

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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What Are You Looking For?

John 1:35-51

This is the time of the year when we celebrate with those who have completed a significant step in their formal education. On Thursday evening, the children in our day care ministry stood up here and proudly sang the Veggie Tales tune, "I Am a Promise": "I am a promise / I am a possibility / I am a promise with a capital 'P' / I am a great big bundle of potentiality / And I am learnin' to hear God's voice / And I am tryin' to make the right choice / I am a promise to be anything God wants me to be."

Jump ahead another 15 plus years, and those same boys and girls will be standing on another platform, receiving rounds of applause and a high school or college diploma. Though they probably won't be singing, "I Am a Promise" at that graduation ceremony, in some respects the lyrics will still apply. Still learnin' to hear God's voice. Still tryin' to make the right choice. Whether you're at the preschool or the post-graduate level, or somewhere in between, the key is listening to the Lord and following his call.

In this morning's Scripture passage from John, Jesus isn't handing out diplomas. Instead, he's distributing invitations. In this case, it's an invitation to discipleship. Jesus is conducting admissions interviews to get more acquainted with those who are interested in coming under his instruction. Some of these prospects have thus far been students of John the Baptist, who himself realizes that a course of study far superior to his is now being offered. So John doesn't hesitate to point his followers in the direction of Jesus. John is a great preacher and teacher, but only Jesus can save the world. In fact, one of the ways John measures the success of his own ministry is by how many of his adherents leave him and move on to become devotees of Jesus.

That's precisely what happens in our text. A couple of John's disciples start following Jesus. Not in the sense of being enrollees with a full course load, but just hanging around Jesus, observing his teaching style, watching how he interacts with those who have attached themselves to him. But soon there comes a point where Jesus wants to know more about them. Today's text puts it this way: "Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, "What do you want?"

"What do you want?" At one level, the question functions in a very literal way in the story line. Jesus has noticed these two individuals hovering nearby for a while, and wants to know more about their interests and intentions. But as with so many other words and statements in John's Gospel, Jesus' question goes much deeper. "What do you want?" is another way of asking, "What are you seeking by following me?" "What are you after?" Or, "What are you looking for?"

Interesting that the first question Jesus puts to these would-be disciples isn't primarily about their prior studies. He doesn't ask them what level of expertise or specialization they've reached in their exploration of theology. He doesn't want to know how much Scripture they've mastered or who their favorite authors are. He doesn't ask them to recite their creed or to state, in five minutes or less, their personal story of faith. What they

know, and what they believe, certainly matter. But first and foremost, what matters is the desire and direction of their heart. Jesus asks, "What do you want? What are you looking for by following me?"

I like the way James K. A. Smith has put it when he says, "Jesus is a teacher who doesn't just inform our intellect but forms our very loves. He isn't content to simply deposit new ideas into your mind; he is after nothing less than your wants, your loves, your longings."¹ "What do you want?" asks Jesus. "What are you looking for?" Maybe this also helps explain why, by the time we reach the end of John's Gospel, and Jesus is in the process of restoring his errant disciple Peter, Jesus doesn't ask, "So Peter, tell me, how much knowledge have you accumulated during your time with me?" Instead, Jesus asks, "Peter, do you love me?" (21:15-17). From beginning to end, being a follower of Jesus is about learning to love Jesus, and to want what Jesus wants.

Graduation season is a time when students get challenged to think about what they want in life. This challenge often comes in the form of a commencement speaker whose job is to impart wisdom and stir the aspirations of the graduates. But sometimes this ends up turning the students inward on themselves rather than outward in service to the world. As author and columnist David Brooks has written:

Commencement speakers are always telling young people to follow their passions. Be true to yourself. This is a vision of life that begins with self and ends with self. But people on the road to [character growth] do not find their vocations by asking, what do I want from life? They ask, what is life asking of me? How can I match my intrinsic talent with one of the world's deep needs?²

A life that reveals God's love for a needy world is a life that faces and engages deep and enduring questions. And no question is more abiding than the one Jesus asks of us if we intend to follow him: What do you want? What are you looking for?

Notice that in our text, those who want to follow Jesus answer his question with a question of their own. "Where are you staying?" (v. 38b). Here's another case where words in John's Gospel operate at more than one level. These potential disciples want more than just an address that they can type into Google Maps so as to track Jesus' location. The Greek term translated as to "stay" also means to "dwell" or "abide." It's one of John's favorite words. He often uses it to describe the relationship that God, Jesus, and the Spirit share with one another and with believers. God abides in Jesus. Jesus abides in God. Through the Spirit, believers abide in Jesus and he abides in them. This language of abiding or dwelling conveys the bond or intimate relationship that believers have with Jesus.

"Where are you staying?" they ask Jesus. Note that he doesn't answer their question directly. Rather, he issues an invitation that will allow them to find the answer for themselves. "Come and see," says Jesus. So instead of handing these prospective followers a course packet that contains all the essential information they'll need, up front, including a synopsis of his identity and mission, Jesus simply extends an offer for them take the first small steps of faith, and to see him as someone who's worth getting to know better. And John summarizes their response this way: "So they went and saw where he was staying, and spent that day with him" (v. 39b).

That's how they began their journey of discipleship. They desired to know more about who Jesus was and where he might take them. In her book, *For the Time Being*, Annie Dillard writes:

In Highland New Guinea, now Papua New Guinea, a British district officer named James Taylor contacted a mountain village, above three thousand feet, whose tribe had never seen any trace of the outside world. It was the 1930s. He described the courage of one villager. One day, on the airstrip hacked from the mountains near his village, this man cut vines and lashed himself to the fuselage of Taylor's airplane shortly before it took off. He explained calmly to his loved ones that, no matter what happened to him, he had to see where it came from.³

In a way, that was part of what these two followers of Jesus, and other disciples to whom John will soon introduce us, wanted. They wanted to know not just where Jesus was staying but most of all where he had come from. Of course we as readers have the advantage of hearing John's poetic prologue, which includes the declaration, "We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (1:14b). So we know that Jesus the Son has come from the Father, to reveal the Father's saving love for the world, for each of us.

But no matter when and how you first heard that, or when and how you first believed that, if you're a follower of Jesus you're always supposed to be moving deeper and deeper into his invitation, "Come and see." It's not an offer that promises all the answers up front. It's not a summons to get yourself completely straightened out and cleaned up before you take that first step of faith. It's not a call to step into the Lord's lecture hall and be filled with increasing quantities of religious information neatly organized on PowerPoint slides. No, "Come and see" is an invitation to seek, and search, and ask, and pray. It's an offer that welcomes and encourages curiosity, discovery, and exploration of who Jesus is and what eternal life, kingdom of God life, is all about. It's a summons to come and be with Jesus, not as a casual acquaintance, but as the one who knows you better than you know yourself, and who longs to be known by you. This living invitation, "Come and see," isn't just a call to be more informed, but to be transformed by letting Jesus take your longings, your desires, your hopes, and your heart, and shape them according to what he wills and what he wants, for you and for the world.

At the beginning of this sermon, I mentioned the commencement program for the children in our day care ministry. During the first few years of their lives, they've probably asked more questions than any of us could count. In fact, you've probably noticed that children often specialize in questions. It's an essential part of how they come to discover and know the world in which they live, and the people who live in it with them. Writer Ralph B. Smith once made an observation that children ask roughly 125 questions per day, while adults ask about six questions per day. So somewhere between childhood and adulthood, we lose 119 questions per day.

Questions are crucial when it comes to engaging with others and engaging the world. That's one of the reasons why the opening section of today's Scripture passage contains a lively exchange of queries. Jesus and some prospective followers go back and forth over the possibility of discipleship. So when it comes to your own discipleship, and the state of your relationship with the Son, what's happening? Are you daily responding to Jesus' call to "Come and see"? Are you consistently and actively engaged with Jesus in the process of knowing him and loving him? Are you developing a deeper desire to be with him and to have him dwell in you? How are you responding to Jesus as he continues to ask you, "What are you looking for?" "What do you want by following me?"

¹ James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016) Kindle Edition.

² David Brooks, "The Moral Bucket List." *The New York Times* (April 11, 2015).

³ Annie Dillard, *For the Time Being* (New York: Knopf, 1999) 204.