

# “WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?”

Post Presbyterian Church

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John 1: 29-42

On Saturday evenings from 5:00 to 7:00, I try to listen to at least some of Garrison Keillor’s weekly radio program, A Prairie Home Companion, live from the Fitzgerald Theatre in St. Paul, Minnesota on FM 89.1. There are always some funny stories that he tells about the quirky and sturdy Lutherans of his fictional Lake Wobegon that resonate with my view of reality and make me laugh out loud!

A few years ago, in a reflective moment in his book, **Homegrown Democrat**, Garrison Keillor talks about his radio program that he has done for many years now. Garrison Keillor says, “I tell stories on the radio about Lake Wobegon and its God-fearing, egalitarian inhabitants, and though I find a grandeur in this, I feel that, at 61, I am still in search of what I was looking for when I was 18 years old. What I really want is a long conversation with Grandpa and Grandma Denham who came over from Glasgow in 1906 with their six kids and settled in a big frame house on Longfellow Avenue. Grandpa was a railroad clerk who wore black high-top shoes and

white shirts with silk armbands and spoke with a Scottish burr, so ‘girls’ came out ‘gettles.’ He never drove a car or attended a movie or read a novel. I want to know why they came here, what they were looking for---the truth, not a children’s fable---and if I have found it, maybe I can stop looking.”

Garrison Keillor speaks eloquently about the truth that we are all looking for whether we are 18, 47 or 61. Our scripture lesson for today makes us stop in our tracks when Jesus turns to the disciples that are following him and asks, “What are you looking for?” What a profound question. What are we looking for? While the answer to that question may include things such as more money or more vacation time or a better car, a lot of people will answer simply, ‘happiness.’

In the annual mind and body special issue of TIME magazine for January, 2005, the editor’s presented a lengthy article about, “The Science of Happiness.” The editors noted that while something like 78% of us say we are basically happy, there’s evidence of creeping dissatisfaction in our lives. “Why else are so many of us flocking to therapists and scarfing Prozac? Why do so many of us reach midlife with a surprising sense of emptiness? In a society as wealthy and

privileged as the United States’, what, after all does it take to find real satisfaction in life?”

The TIME Magazine article focused on a whole new field of serious scientific inquiry called Happiness Science. University of Pennsylvania psychologist Martin Seligman says that psychology should be focusing not simply on helping people cope with unhappiness but on what makes human beings flourish and experience happiness. Seligman and his team have identified what makes human beings happy and they found that the things that make us happy are our deep connections to other people. I would not know about this, but at the very top of the list of what produces the most happiness in other people’s lives is ‘grandchildren!’ I hope I will not have the same feeling of wanting to disown or throttle my grandchildren that I sometimes have now for my eight year old daughter and twelve year old son. However, in all seriousness, what these researchers found is that there is something deeply satisfying about the close, intimate and personal relationships we share with family, friends, neighbors, church members and colleagues. We want to know others and be known by those closest to us in ways that help us to feel comfortable and secure in a world that is not always so.

(I found the Garrison Keillor quote from Homegrown Democrat and the TIME Magazine information in a sermon preached at The Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago entitled, “Looking” on January 23, 2005)

While the TIME Magazine article reminds us that we are all searching for more meaningful connections with others to help us experience greater happiness, health and well-being, it also emphasized the connection between religion and happiness. Scientists have known that religious people are happier and now believe that for many people, religion provides a social and spiritual support, a caring community, great hospitality as well as a place to be. Although I am thankful for the real needs that are met by some of our experiences in church, I believe that beyond church, we long to be found and known by a God who affirms our seekings, our strivings, and our passions and who knows best how to bring healing, security and wholeness to the very broken, unformed and fragile places deep within our beings as well as to our war-torn, impoverished and unfinished world.

I could have written the first few sentences of a sermon I found this week in the latest edition of Lectionary Homelitics, entitled, “Sacred Seeking.” The Rev. Susan Andrews very honestly says this, “I envy

people who know, beyond a shadow of doubt that they have ‘found’ Jesus. I envy people who unequivocally know that they are saved, that God is in charge, that all is right with their private, spiritual world. But alas, I am not one of them. Again and again in my life of faith I have fallen into spiritual black holes. In my life of faith, there have been few moments when I feel like I have ‘found’ Jesus. Instead, it seems to me that Jesus purposely keeps slipping away, trying to stay one step ahead of me, beckoning me forward on my unfolding journey of faith.”

Frederick Buechner has this to say about the necessary ambiguity of the Christian journey of faith, “If you tell me Christian commitment is a kind of thing that has happened to you once and for all like some kind of spiritual plastic surgery, I say, you are either pulling the wool over you own eyes or trying to pull it over mine. Every morning you should wake up in your bed and ask yourself: ‘Can I believe it all again today?’ No, better still, don’t ask it till after you’ve read The New York Times, till after you’ve studied that daily record of the world’s brokenness and corruption, which should always stand side by side with your Bible. Then ask yourself if you can believe in the Gospel of Jesus Christ again for that particular day. If your answer is always, ‘Yes,’ then you probably don’t know what believing means. At least five times out of ten, the answer

should be ‘NO!’ The No is what proves you’re human in case you should ever doubt it.”

“When John’s two curious disciples begin to follow Jesus, Jesus turns to them and meets them where they are. He doesn’t proselytize or push or manipulate or control or judge or punish. Instead he engages them, asking a question that gets to the heart of our human experience: ‘What are you looking for?’ Encouraged by his approachability, by his humanness, by his openness, Andrew and his friend decide to follow Jesus a little bit father. And so they ask Jesus a question: ‘Where are you staying?’---(as John Buchanan says, it sounds like they are angling for an invitation to lunch which is essentially what they get.) ‘Come and see,’ Jesus says and they go with him and end up staying with Jesus all day---the beginning of a staying-with- Jesus for the rest of their lives. The Christian enterprise has begun! “ (This paragraph contains quotes from Susan Andrews’s sermon, “Sacred Seeking” and John Buchanan’s sermon, “Looking” –January 23, 2005)

Susan Andrews says that the words, stay and remain are crucial words in the Gospel of John. They have the same root as the word, abide, which is perhaps the most important word in John’s vocabulary. “Abiding, resting, staying, remaining---an intimate

togetherness, over time, in the presence of one another's company--- allowing experience and familiarity and trust to cement a relationship that the mind cannot even fathom. This, my friends, is faith, and it all begins with curiosity. Knowing Jesus is not about intellectual certainty or ethical perfection. On the contrary, to know Jesus is to embark on a journey, to ask ourselves the question, 'What are we looking for?'"

I have worked with the sick and the dying for many years now and this work continues to bring great meaning to my life and continued salvation to my soul. I truly love my work with the sick and the dying because I have found that the view these people have from the edge of life is often more accurate than the way people of health see reality. It has been my experience that the sick and the dying have a much clearer focus on what truly matters in the living of our days and would be able to very astutely answer the question, "What are you looking for?"

In the profound book, **My Grandfather's Blessing**, Dr. Rachel Remen echoes some of my sentiments. She says, "When life is stripped down to its very essentials, it is surprising how simple things become. Fewer and fewer things matter and those that matter, matter a great deal more. As a doctor to people with cancer, I have

walked the beach at the edge of life picking up this wisdom like shells.

One of my patients survived three major surgeries in five weeks and afterwards described himself as ‘born again.’ When I asked him about this, he told me that his experience had challenged all of his ideas about life and faith. Everything he had thought true had turned out to be merely belief and had not withstood the terrible events of recent weeks. He said he was stripped of all that he knew and left only with the unshakable conviction that life itself was holy. This insight in its singularity and simplicity had sustained him better than the multiple, complex system of beliefs and values that had been the foundation of his life and faith up until this time. The holiness of life upheld him like a stone and upholds him still because it has been tested by fire.”

I believe that in the depths of our most terrifying vulnerabilities we know the sacred, holiness of life and we discover that we live not by choice but by grace and faith. It is there that we affirm life itself is truly blessing and gift to all of us who live most of our days with the illusion that we are in total control. And it is there we know that the loving relationships we share with trusted family and friends who

are willing to walk with us by faith through thick and thin is what makes the gift of our lives most meaningful and full.

As Susan Andrews has reminded us, to follow Jesus, whether out of curiosity or conviction, is to be a Christian. “Christianity is not an idea but a lifestyle, not a destination but a journey, not a product but a process, not a routine but a relationship, not an individual thing but a focus on community, and I would add, not an answer but courage to live the questions. All that Jesus asks for in return is our commitment to abide, to stay, to hang out with him for a while, and God will do the rest.”

On this day may we be filled with peace and gratitude that the Holy One continues to awaken faith in us and that every now and then, we receive answers to the question, “What are you looking for?” in the glimpses of healing, grace, love, life, meaning and greater wholeness we are given along the way that far exceed anything we could ever acquire for ourselves.

## **PASTORAL PRAYER**

Gracious and Loving God, we gather in this place each Sunday to worship You and to give witness to the love that continues to create us, the grace that day to day sustains us, the sacred bonds we have with you and special others and the holiness of life itself. We are thankful for the poignant questions Jesus asks us and for the reminder that “Christianity is not an idea but a lifestyle, not a destination but a journey, not a product but a process, not a routine but a relationship, not an individual thing but a focus on community, and not an answer but rather courage to live the questions.” We are humbled by the knowledge that the lasting mark of conversion is not one date circled in red on the calendar, but the whole story of our life. We are forever grateful that salvation is always seeking us out and comes to us when we abide in You not because we are good or faithful or deserving but because You, O God, are good and faithful and most gracious.

We ask O God that your peace, healing and comfort would be with our friends and loved ones who are experiencing illness, grief or depression. We pray on this day for Edna and her family as they mourn Ben’s death and prepare to celebrate Ben’s life tomorrow--- may the life and the love they shared with Ben for so many years

give Edna and her loved ones comfort and strength at this time. We pray for Frances' grandson, Jason as he begins his chemotherapy treatments---may the love and care of family, friends, acquaintances and strangers remind him of how much he is loved and give him comfort and strength to deal with the harshness of chemotherapy. We give you thanks that Deidre and Charles' son Greg is on the mend and as he regains his strength and composure may he continue to feel the love and grace that surrounds him. We also pray for Nelda as she recovers from shingles, Wanda as she faces ankle surgery this week and Doris Wilson, as she deals with hip problems. May God's grace, healing and peace be their strength and comfort.

May the experience of worship remind us this week of the things that truly nourish our souls and in this place, may we receive the perspective and courage we need to live Christ's mandate of love and to more fully devote ourselves to his mission of bringing God's kingdom to our unfinished world and incomplete selves. May our connections with others be strengthened and day-by-day, may we be assured of God's presence with us on our unfolding journey of faith as we abide in him and he abides in us. In the name of the One who showed us how to live and to love, we pray, Our Father, who art in heaven.....**AMEN.**