
A QUESTION AND AN INVITATION

She showed up in church on Sunday morning in her black leather, biker jacket looking a little bit lost.

- Based on her clothes, piercings, and tattoos, she clearly did not fit into that congregational setting.
 - I introduced myself and welcomed her.
- She said, “I had to come today because GOD invited me on your sign.”
 - I couldn’t even remember what the marquee sign in front of the church said, so I checked after the service was over.
 - It read, “LOOKING FOR A SIGN? THIS IS IT.”

She later told me that she had been feeling that something was missing in her life but she didn’t know what it was—that her life seemed to be filled with questions and no answers.

- But when she drove by and saw the sign, it was like GOD was inviting her to come.

A question and an invitation.

- In the Gospel of John, that’s how JESUS’ ministry and mission starts.
 - And I find both intriguing and helpful.

First, the question.

- JESUS’ first words in John’s Gospel are not a sermon, or a command, or a proclamation about the coming of the kingdom, as happens in the other Gospels.
 - When John’s followers pursue JESUS, HE asks them, “What do you want?”
 - His question in the original Greek is much richer:
 - “What are you looking for?” or,
 - “What are you seeking? or,
 - “What do you hope to find?”
 - We might expand that to:
 - “What do you need?” or,
 - “What do you long for?” or,
 - “What is it you are hoping for?”
- These are great questions, but ones we rarely ask or try to answer in the church, much less in our conversations with folks in our daily lives.

As I’ve reflected on why I rarely think to ask such questions here, I wondered if it might not be due to the consumer culture in which we live.

Actually, commercials and advertisements ask questions all the time, but when they do, it’s not really a question.

- It’s a set-up for the answer they’ve already prepared.
 - “What do you need?” quickly becomes, “We know what you need: a new pair of running shoes, or a more expensive car, or whiter teeth, or to lose fifteen pounds.”
 - And then we’re told that we can have that thing that we surely must need for a price.

I know that you know better than that.

- We know that true wealth is counting all the blessings we enjoy that money cannot buy.
 - But message after message to the contrary can wear us down and push us to look for substitutes.
 - And this is all the more true for those who do not have a meaningful relationship with our LORD.

That's why a question might be a worthwhile place to begin the new year for ourselves, and to include in our conversations with those who are not affiliated with a church.

- It might serve us and them well to ask this question:
 - "What do you really need, long for, or hope for?"

And a question we might ask as a congregation at the beginning of this year is how might we offer those things?

- Might what is needed be silence in a world of so much noise?
- Could it be a place to serve others in a world that encourages putting yourself first?
- Perhaps some sense of hope and courage when the headlines inspire fear and despair?
- Maybe a Sabbath rest in a 24/7 world where relentless busy-ness has become a badge of honor and is regularly substituted for meaningful activity and necessary rest?
- Or might what is needed simply be a place for people to belong in an individualistic and often lonely culture?

Those of you who participate on social media may recognize that our electronic communication devices are both helpful and harmful.

- They are helpful in that they connect us with people who are far away.
- But they are harmful because they often isolate us from those who are close by as we pay more attention to the thing in our hand or on our desk, than the person who is sitting right across from us.

What is it that we and the people we know most need, and how might our congregation provide it?

- What is one purpose around which to organize our efforts, one hallmark of this community to lift up that others may see who we are and what we offer that can meet a deeply felt need that they have.
- No church can do everything, of course, but I wonder if we might find one thing on which to focus in the coming year?
 - As I've been thinking about this, I've wondered if that one thing might be simply letting people know that this is a place to belong.
 - Give that some thought this week.

The disciples reply to JESUS' question by asking where HE is staying.

- Again, the translation is a little weak, as they are really asking where HE is dwelling, abiding, or remaining.
 - What they want to know is where can they come to simply be with HIM.
 - And before looking at the specifics of what JESUS does say, I think it is also important to note what JESUS does not say.
- JESUS doesn't give an answer, directive, or command.
 - Instead, HE offers to them an invitation.

Invitations are inherently relational, and I think it is worthwhile for us to recognize that.

- Because when people come with their questions about faith or religion, they're often less interested in a particular answer or specific information, but rather are seeking a relationship that allows them to explore those questions with someone else.
 - People with questions often want to know what others think, at least as much as the answer to the question.
- It also reminds us that we don't have to have all the answers, but simply be ready to offer an invitation, and through that invitation, offer ourselves—our commitment to be with them in conversation regardless where the questions and conversation may lead.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor who oversaw an underground seminary in Germany prior to WWII when seminaries had been outlawed by the government.

- During that time he wrote a book called *Life Together* that explores the hallmarks of Christian community.

- In that book he writes:

The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them. Just as love to GOD begins with listening to HIS Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them. It is GOD'S love for us that HE not only gives us HIS Word but also lends us HIS ear.

So, it is HIS work that we do for our brother when we learn to listen him. Christians, especially ministers, so often think that they must always contribute something when they are in the company of others, that this is the one service they have to render. They forget that listening can be a greater service than speaking.

Many people are looking for an ear that will listen. They do not find it among Christians, because Christians are talking when they should be listening. But he who can no longer listen to his brother will soon be no longer listening to GOD either; he will be doing nothing but prattle in the presence of GOD too.

JESUS' invitation to these future disciples is quite simple: "Come and see."

- It is non-threatening.
- It is clear.
 - And, again, it is inherently relational.
- It is something that any of us could say.
 - And that, in turn, invites us to image evangelism—in a different way.

Evangelism doesn't have to be intrusive or abrasive or unwelcome, though I suspect many of you have experienced it that way.

- Evangelism is simply offering a clear, non-threatening, relational invitation to others who are seeking something more than that which the culture has to offer: "Come and see."

People today worry about the decline of church attendance.

- I believe this decline will end when a critical mass—and it doesn't even have to be a majority—just a critical mass of our people can do two things:
 - First, that they know why they value participation in the church, and
 - second, that they can share that with others.

Take some time this week to think and even to write down what it is that makes coming here important to you and worthwhile for you so that you might be able to tell someone else.

- Understand, though, that the goal of this is not to get more people into church, or stop the decline of congregational participation,
 - but to simply invite people into the joy and life we have experienced in CHRIST.

And as you think about doing this—about inviting others to come and see, recognize that it is not just we who extend that invitation.

- It is GOD in CHRIST working through us to invite others to an abundant life that is so much richer than anything we can buy.

- And just as importantly, it is GOD in CHRIST inviting us to that same life.
- Even if we wrestle to name or understand or express our faith,
- even if we struggle to share our faith with others,
- even when we wonder if we believe at all,
 - JESUS is still there,
 - still asking what we most deeply need,
 - still inviting us to come and see,
 - and still determined to give us more than we can possibly image.
 - JESUS simply will not give up on any of us...ever!
 - And if you're not sure of that, then all I have to say to you is this: "Come and see."