, Scott Biggers, said, "It's kind of like panning for gold." I've never actually done that, but Scott has, and here's the way he described it: you scoop up a pan full of sand and gravel from the bottom of the creek and swirl it around hoping that the sand and gravel will slosh out and the heavier gold will settle on the bottom. On a good day, you might actually see some flecks of gold in your pan, but what you really hope for is a

nugget the size of a golf ball. When John finds Jesus it's like he's scooped up a nugget the size of a bowling ball. He struggles to get it out of the water, gasping and shouting, "This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" When he tells the story later he says, "I saw it with my own eyes! I saw the Spirit descend and remain on him! I'm telling you, this is the Son of God!"

He can't keep the good news to himself. The next day two of his disciples are standing there with him, but when he sees Jesus walking by he says, "Look, the Lamb of God!" and immediately they leave John and start following Jesus. I don't know how far they follow him before he senses their presence but eventually he turns around and asks, "What are you looking for?" And they don't know what to say (would you?). One of them finally blurts out, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" and that's an important word in John's Gospel. The Greek word *meno* means "to abide, to remain, to stay." It's the same word Jesus uses when he talks about the vine and the branches in chapter 15: "Whoever abides in me will bear much fruit," he says. These disciples say, "Rabbi, where are you abiding?" And that's a clue, isn't it? I think these two have found what they are looking for, and they don't want to lose it. "Where can we find you next time we come looking for you?" And Jesus said, "Come and see." And they did. They abided with him (there's that word again) for the rest of that day. "It was about four o'clock in the afternoon," John notes, which is just the kind of thing you might say if you had an experience you wanted to remember the rest of your life.

What we don't often talk about in this story is the fact that two of John's disciples left him to follow Jesus. Last week I asked another pastor in my town how it would be if he were talking to two of his members one day when I walked by. "What if you said,

‘Look, there goes Jim Somerville, Pastor of Richmond’s First Baptist Church,’ and they left you and started following me? How would that make you feel?” “Not so good,” he said. And let’s be honest about it: that kind of thing happens to pastors all the time. I’ll bump into somebody at a restaurant and say, “Hey, I haven’t seen you in a while!” And they’ll look a little embarrassed and say, “Yeah, well...we’ve been going to that new megachurch in town. Our kids have a lot of friends who go there, and you know how it is with kids.” I just stand there, not knowing what to say. This is why John the Baptist made it into the Bible and not me; because when people leave him for Jesus he seems thrilled.

But maybe it’s because John knew from the beginning that what he was offering wasn’t the real thing. “I baptize you with water,” he said, “but the one who comes after me will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” Do you remember that story from Acts, chapter 19, when Paul found some believers in Ephesus? He asked them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you were baptized?” “No,” they said. “We didn’t even know there was a Holy Spirit.” So he asked, “Into what then were you baptized?” And they said, “Into John’s baptism.” Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.” And so they were baptized in the name of Jesus, and after Paul had laid his hands on them the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they began to speak in tongues and prophecy (Acts 19:1-7). I think those believers would say they found what they were looking for.

And to be fair to those people who visit the new megachurch in town, they may simply be looking for something they haven’t found. And maybe they will find it there.

I hope so. But when I think of megachurches I often think about the time I was a youth minister and wanted to have the biggest and best youth group in town. One of the first things I did was weigh every kid who came on Wednesday night because it sounded so much more impressive to say that we had a 1,136 pound youth group than to say we had a group of eleven kids. I did everything I could to increase attendance: we started our own radio station, held the “World’s Biggest Kite Contest,” and made regular trips to the amusement park. But I remember the day it changed for me, when I called to invite one of our youth to something we were doing and he said no thanks: that he and his friend were planning to go to a movie. And that’s when it hit me that I could never compete: that these kids had all the entertainment they needed and a whole lot more, and the only thing I could give them that they weren’t getting everywhere else...was Jesus. So, I made up my mind to do that—to give them Jesus—and to keep it up even if the youth group withered away to less than a thousand pounds.

In one way or another, that’s what I’ve been trying to do ever since.

—*Jim Somerville* ©2020

ⁱ “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For,” U2, 1987.