

1 Corinthians 1:1-9 ~ John 1:35-42

What are you Looking For?

Second Sunday after Epiphany ~ Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday ~ January 15, 2023

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Introduction to Scripture:

We get to hear Jesus' first words again today. Last Sunday, you may recall, we heard his first words in Matthew. On this second Sunday after Epiphany, we're taking a brief leap out of Matthew, for a flash of vision, to see what we see about Jesus in the Gospel called John. John covers a staggering amount of time in that first chapter. You may recall that this gospel begins at the beginning of creation, "In the beginning was the Word" (John 1:1). The Word has now become flesh, in the form of Jesus, who has "moved into the neighborhood." He's all grown up, freshly baptized, and in John, it is not until the *next* day that the One called the "Word" actually utters a word.

That first word, that first sentence is not a statement. It is a question. It is directed at two of John the Baptist's disciples. One is identified as Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. The other is not named. Let's take that as an opening, for you and me, to insert ourselves into this scene. To let Jesus ask us this question today. As individuals, and as the Body of Christ we call FPC. Let us open the eyes of our hearts, let us "Come and See" what Jesus has to reveal to us in this reading of God's holy word as it is written in John 1:35-42.

Sermon:

"What are you looking for?" Did you hear it? That was the question that Jesus asked the two disciples that next day. His first utterance in the Gospel of John. I hear Jesus asking us that question today and every day. What are you looking for? What do you want? Why are we here? Every day we get up, maybe check the weather, get dressed, have breakfast, get to work or school or whatever we have planned for the day. But more often than not, we don't stop to ask this deeper question, the "why behind the what" that comprises our day. Until something happens that shakes us up. Or shakes our world.

Like when someone we love, dies. For the past two Saturdays, we have had two funerals here at FPC. Many of you have attended and also helped with both of them, for Dr. Don Mabeus a week ago, and for Amy Zais, yesterday. When we walk through the grief of saying goodbye to loved ones we are pushed to the precipice of these deeper questions. In the context of life and death and our short time on this earth, what are we doing that really matters. And why? What are we looking for?

Especially these past two weeks, I have been giving thanks to God for all of you, as Paul begins his 1st letter to the church in Corinth. For the diversity of your spiritual gifts so freely offered in surrounding these two families, and also helping our refugee family. I am also grateful to each of our hardworking committees and boards. Yes, there are even epiphanies at meetings here, from time to time. At the beginning of every committee and board meeting here at FPC, someone offers an opening devotion, meditation, or thought to help us prepare for the work at hand. This past week, at the beginning of a committee meeting, the person tasked with

providing the opening, started with this very question. Calling us to take a breath and ask “why” before we got into the “what” of the work at hand. I think we’re all better at the “what.” We’re more comfortable with it. We can see it, name it, check it off the list. But I hear Jesus calling us to begin with the “why.” And specifically here in church. When we come to church, what are we looking for?

I heard a great answer to this question in a piece read by another member of our church who shared it at two different meetings. It was written by by Rev. Kazimierz Bem, a UCC Pastor and author, he wrote: *The Church is the only place today where we can hear and talk about God, faith, and hope and they are not a caricature (as portrayed by the media) or a ruse (as performed by politicians). We are the last place in society where grace is not a name but a gift, the cross is not the sign of a scratched-out mistake on a written page but a symbol of a predestined act of love, communion is not a noun but a state of being, and where God is more than a feeling you get when you think of pink fluffy unicorns dancing on rainbows. The Church is the only place where we can talk about God, and more precisely, the God revealed to us in Christ Jesus Christ, his love shown for us, the life that he gave to us. It is the place where we realize our faith matters not just to us, but to all those around us whether we know them personally or not. The Church is the only place where words like truth, light, forgiveness, resurrection retain their true meaning.*ⁱ

At church, we open ourselves to what we need to see from *both* ends of the binoculars. And this work, like grief, is done better together. Today, on Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday, taking a page from the prophet, John the Baptist, I am choosing to step back that we may see Christ through the voice of the Rev. Dr. King. We may think of him only as a champion for the civil rights of African Americans. He was that certainly. But his concern was not only for his own people. As a preacher and a Christian he called for justice for all people. Anyone who is poor, marginalized, without voice or agency. His concern extended across the world to Vietnam and beyond. And he listened for the voice of Christ speaking through many faiths, not just our own.

It is striking how timely the themes of his writing are still today. The words we are about to hear were written in the 1960’s not long before he was assassinated in 1968. Let us listen now to his words, spoken by seven voices, interspersed with our own as we sing (sitting in our seats) stanzas (as directed) from the hymn #757 “Today We all are called to be Disciples.” And let us look and listen with the eyes of our hearts for how we are being called to continue the work of Christ on this earth, today.

**Words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (Jan. 15, 1929 – April 4, 1968)
interwoven with Hymn #757 “Today We All Are Called to Be Disciples”**

Reader #1 Kristy Johaneck

As long as there is poverty in the world I can never be rich, even if I have a billion dollars. As long as diseases are rampant and millions of people in this world cannot expect to live more than 28 or 30 years, I can never be healthy even if I just got a good checkup at Mayo Clinic. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the way our world is

made. No individual or nation can stand out boasting of being independent. We are interdependent.

Reader #2 Dolores Aue

Moral principles have lost their distinctiveness. For modern man, absolute right and absolute wrong are a matter of what the majority is doing. Right and wrong are relative to likes and dislikes and the customs of a particular community. We have unconsciously applied Einstein's theory of relativity, which properly described the physical universe, to the moral and ethical realm. ***Let us remain seated and sing together the first stanza of #757 "Today We Are Called to be Disciples."***

Reader #3 Josette Kaiser

The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy. The true neighbor will risk his position, his prestige, and even his life for the welfare of others. In dangerous valleys and hazardous pathways, he will lift some bruised and beaten brother to a higher and more noble life.

Reader #4 Mark Nelson

There is so much frustration in the world because we have relied on gods rather than God. We have genuflected before the god of science only to find that it has given us the atomic bomb, producing fears and anxieties that science can never mitigate. We have worshiped the god of pleasure only to discover that thrills play out and sensations are short-lived. We have bowed before the god of money only to learn that there are such things as love and friendship that money cannot buy and that in a world of possible depressions, stock market crashes, and bad business investments, money is a rather uncertain deity. These transitory gods are not able to save or bring happiness to the human heart. Only God is able. It is faith in him that we must rediscover. ***Now, let's sing the second stanza.***

Reader #5 Pastor Laurie

I've seen too much hate to want to hate, myself, and I've seen hate on the faces of too many sheriffs, too many White Citizens Councilors, and too many Klansmen of the South to want to hate, myself; and every time I see it, I say to myself, hate is too great a burden to bear. Somehow, we must be able to stand up before our most bitter opponents and say: "We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will and we will still love you. We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws and abide by the unjust system, because non cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good, and so throw us in jail and we will still love you.

Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and, as difficult as it is, we will still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities at the midnight hour and drag us out on some wayside road and leave us half-dead as you beat us, and we will still love you. Send your propaganda agents around the country and make it appear that we are not fit, culturally

and otherwise, for integration, but we'll still love you. But, be assured that we'll wear you down by our capacity to suffer, and one day we will win our freedom. We will not only win freedom for ourselves, we will so appeal to your heart and conscience that we will win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory. If there is to be peace on earth and good will toward men, we must finally believe in the ultimate morality of the universe, and believe that all reality hinges on moral foundations. ***Please join me in singing the third stanza.***

Reader #6 Janet Wolfe

I've decided that I'm going to do battle for my philosophy. You ought to believe something in life, believe that thing so fervently that you will stand up with it till the end of your days. I can't make myself believe that God wants me to hate. I'm tired of violence. And I'm not going to let my oppressor dictate to me what method I must use. We have a power, power that can't be found in Molotov cocktails, but we do have a power. Power that cannot be found in bullets and guns, but we do have a power. It is a power as old as the insights of Jesus of Nazareth and as modern as the techniques of Mahatma Gandhi. ***Finally, let's sing the fourth stanza.***

Reader #7 Linda Hitchman

So I say to you, seek God and discover him and make him a power in your life. Without him all of our efforts turn to ashes and our sunrises into darkest nights. Without him, life is a meaningless drama with the decisive scenes missing. But, with Him, we are able to rise from the fatigue of despair to the buoyance of hope. With him we are able to rise from the midnight of desperation to the daybreak of joy. St. Augustine was right—we were made for God and we will be restless until we find rest in him.

Love yourself, if that means rational, healthy, and moral self-interest. You are commanded to do that. That is the length of life. Love your neighbor as you love yourself. You are commanded to do that. That is the breadth of life. But never forget that there is a first and even greater commandment, "Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and all thy soul and all thy mind." This is the height of life. And when you do this you live the complete life."

Concluding Prayer:

*O most merciful Redeemer, Friend and sibling;
May we come and see you more clearly,
Know you more dearly
And follow you more nearly,
Day by Day. Amen.*

ⁱ https://reflections.yale.edu/article/audacious-odysseys-charting-future-theological-education/keep-teaching-keep-worshipping?fbclid=IwAR2RpkctVnPG1SVzVbW4dLrMxXHc72SHwvUBUBXpDG3_SuhXKCagoegkRYw