

Glue

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John 1:29-42

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I feel like this scene was stolen a bit by Forrest Gump running out near Monument Valley when he decides he is finished with running after a couple of cross country treks. He has amassed a horde of followers who want to know what is next.... I can't remember his response or if he offers one, but it seems to be along the lines of Jesus' 'well what are you looking for?' Too bad we don't have Andrew and Simon Peter's letters home after their miraculous encounter with Jesus. Dear Mom and Dad, we heard John the Baptist refer to Jesus as the Lamb of God and so we dropped everything and followed him. Dear Andrew and Simon Peter, this Jesus person sounds exciting and miraculous and charismatic. What did he say and do that led you on this journey with him. Dear Mom and Dad, well, um, he just asked us what we were looking for and we asked him where he was going and where he was staying, and he said 'Come and See,' and so we went. Dear Andrew and Simon Peter, please tell me there is more. Hello? Andrew? Peter? There is something, shall we say, lacking in justification, for casting their lots with Jesus with so little to go on, other than this open ended question, 'What are you seeking.'

What are you seeking? But I guess it could be worse. In a stimulating piece in New York Magazine several years ago, political commentator Andrew Sullivan wrote or made the point that most of the time, our operating religion or de facto cultural religion in the late modern world we live in, is not really monotheism or even following Jesus per se, but rather a belief in 'a gradual ascent of mankind toward reason, peace, and prosperity.' He describes our effective religion this way: 'we have constructed a capitalist system that turns individual selfishness into a collective asset and showers us with earthly goods; we have leveraged science for our own health and comfort. Our ability to extend this material bonanza to more and more people is how we define progress; and progress is what we call meaning.'¹ A world where everyone's needs and wants are taken care of and we are moving forward and always making progress. According to Sullivan, much of the time, that is really all the religion we need or want. Several years ago before his own moral fall, the comedian Louis CK was trying to explain the phenomenon of texting and driving and the increased spike in accidents where people had accidents while texting...why, he wondered aloud, were so many people willing to risk their lives and have an accident or hurt someone severely texting on our phone. His explanation was that we are so afraid of being alone or ever having to deal with an existential moment or the meaning of life or feel the pain of loneliness, that we are willing to text and drive and even risk an accident if it keeps us from having to ever

¹ Andrew Sullivan, 'America's New Religions,' in *New York Intelligencer*, December 7, 2018.

dealing with our own loneliness or have an existential moment. Andrew Sullivan backs this theory up reminding us that ‘our world tries extremely hard to protect us from the sort of existential’ questions and discussions of what life is for and what the good life is, by surrounding us with ‘Netflix, air-conditioning, sex apps, Alexa, kale, Pilates, Spotify, Twitter...they’re all designed to create a world in which we rarely get a second to confront ultimate meaning—until a tragedy occurs, a death happens, or a diagnosis strikes.’²

Jesus and the direction of his life is not just frustrating because it is not well defined nor do we get an immediate cost-benefits analysis here in John or even much of an explanation of what it is going to entail. No discussion of wants and needs at all, much less any promises that they will all be taken care of and covered. But I also I think Jesus places a very different emphasis and point on life than a sense of unbroken progress, success, or even satisfying all needs and desires. It is interesting to me how little is said about Jesus’ trajectory and also how little purposeful movement happens. Jesus is not going places and ascending the ladder of success. If anything, he seems to move circularly or at least spirally. Here in John, two days in a row, he seems to be walking the same path and going the same way. He does not offer a captivating or inspirational speech. He does not seem to be on a well-defined path and moving on up trajectory. In fact, from one day to the next in our passage not much happens, other than Jesus walking by and John the Baptist announcing, ‘Behold the Lamb of God.’ Jesus’ pace is a different pace. Jesus’ cares are different cares. And Jesus questions, ‘what are you looking for,’ have a way of helping us see how different what we are looking for becomes in relationship to him. It’s like he is asking us that question to go ahead and help us to see that our hope for progress alone or success or the fulfillment of all our wants and desires may have little to do with following Jesus and may even distract us from his presence in this world and in our lives. Especially in the urgency of the moment.

During some years of some rather lackluster academic performance, let us say roughly in my middle school years, I remember a parent asking me whether there were ever times that I just loved learning or education just for itself; not for the grade or the parental approval on the report card or to get into college or get a job or some other utilitarian motive. But are there ever moments where you just enjoy it as an end in itself. I distinctively remember looking at the person throwing this hypothesis out there as if they had three eyes and full of misplaced sentiments, but I wonder if following Jesus is a bit like such an endeavor. Kind of like the Last Judgment scene, not being so much a dividing of the house between all the good people over here and all the bad ones over there, but more of conversation, if this is what you believed and thought was so important, why weren’t you more joyful, why didn’t you follow the consequences of its meaning in every aspect of your life and your world? Why did you treat it like a checklist or a project or a needs assessment? One of the reasons Christian community exists and we don’t just all follow Jesus on our

² Andrew Sullivan, ‘America’s New Religions,’ in *New York Intelligencer*, December 7, 2018.

own, is because we can tend to wants and needs on our own, we can consume on our own and determine what we like and don't like, but the God who seeks us and in whom we seek until our restless hearts find their rest, does not let us rest or find peace on our own, but only in the life we share together. The meaning is baked into the community.

Just as it is hard to use direct words to describe where following Jesus is going to lead us, I think it is also hard to describe what difference this meaning makes in our lives or in the life of the community. But here's one. Several weeks ago in conversation with a new elder in this congregation, we were discussing what difference being part of a Christian community made in our lives. This was not a profound difference but not a trivial one either. We both acknowledged that we often care too much about the outcome of a sporting event and made even allow it to affect our mood and perspective. We might have a child who is struggling in one form or one another and let our own anxieties about it inflate it and give it a life of its own. We might be overcome by the politics or the news we watch religiously and believe that frames all reality. We might be struggling with an illness or a personal demon and can't see past it. And then we come to church and we see people sitting with us who might be both making a joyful noise, but also carrying their share of life's burdens, whether it be grieving a spouse or a child or a tough diagnosis or a bend in the journey of life that they did not anticipate, and we realize that we are part of their lives and belong to them and are called to lift up our hearts or remember each other in our prayers or offer a cup of cold water or help shoulder a burden. And it may be a small thing, it may be a silent thing, it may be a presence that is hard to detect. But it makes us more human, it gives us meaning, and helps us to see the glue Christ is in our lives and in our life together, not always that concerned with the procedures of where we are going or the details and attainment of progress at every turn, but finding instead that our lives are less about collecting experiences and more about finding meaning and offering others a life shot through with such meaning through Jesus Christ our Lord.

What are you seeking? What are we seeking? I wonder if that is not a similar question that goes all the way back to the garden in Genesis, when God asks the first humans, 'where are you?' Trying to become something other than the gift of our humanity, perhaps. Trying to chase or become divine. To be like God. But right from the beginning, here in John, we find that, God did not create us to become divine, but to become fully human and flourish as God's creatures, aware of our limitations, in need of relationships, accepting of our lack of completion. Strangely that is how we will find meaning in this life rather than chasing and trying to fill every need, want, and desire, even the noble ones. And it is when our needs are frayed or our lives are splintering, that a god who only knows how to give more goods and comforts seems painfully inept and out of touch. And the Lamb of God, who seems so directionless, non-linear, and ineffective, gives us purpose and hope beyond the immediate crisis or the instant success, following him, being challenged by him, finding meaning through him until his kingdom comes.