

Second Sunday after the Epiphany—Year A
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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What are you looking for?

I was leaving a well-known department store the other day, after having bought some socks, and the signs on the doors as I was leaving left me a little puzzled. They said, “come again soon to save.” And I thought: that is a lie. I don't leave this place with more money than I had coming in. I leave this place with less money than I had coming in. So, in every sense that matters, I have not saved; I have spent. So, by all means, feel free to thank me for shopping, but please don't tell me lies.

That episode got me thinking about the function of a sign like that. Was it supposed to give me a little rush? A little sprinkle of dopamine into my brain to feel good that I had accomplished something? Because that's a bit offensive. Getting 20% off a pair of socks is not an accomplishment. Loving your enemies is an accomplishment. Praying for those who hate or persecute you is an accomplishment. Let's not confuse a New Years sale at a department store with the heart of Christian discipleship. The sign kind of ticked me off. I felt my emotions being manipulated. What was it trying to get me to feel?

As you can see, going shopping with a priest (me) really is not all that fun. I wouldn't recommend it.

I believe that the human condition at the start of 2017 in our country and our city comes with some pretty extraordinary problems. I believe we are overworked; overtired; over stimulated. I believe we are over medicated, over addicted and over separated from the stories and concerns of our neighbors. I believe that every sign on every corner of every merchant's street is working overtime to get us in a particular frame of mind--to play on anxiety, to play on discomfort. I've noticed lots of old high school friends have started selling skin care products, or nutritional supplements or protein shakes. And they tend to start their pitch with something like, “are you tired all the time?” “Are you unhappy with your weight, your skin, your hair, your nails etc. etc. etc..” And I think, well I wasn't until you asked. I think these kind of pitches are playing off a truth of the human condition--that we are, naturally, looking for something.

This is Jesus' question to the disciples of John the Baptist in today's Gospel. “What are you looking for?” Or, as my old Greek professor preferred, “What are you seeking?” We are in the first chapter of the Gospel of John, and in it, John the Baptist is an itinerant minister walking through fields and towns telling people that Jesus is coming on the scene and to be ready. We tend to think of John the Baptist as a fiery-eyed prophet eating bugs and wearing uncomfortable clothes. Though, really, you could just as easily imagine a country preacher going from town to town talking about Jesus. However you want to imagine him, he had a knack for pointing people away from the things in the world that are silly or ephemeral and pointing them toward the real stuff, the God stuff. In this morning's story, John is sitting there with some of his followers

having a chat. And then, as luck would have it, Jesus walks by. Not everyone recognizes Jesus, but John does instantly. He exclaims, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world...I see the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.” The John’s followers also recognize Jesus. They go to him, call him Teacher. Jesus stops, looks them in the eye and says, “What are you seeking?” I appreciate the economy of language in this story. There’s no hello, there’s no chit chat about the weather. When these people approach Jesus, There is no artifice; Jesus asks them right off the bat, “What are you seeking?”

There must be a natural restlessness somewhere in the human psyche that tells us that things are not as they ought to be. Maybe this is what Jesus recognizes when he questions the disciples. We have this restlessness, and we find ourselves seeking. Looking for, I believe, God. Which isn’t to say that we always find God. I think we find lots of pale substitutes. Funny little false minor gods.

But we’re wired to seek the divine. To turn our minds and hearts to Christ. To sit at the feet of Jesus. I realize that we get a little tingle when socks are 20% off. But ultimately that is not as satisfying as the presence of a loving God.

Jesus turns to the two disciples and says to them, “Come and see.” Come and see the living God who makes his home alongside the needy of this world. Come and see a generous God who feeds us bread and wine for strength in this sometimes-trying life. Come and see a God who calls us to be more kind, more just, more connected to our neighbors. That is Jesus’ answer to us as we seek. Come and see.

In the office, Sara makes fun of me because I so often write, “all are welcome” or “you’re invited” on the publications that go out to the parish. And she’s right, of course. I’m a one trick pony that way, But what I suppose I’m trying to drive at is precisely what Jesus is saying to the disciples. Come. See. Not just a few people. Not just a certain kind of people. But all of you are invited. All of you are welcome to come and live life in the presence of God.

God is what we are seeking, folks. God is who we are looking for. The world will tell you what you seek is out there. That you’re looking for the best possible deal on socks. But you’re not. You’re looking for God. And you’re in luck. God is here. Or, as Paul puts it in the first letter to the corinthians, God is faithful. Amen.