

What are you looking for?

We know that Jesus was big on asking questions. I love reflecting on the statistic that Jesus apparently asked 307 different questions in the gospels. Of the 183 questions he was asked, he answered three. This master teacher, followed by many and varied folks, did his amazing work by asking questions and telling ridiculous stories (parables) that angered most of the religious establishment and puzzled even those students and followers with whom he spent most of his time.

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It's said that this is the first recorded question Jesus asked his disciples. In our Gospel reading today, he notices two of John's people following him, after John had told them this was the man he'd been talking about. The Lamb of God. They were curious enough to walk behind him, but not sure enough of themselves to just walk up to him and start talking. So, Jesus turned to them and stopped them in their tracks, probably shocking them a bit. It's an open-ended question, and although we can't know the tone of voice he used, I'm guessing it wasn't too hostile. Their seemingly flustered response was not what I'd hope to say given the same circumstances – it almost sounds like it was the first innocuous thing they could think of was – *“where are you staying?”* A little bit like, *“Been in town long?”* or *“How do you like this weather?”*

We could, however, read their response differently. After all, they started it with the word “Rabbi” meaning they already knew Jesus to be a teacher. He came with an unbelievably strong recommendation from their teacher, John the Baptizer.

Writer and pastor Jo Ann Taylor believes this about their response:

“...this means more than, “what’s your current address?” They are really asking, “Teacher, what is it like to abide with you? Is there room for us in your life? Can we come live where you live? Will you teach us? If you are who John says you are, we want to spend every possible moment in your presence. Where are you abiding, so we can come abide with you?”

Perhaps the two men following Jesus that day had a special revelation, an ah-ha moment when they were able to recognize something of God right in front of them. An Epiphany. We are in the season of Epiphany just now, and we are invited by this season to open our eyes and see what may be revealed. Pastor Taylor continues:

“And Jesus invites them to “come and see.” He invites them immediately into his life. He does this with the understanding that they may choose not to follow. Once they’ve seen his accommodations and had a taste of his teaching, they may not want to stay. But his invitation is open anyway. Come, and see.”

The invitation, then and now, is not to a party or a special dinner. It's not an invitation to a guaranteed place of honor or a highly praised job. Jesus invited those two curious men, and invites us today, to partake in community living for the good of the world. It's an invitation to be more fully open to the teachings of Jesus, and an invitation to more fully identify ourselves as his followers.

Tomorrow is the birthday of the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King. He would have been 94 years old but was killed at the age of 40. He, too, ministered to his people in ways that were unsettling to some and infuriating to many. When he was 26 years old, he gave his first speech about freedom, a speech that was truly about our identity as Christians.

This was in 1955, when the Montgomery bus boycott was just days old, and when a 14-year-old Emmett Till had been murdered only 3 months before. The leaders of the bus boycott had organized a gathering to support the boycott, and asked Reverend King to give a motivational speech, hoping he'd simply tell them to stay off the busses til the companies gave in and let black people sit wherever they wanted.

However, like Jesus, Martin Luther King did not limit himself to what was expected. Lutheran theologian Rev. Dr. Richard Lischer describes what King did instead.

What was expected from King was a motivational speech. Stay off the busses! But they got much more. Young Pastor King told them who they were. In his very first speech he said, We are followers of Jesus Christ. Given who we are, therefore, we will be free, because freedom is the essence of the gospel. But we will not achieve our freedom by hatred or violence. Then with a voice as clear as John the Baptist's he said, "Today we stand at the daybreak of freedom." Later, in the epidemic of black church bombings in the South, King and his associates would often rush to the scene of the crime. And there he, in his black preacher suit and dark tie with his KJV under his arm, would stride into to the still-smoldering foundation of the church and there in the ashes he would not hold a press conference or tweet; he would preach a sermon. It was his way of symbolizing the power of the Word of God over every attempt to silence it."

What Dr. King offered us (67 years ago) was nothing complicated or hard to understand. He wasn't a politician. He was a Christian language teacher, and the language he taught us was basic Christian testimony: In a few powerful strokes he taught us how to do justice and to temper it with the love of mercy. And in so doing, he told us who we are as a people. And to those of who resisted (and there were and are many), he told us who we might become."

The Gospel, the speeches of Martin Luther King, and many others – these have given us the dubious gift of questioning who we are and our place in the world. Written in King's Letter from Birmingham Jail is this challenge to change how we see and who we become:

"In a real sense all life is inter-related. All [humanity is] caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be."

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What comes with this question is also the realization that Jesus believes, assumes that we ARE looking. He doesn't leave a lot of room for the answer: I'm not looking for anything, thanks. All is well, I have everything I want and need and the world is fine just as it is. While we might want to turn our heads away sometimes from the sadness and pain in the world, we can't help but keep looking, seeking. In fact, it seems to me that when we turn our eyes from that which is ugly or difficult, we also turn our eyes from that which is good and loving and exhilarating. Jesus knows we are looking for...something. He doesn't ask IF we are looking, but for what. When we can sink into

that question and allow ourselves to “*come and see*” then we become more truly his followers and our best selves.

I’d like to invite you to close your eyes and imagine that in the very place we are now, where you are sitting, that Jesus is sitting next to you. Loving you and feeling just fine about you, as I know he does, he asks you, *What are you looking for?*

Take a few moments of silence and feel that question. Feel the truth of your answer – it’s yours, after all, and he already knows. It’s just such a gift to yourself to answer it. I’ll hold a little silence here.

Thank you. Now, if you’d like to, **without any expectation of an answer, knowing that being asked doesn’t mean you have to say anything at all**, turn to a person near you and quietly ask them that question. Let’s just hear the gift of this question from one another and take it in.

What are you looking for?

Remember that Jesus doesn’t ask IF we are looking, he knows we are. Inviting us to come and see, Jesus is opening a door to an understanding that is at once liberating and terrifying. Doctor King, and so many others brave enough to tell the truth about love and God and right action, knew there could be uncomfortable or dangerous consequences to this understanding. Speeches, marching, writing, demonstrating, organizing, building new relationships, tearing down old ways that don’t work...we hold ourselves accountable to the truths that everyone belongs, that we are loved beyond what we deserve, that death cannot triumph, **and that for all those reasons we must live up to our identity as Christians.**

What are you looking for?

Jesus isn’t sitting around waiting for us to invite him into our lives. Instead, Jesus invites us into his life. With his “come and see” Jesus, called by John the Lamb of God, includes **us in his** work.

Shortly before his death, they told Dr. King to quit marching. He replied by testifying,

“I don’t march because I like it; I march because I must. And because I’m a man. And because I am a child of God. Tell the truth and that’s when the trouble starts. I can’t know the shape of your trouble. I don’t know what the cost of your discipleship will be. / But I do know this: /John told the truth. /And so can we.”