Where Jesus Is Staying—Jn 1:29-42

“What are you looking for?” Such a simple question. We’re all looking for something. Typically, it is not salvation—or we don’t think of it in such grand terms, anyway. We’re all looking for something. What are you looking for? Some of you can answer that right away, without hesitation: I’m looking for my lost health, my lost strength! I’m looking for prosperity, financial peace of mind! I’m looking for security, safety in this uncertain world, this world so different from the one I came into decades ago! I’m looking for my glasses!

If we were to push a bit farther, probably somewhere down the list of what you’re looking for we would also find wisdom, hope, faith, compassion, forgiveness, and maybe even love. We’re never especially ready to admit that we are looking for love, because it makes us sound so weak, so vulnerable, so needy. My conviction is that we all know, at the bottom of our hearts—the foundation of our hearts—that we are all looking for love, though we’ll rarely admit it to ourselves, let alone to any other human being. Maybe we can admit it to God, though. Maybe we can admit it to Jesus.

It’s a simple question that Jesus asks, “What are you looking for?” His would-be disciples either do not hear him or they mishear him: they do not answer the question Jesus asks. Do you recall what they say to Jesus, those first two would-be followers? “Rabbi, where are you staying?” (1:38b).

They don’t even answer his question! Instead, they pose a question of their own. What they say to him seems to have very little if any connection to what he has just said to them. Don’t you find that a little odd? I mean, John the Baptist has just said in the hearing of these disciples, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” (1:36b). They could at least have said to Jesus, “Rabbi, we are looking for the Lamb of God,” or “Rabbi, we heard that you are the Lamb of God.” If they had to ask a question, they could at least have asked, “Rabbi, are you the Lamb of God, as John says?”

What is it to be the Lamb of God? John had said, the day before, upon seeing Jesus in the distance, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (1:29b). If those disciples had been there and listening that day—and it doesn’t seem listening is their strong suit—they may well have wondered what John meant. Now you and I, living after these events, after the Resurrection, living as we do in the glorious light of Easter, we are aware that Jesus takes away the sin of the world, somehow or other, through the events surrounding Easter. I hope that, reading the Bible, you have perceived that none of Jesus’ disciples seem to get it, seem to hear clearly or understand what it is that Jesus is saying to them. This is shocking in itself: it’s as if these twelve apostles who spent such an intensive period of their lives alongside Jesus spent that formative time preoccupied with themselves, their own worries, their own concerns,

their own hopes, than they did listening to the words, the teaching of the one they call rabbi, teacher. Having spent a few years teaching myself, I can guarantee you at least this much: you won’t learn very much if you don’t try to listen to the teacher.

In this life, we fear appearing vulnerable, and we are almost hopelessly preoccupied with our own cares, our own hurts, our own problems.

The lack of listening on the part of these first, would-be disciples is a little disturbing for another reason: of all people, they should have understood what was meant by a lamb, for as faithful Jews, making animal sacrifice at least once a year was part of their religion, part of their way of life, part of their world. Goats and pigeons were common sacrifices; occasionally the wealthy and important would sacrifice a bull. Lambs, also, were commonly sacrificed.

Jesus asks, “What are you looking for?” Such a simple question. Those two either didn’t hear him, didn’t think the question merited a reply, or else they honestly did not know how to answer that question, because they did not really know what they were looking for, or else they couldn’t quite put it in words. Have you ever felt unhappy and dissatisfied, without any notion of what would make you happy, what would make you satisfied, without any clear perception of why you were unhappy, why you were dissatisfied?

Maybe those would-be followers were ashamed to answer because they thought the answer would make them look foolish in the eyes of this man whom John has pointed out to them, this man who, as John tells them, has a unique and extraordinary part to play in God’s plans for His people. Rabbi, we want to be wise. Rabbi, we want to be holy. Rabbi, we want to live. Rabbi, we want to know God. Could you admit such things to one another?

Up to this point in the Gospel according to St. John, we have heard of the cosmic mystery of Christ, the Son who became incarnate and walked among us, and we have seen him, there at a distance; alongside John and his disciples, we have seen Jesus, walking among us, but at a distance. This morning, we hear the first words Jesus speaks aloud in the Gospel according to St. John: “What are you looking for?” Those are the first words Jesus addresses to us. That’s the question that precedes everything else we hear in this account of the Gospel. And that is the first question Jesus asks each of us, asks me, asks you: “What are you looking for?” That question is the first question, and precedes everything else.

I guess our answer depends in large part upon who is doing the asking. If you were to ask a neighbor, “What are you looking for?” he or she would probably look at you sort of funny. We don’t typically have such “deep” conversations with our neighbors, maybe because, typically, we don’t know our neighbors well enough to ask, or we don’t want to know them well enough to ask. That’s a pity! Sometimes, we have such conversations with our friends, though not as often as would be truly good for our friendships, I think. Even when we ask a friend, “What are you looking for,” the response is likely to be something simple, mundane, even: I’m looking for renewed hope; I’m looking for peace; I’m looking for happiness; I’m looking to feel better. Mundane and simple, you see, does not mean unimportant. Your friend is not likely to answer you by saying, “I’m looking for life” or “I’m looking for holiness,” or “I’m looking for God.” At the bare, wounded and vulnerable heart’s core, though, that’s precisely what they are saying.

That question, beloved, “What are you looking for?” can open up some painful places. No wonder those would-be disciples don’t answer Jesus, but instead act as if they hadn’t even heard him. Try asking that question yourself, sometime. Try asking a loved one, a friend, even a neighbor, “What are you looking for?” If the other person doesn’t laugh you off, or look at you funny, if she or he takes you up on your offer, you might be surprised by what you hear.

You see, that question that Jesus asks is an offer, an invitation: open yourself to me. Open your heart to me. Open your spirit to me. Open your life to me. What are you looking for? We’re used to being closed off and to closing ourselves off. We don’t like to be vulnerable around anyone—maybe especially around God! Many of you have learned through hard lessons that most people seem to have no real interest in others. They don’t really listen, and they don’t really care. When we’ve tried to share our hurt, to open up about our burdens, we’re met with a cold response, with indifference: with some difficulty and fear, we dig a hole through our own wall of closed-off-ness only to discover, on the other side, the closed-off wall of the other person. We’re left feeling hurt and bitter, and we resolve never to try that experiment again!

Brothers and sisters, the invitation has to come to us; we cannot force the invitation. Sisters and brothers, the invitation does come to us. He comes to us. Jesus comes to us, asking that question: “What are you looking for?” We’re just like those would-be disciples: we act as if we did not hear the question. We respond as though Jesus had asked us something else, anything else but that question. We ask a question, as though Jesus hadn’t said anything to us. “Where are you staying?” they ask him. What does that question have to do with what Jesus has just said? just asked them??

Beloved, the heart is a mystery. So much seems hidden there, hidden away from others, hidden away, even, from ourselves. We can see so much there, if we learn how to look, how to listen. We’ll find the key there, hidden yet in plain sight. Jesus knows that, knows that better than anyone who has ever walked upon this earth, knows it better than anyone who will ever walk upon this earth again until he comes again. Jesus knows the heart, our heart, your heart.

Jesus accommodates those would-be followers. He answers them, when they ask, “where are you staying.” “Come and see,” he tells them. That’s an invitation. Jesus offers them an invitation whether he asks them what they are looking for or says to them come and see. Both are invitations. I hope you hear that. I hope you hear that invitation, because it is an open invitation for you. It is also an open invitation for your loved ones, your friends, your neighbors, even strangers whom God brings across your path!

Jesus knows the heart, and he invites you to grow in learning about the heart. Jesus showed those would-be followers the physical place where he was staying at that time. That’s not where Jesus is staying, though. They went on to Cana. They went on to Capernaum. They went on to Nazareth. They went on to Bethany and on to Jerusalem. He went on to a cross on a hill far away, and into a tomb in the rock. Sisters and brothers, Jesus was not staying in any of those places. The Son of God did not come to stay in any of those places, to live in any of those places. That is not where Jesus lived. That is not where Jesus lives. Do you know where Jesus is staying, where Jesus lives? Come and see. And bring a friend.

And to Jesus Christ, who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests of his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever.