

“What are you Looking For?”

John 1: 29-42

1/19/2014

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Last week we heard in the Gospel of Matthew how the sky opened at Jesus’ baptism and God testified, “This is my Son, the Beloved with whom I am well pleased.”

This week in the Gospel of John we hear others testifying to who Jesus is and what his relationship to God might be. In this short reading there is great variety – at first, according to this Gospel, John the Baptist did not know who Jesus was! And others proclaimed him to be the Lamb of God, Son of God, Rabbi and the Messiah.

This is a good reminder to us that through the centuries, how people experienced and saw Jesus has differed as much as it does today.

I am intrigued by the question Jesus asks two of John’s disciples that decide to follow Jesus: “What are you looking for?”

In other words --- what we seek has huge impact on what we see and experience. Imagine if Jesus were to ask you that very question in your spiritual quest– “What are YOU looking for?” What would your answer be?
What is your deepest longing?
Would you know how to answer?

Let’s consider for a brief time the various titles given to Jesus in this reading and what they might say about what a person is looking for:

The title “Lamb of God” is one that sounds rather odd to our ears today. This has often been interpreted as meaning Jesus is God’s sacrifice for humanities sin – even the writer of the Gospel inserts the words “the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world”, but historical research tells us that lambs were not used for sin sacrifices. They were only used for the Passover sacrifice *which is a sacred meal that remembers the liberation and deliverance of the people of God from slavery.*

Referring to Jesus then as the “Lamb of God” might reveal a person’s or a people’s search for a God-given liberator – someone who will set them free or show them how to get themselves free, from the horrific yoke of slavery.

As Jewish people they would immediately know what is meant by the term “Lamb of God”, while we Gentiles may not.

(I was recently looking at a book by Howard Thurman about the theology of Negro spirituals that were sung in the days of slavery in this country. The identification of Jesus as the Lamb of God – as the liberator; the one who suffered yet rose above his suffering and even used it for the sake of liberation – was a favored image for Negro spirituals.)

Of course most of us understand the title “Rabbi” which means teacher. The person who testifies to Jesus in this way is looking for a teacher of spiritual wisdom; of right living; of religious law. It is a term of great respect.

Messiah, “the anointed one”, is a King anointed by God to serve the people as both a spiritual and political-military leader. This person is looking for an earthly King that will rule over the people in a godly way.

And finally, “Son of God” – It was not uncommon for Emperors to assume a title such as this, so in some ways it was meant as a challenge to oppressive political leaders.

Son of God was a proclamation of Jesus intimate relationship to God and his divinity. It is the term many of us grew up hearing and being taught that this was the true and final identification of Jesus and in turn, who we should be seeking on our spiritual journey in order to be true Christians.

According to scholars such as Marcus Borg, this identification of Jesus was the “one and only” until the creation of the Nicene Creed in the 4th century. *In the New Testament it was seen as one testimony among many which functioned as metaphors for imaging the significance of Jesus and his relationship to God.* (Borg, Seeking Jesus Again for the First Time)

The one who would call Jesus “Son of God” prior to the Nicene Creed and the creation of Christian doctrine would be proclaiming a desire to follow someone whose very being embodied God’s love and justice.

Lamb of God – Rabbi – Messiah – Son of God...

“What are you looking for?” Jesus asked those who would follow him. These various titles can tell us a lot.

There was a variety of answers to that question – and no doubt some who probably said, “I don’t know – I just know that there is something missing or out of sorts in my life and in our world.” And so they followed him hoping maybe Jesus could help them find their way.

There is no one RIGHT answer to who the Jesus of history or the Christ of faith actually is. Nor is there one answer to the deep and complex spiritual question, “What are you looking for?”

We may have been given an answer to who Jesus is when we were children that we may have accepted just fine at that time, and it may or not make sense or “work” for us now as adults. I find that we progressive/liberal Christians often seem to toss Jesus off to the side because we can’t tolerate or believe some of the doctrine the church has taught or shoved at us. I have met women who don’t want to follow the teachings of a man ---I have met men who don’t know what to do with Jesus either, he is either too wimpy or too other-worldly. Many of us are unsure how Jesus is relevant to us today.

We have let Christian conservatives steal Jesus from us and have put our focus on God. While there is nothing wrong with focusing on God – I grieve the loss of Jesus. I want us to retain the centrality of Jesus in our faith without needing to dictate what or who he has to be historically or spiritually.

I also believe that we can proclaim the centrality of Jesus in our life as a Christian community without needing to say that *he is the only and exclusive revelation of God*. (Borg) We can deepen our own Christian walk and respect and even learn from the journeys of others.

The more I study the amazing scholarly work that is available to us about the historical Jesus the more I come to embrace the amazing courage and message of Jesus and how his life helps me understand the kind of earth God dreams of and longs for.

The more I come to embrace the strange and unexplainable workings of prayer and contemplation – the more I sense that somehow the Spirit of Jesus – what I would call “the Christ of Jesus”, is still moving within and among us and can guide our own spiritual journeys in ways that are truly transformative.

This morning I would like to invite you into a brief time of reflection/conversation with a couple of questions ---

The first one is this:

What were the ways you thought of Jesus when you were a child?

The second question is this:

As you consider the various testimonies we heard in the Gospel today – Lamb of God --- Liberator---Rabbi – Wisdom teacher---Messiah – King---Son of God – one who embodies the very heart of God, who walks the talk...

Or any other names/characteristics you know about Jesus --- In what way(s) does Jesus speak or appeal to you as an adult today?

Close with litany/prayer: UCC Statement of Faith ---testimony NOT doctrine