

John 1: 35-42
January 14, 2018
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

Last Sunday at the end of the service I had an “aha” moment—an *epiphany* you might say. It is this: that when we discover the presence of the living God within our hearts we are propelled outward. We are led to follow. We do not require a specific destination. When we are following the deep yearning, the journey is enough.

This deep yearning is to grow closer to God.

The Bible is given to us as a record of God’s yearning for humanity to seek him. It is a sometimes wonderful, sometimes terrible record. Yet the constant theme is always the same. God yearns to be reconciled to God’s people. God’s people so confused and deceived by selfish desires consistently distort and misdirect the deep yearning to be reconciled that we go seriously astray. To draw from St. Francis’ prayer, we yearn to be instruments of God’s peace; but instead of sowing love we sow hatred; instead of pardon, injury; instead of faith, doubt; instead of hope, despair; instead of light, darkness; instead of joy, sadness.

Friends, hear me when I say that we don’t do this all the time; and we almost never *mean to do so*. We start out with a desire to be instruments of peace and then things go bad. We end up in conflict and the attendant feelings of anger, guilt, remorse, need to justify ourselves and all the rest.

In the second part of the prayer St. Francis identifies the source of the problem as well as the solution. When we look back at good intentions gone wrong we see that, in fact, we *have sought to be consoled rather than to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love*. In short, when good intentions go bad, we realize that our motives had more to do than

seeking our own peace and sense of wellbeing. It is like a train headed toward a destination and suddenly a switch is thrown and it is headed in an unintended and unwanted direction. This is the root meaning of the Greek word, *hamartia*, which we have translated “sin.”

One way of understanding the Bible is simply as God’s unwillingness to give up on us. God reaches out and we yearn to respond; yet something within us causes us to do the very things which isolate us from the love we so badly desire. In the words of Paul Simon, “The more we near the destination the more we’re slip-sliding away.”

For me, the good news of God sending Jesus into the world has to do with God’s recognition that unless God intervenes, this situation will go on forever. So God sends Jesus to be born among us, to live with us, to teach us, heal us and love us. In Jesus God’s yearning for to be reconciled to us becomes concrete and personal. To encounter Jesus *is*, in the most direct and personal way possible, to encounter God’s yearning for reconciliation.

Of course the gospels report in painful detail how, despite the overwhelming presence of God’s love in Jesus, and our yearning to receive that love, things go wrong. We abandon Jesus and call for his death. Why did that happen? The answer is, of course, because we are the same people we’ve always been. If the story ends with Jesus in a tomb there is no good news. It’s just “same-old, same-old.”

The Good News happens because God, knowing who we are and what we will do, has made a stunning decision. He will unilaterally overcome our helplessness. He will raise Jesus from the dead. The pattern is broken. We are no longer condemned to watch our deep desire for God get distorted and misdirected. God has changed the end of the story. We are reconciled and through faith in Jesus as the personal and complete expression of God’s grace we can begin

a journey of listening for and trusting our inner deep yearning. There is now no obstacle between our journey toward God and God's welcoming arms.

I propose that the passage we heard from the Gospel of John provides a wonderful illustration of the path we are meant to follow. John the Baptist has prepared his disciples to look beyond him to one who is to come, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. His ministry has been to awaken within his disciples a yearning for this one who God is sending into the world. Some, not all, of John's disciples are alert to this yearning so that when the moment comes and John sees Jesus and cries out, "Look! There he is! The Lamb of God!" two disciples leave immediately to go after him.

Note this: they have no knowledge of this man. They are compelled to go to this man. There is no thought of what will happen, no promise of reward. There is also no fear of danger. They go after him. When they catch up to him he turns and asks them, "What are you looking for?"

Friends, I propose to you that this question goes to the heart of the spiritual quest. It seeks to bring to awareness that deep yearning which lies deep within us, prompting our best thoughts and desires. It also is lovingly designed to awaken our frustration with our own ability to sabotage our high aspirations. "What are you looking for?"

Well, what *are* we looking for?

In order to answer this question we need to get off the conveyor belt of worldly life. We need to stop and recognize that the things we strive for: financial security, stable relationships, health, while good things, are obstacles to answering the question. Of course, if what we really want is security in this life why go to Jesus? Imagine the disciples answering Jesus' question,

“We’re looking for a better return on our investments. We are looking to reduce our tax liability and to afford a bigger house?”

I assume that what has brought you here this morning is not a desire to acquire any of these things. No, I assume that you are here because of a deeper yearning. We are looking to grow closer to God.

I am looking for freedom from all the fears, big and small which keep me from completely giving myself to God. So many of my deep yearnings are frustrated by the voice that says, that’s too risky, play it safe, don’t offend anybody, try to keep everyone happy. I often feel like Gulliver in the land of the Lilliputians, tied to the ground by a thousand tiny cords. I am looking for a way to get free so that I can offer my whole self to God and to my family and the community around me. Those rare moments when I get even a glimmer of that freedom are so precious! I am looking for a way to experience that freedom *before* I get to heaven. In the words of the Psalmist, I want to experience “the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.”

What is it for you? Whatever it is, I love the disciples’ answer, “Rabbi, where are you staying?” For me, this question reveals the deepest desire—to be with Jesus where he is staying. To be with Jesus wherever he abides is to draw near to the love and peace of God. It is a simple question to which Jesus gives a simple answer, “Come and see.” No rules. No list of beliefs you need to have. No morality clearance check. We are invited to join Jesus where he is staying. In him and with him we will find the open arms of God waiting to receive us. Amen.