

What Are You Looking for?

Doug Nave
The Covenant Network of Presbyterians
Idlewild Presbyterian Church
November 3, 2005

*The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and see."
(John 1:35-39)*

*Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them. . . . When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, "Lord, what about him?" Jesus said to him, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!" So the rumor spread in the community that this disciple would not die. Yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?"
(John 21:20-23)*

They say that the average young adult thinks about sex at least once every five minutes.

It's true. Researchers interviewed 4,420 people, at various times of day, and asked if they had thought about sex in the last five minutes. Roughly half of all people between the ages of 14 and 25 said yes. Think about it: That's not even enough time for a high schooler to finish a simple algebra formula. No wonder my math scores were so low.

I don't know what the research shows about older adults. But do me a favor: Glance at your neighbor from time to time, and if that person is smiling too much, please give them a nudge and tell them to get their mind back on the sermon.

Something that's that important to people – that people in their most formative years think about every five minutes – is obviously something that the church needs to think deeply about as well. And no one can accuse the Presbyterian Church of shirking in this regard. We've spent at least the last 30 years thinking, debating, *obsessing* about sex.

But sometimes it's good to return to first principles. We need to remember what we're really about. The culture may be obsessed with sex, but we in the church are about infinitely more.

Our text this evening is from the Gospel of John. John, that master of the declarative sentence, who opens his book with the magisterial statement, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God." This was someone who didn't mince words. He said clearly and forcefully what he believed. Isn't it interesting, then, that when John tells us what Jesus said, he chooses as the first word and the last word . . . not statements, not grand declarations, but *questions*.

The very first time Jesus appears on-stage as a speaker in John's gospel, we hear John the Baptist proclaim, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" John's disciples follow after Jesus, wanting to know more. And then Jesus asks them a question: "What are you looking for?"

It's a curious opener for the star of the show. It's a moment when one would think that Jesus would acknowledge his importance, give a speech. But he deflects all the attention back to the people who trail after him: "What are you looking for?"

Well, if the opening line isn't dynamite, we certainly expect that the closing line will be. Jesus will come through with something really big now! But remarkably, John's Gospel – in fact, the entire Biblical record of Jesus' life – ends with another question, a request for *someone else's* point of view.

From the little the story tells us, it sounds like there's some politicking going on, like Peter and John are informal rivals jostling for position, at least from Peter's point of view. Peter finally asks Jesus point blank, "Lord, what about him?" Where does he fit in the scheme of things? And Jesus responds with a question: "Peter, if I have something special in mind for John, if John has a role to play here, *what is that to you?*"

And those are the last words that Jesus speaks in the Gospels.

I believe that John deliberately began and ended his account with these two questions for a reason. In some sense, they point directly to Jesus – in each case, the question is closely joined with an instruction to "Follow me." But for John, the *questions* seem to take pre-eminence.

What are you looking for? What is that to you? The answers seem obvious from the stories. The disciples of John the Baptist, in response to Jesus' question, surely said "We're looking for the Saviour!" When Jesus asked Peter "What is that to you?" Peter almost certainly thought, "Why, it's the future of the church!" But the questions call us to reflect, to go beyond easy answers and unchallenged assumptions. They call us to examine ourselves, to think about what it really means to be disciples of Jesus Christ.

We will be thinking together over the next several days about what it means to be disciples in community. "Disciples" and "community" are loaded words these days in the Presbyterian Church. We find ourselves divided into opposing camps, each of which seems to question whether folks in the other camp are really true "disciples" at all. And we obviously are concerned about how to build and maintain a sense of community that seems to be sorely lacking

today. We heard and shared deep pain in our conversation this afternoon, pain that has lasted so long it's hard to remember when the church filled us with joy. Yet we know that it did, once, and that it will again someday.

Much of what has brought us to this place is sex (it's been five minutes, I can mention it again). We continue to be almost evenly divided about whether persons in same-sex relationships may offer ordained service to the church. Our Constitution currently contains a very controversial provision, Amendment B, that effectively bars many from serving. In fact, it's interesting to think why we have Amendment B. The only time that provision has any relevance at all is when someone feels called to serve, and a congregation believes its life in Christ will be enriched by that person's ministry. Then we step in with Amendment B, and say that that person, and that congregation, are wrong.

Many claim that Amendment B simply acknowledges the truth, that Scripture condemns all same-sex relationships. As a gay man with a same-sex partner eight years and counting, for whom I thank God every day, the falsity of that seems self-evidently clear to me. But in any event, if Amendment B really were motivated by a concern for Truth, it should bar ordained service not only by partnered GLBT people, but also by the many *heterosexual* Christians who are working to make the church more inclusive than it is. That would include, for example, roughly half of the Bible faculty in our seminaries. Clearly, such people aren't excluded from office. So it seems that Amendment B is not motivated by a concern to uphold an essential belief.

The other claim one frequently hears from proponents of Amendment B is that it affirms the life-changing power of Jesus Christ. In fact, the claim is usually made in more provocative terms: that the GLBT "lifestyle" reflects an implicit denial of Christ's transforming grace. The argument simply sidesteps the crux of our disagreement, that many see the workings of Christ and grace *in* same-sex relationships. But there is a more fundamental problem here – a problem of discipleship.

Scripture tells us that when Jesus called the first disciples, he had a very simple ordination exam. He applied one test of fitness for those he called to build the church: Whether those he called would immediately rise up, leave their other involvements, and follow him. That was the test.

Things are not quite so simple today. But still it seems to me that the church is left with a fundamental choice. Does it follow Christ, rejoicing whenever anyone leaves their current preoccupations to rise up and serve? Or does it adopt a controversial, culturally conditioned belief – the prejudice of an overwhelmingly hetero-centric society – and apply its own standards of suitability? I believe that Jesus Christ is asking the Presbyterian Church today, "What are you looking for?" The Christ whom you can follow . . . or a supposed sinner whom you can judge?" And if someone whom the Spirit calls to service lives differently than you do, "what is that to you?"

This kind of controversy isn't new. In Apostolic times, many Christians were fairly orthodox Jews who believed that Jesus was the risen Messiah. They remained in Jerusalem, under the

leadership of Peter and James, and they held to the traditional Jewish laws regarding circumcision, food restrictions, and purity.

But they were a community on edge, challenged and unhappy with the apostasy they saw in a man named Paul. Paul taught that the Christian was justified by grace in Jesus Christ, that it was unnecessary – in fact, undesirable – for Gentiles to comply with the legalisms of the Torah. To many in the church at Jerusalem, Paul was undermining the faith. He was leading people astray with his sordid example and false teachings, an enemy of the true faith.

There were several high-level meetings in Jerusalem to iron the matter out. Compromise and political jockeying led to different outcomes from one meeting to the next. (Sounds a bit like our General Assemblies!) It appears that eventually some agreement was reached – probably that the Jewish Christians would continue to treat the Torah as binding on themselves, but would not try to force it on the Gentile Christians.

It was a difficult resolution for some to accept, then as now. Tensions ran high. In his letters, Paul sometimes refers to the other side as “dogs” and “evildoers,” and it seems likely that Peter and James harbored similar views about Paul.

But Paul also recognized the need for unity despite disagreement. The New Testament tells us that he embarked on a major project to collect money for the Christians in Jerusalem. These were his adversaries, but at the same time he wanted to build them up, to develop community with them.

The plan seems to have ended badly. While the New Testament writers treat the matter with some tact, we can deduce what probably happened. Paul arrived in Jerusalem with his gifts, and was greeted by the religious leaders with a stern rebuke for his failure to follow traditional religious rules. A short time later a mob tried to kill Paul, and he was subjected to a lengthy legal ordeal. There is little evidence that the Christians in Jerusalem made any effort to intervene on his behalf.

Most importantly, Scripture makes little mention of the collection that Paul had worked so hard to put together and bring to Jerusalem. Scholars suggest that this is probably because the Christian leaders in Jerusalem ultimately rejected Paul’s gifts. To accept them would have been at least implicitly to approve of Paul and his ministry. Can you imagine the heartbreak and humiliation that Paul felt, after so many years of effort. (I have to imagine that this sounds familiar to those who have offered their gifts of ministry to the Presbyterian Church, and been refused.) The rift between Peter and Paul was in all likelihood a deep and bitter one, grounded in bedrock convictions on both sides that the other’s view of the faith was wrong.

Well, what did Paul discern from all this? I believe he discerned the critical importance of nurturing his own faith *and* allowing others to do likewise – even if they took different views about how they should conduct themselves under the law. In the words of Paul, “Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them.”

This was not simply taking the easy way out. Paul tells us that the Christian is governed by a standard, established by God in each individual's conscience, that is higher than what any temporal community might impose: "The faith that you have, have as your own conviction before God. . . . *Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.*"

This should have a familiar ring. In our Protestant parlance, we would say that Paul taught the early Christians to look first and foremost to Jesus Christ, and to show each other mutual forbearance in matters of conscience. "Christ," he says, "is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes."

You know, sometimes I think that for all of our sophistication, we never really progress beyond the lessons we learned as children. I think of the third-grade Sunday School teacher who asked her class, "What do we need to be to have eternal life?" The class was silent, so she prodded a bit: "What do we need to be – honest, loving, obedient?" Finally, a little boy raised his hand and the teacher said, "Yes, Billy, what do we need to be to have eternal life?" And Billy said, "We need to be dead."

Sometimes that's about how we look at things, isn't it? We turn away from the Living Water, the life and witness of Jesus Christ, and embrace dead duties and legalisms.

A smaller, but telling incident from the Gospels reinforces the point. Luke tells us that Jesus visited the home of Mary and Martha. You know the story. Mary came to sit at Jesus' feet and listen. Martha welcomed Jesus into her home, too, but Luke tells us that then she "was distracted by her many tasks." Eventually she went to Jesus and complained that Mary was not helping as she ought. And Jesus issued that gentle rebuke: "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing."

So we come back to our questions. What are you looking for? If Mary – or others – are not serving as you think they should, what is that to you? I wonder if many of our difficulties in the Presbyterian Church today arise because we have forgotten the experience of grace in the exercise of judgment.

There is danger here not only for those in the church who would exclude others. Can I say it gently? I believe there is also danger for those of us who would be excluded.

Some of us may become so focused on our hurt and anger and sense of betrayal that our entire life of faith revolves around our claim to better treatment. I remember being in the sanctuary of a progressive church a few years ago. It was ringed with beautiful stained glass windows depicting scenes out of the Bible. But next to the pulpit the congregation had removed an old window and replaced it with a modern stained glass depiction of two same-sex symbols. Part of me was glad to see this clear affirmation of the congregation's commitment to inclusivity – we see it so seldom, it's wonderful when we do. But somewhere in the back of my mind I also heard a small, worrisome voice, warning that if we're not careful, we can allow what should be a life-changing engagement with Christ to become simply an affirmation of self.

What are we looking for? If people mistreat us, what is that to us? Will we take our eyes off Jesus Christ?

The biggest risk I see, in all our controversies in the Presbyterian Church, is the risk that some may lose their faith entirely. We may lose our focus on Jesus Christ. I work hard on these issues because when I contacted the New York City spokesperson for a gay Presbyterian group many years ago, he bitterly told me that he was no longer a Christian at all. And sometimes I can understand that. I look at the church, at our adversaries in the debate, and all I see is fear, denial, and rancor. I see an inward turning, an unwillingness to consider the world as, at least, I think it really is. I see arrogance, rather than humility, exclusion rather than embrace. And I wonder who would want to be part of all that.

I remember getting on an elevator at General Assembly several years ago, in Columbus Ohio. An older gentleman got on with me, and we began to chat easily. We felt an immediate warmth toward each other because we knew that we shared a mutual commitment to Jesus Christ. But suddenly he started to look at me differently. He hesitated, and said “I feel like I know you from somewhere.” I watched as his expression darkened, then froze, and he said, “You’re the fellow in that video” – the one we were circulating in favor of ordination reform. Suddenly the air was thick with hostility. He turned to face the door, and didn’t say another word as we went down the last eight floors.

On bad days, when I see some on the other side of our debates – people who claim to have a faith so much deeper and more substantial than mine – I wonder if Christ really does have the power to bring grace into our lives. If this is what Christianity produces, can Christianity really be true?

You see the danger in looking to others . . . instead of to Jesus Christ.

I had my first theological experience of grace when I was about eight years old. I was raised the son of a Presbyterian minister. Like all good preacher’s kids, I thought my job description required me to raise a little hell in church. One Sunday morning, while my father was in the sanctuary leading worship, I was in the Sunday School chasing a friend around the halls. We had a wonderful indoor playground, a labyrinth of rooms separated by doors made with large glass windows. My friend ran through a door and pushed it shut to slow me down, but I didn’t see that in time. I charged head first through the glass.

Somehow I didn’t cut myself very badly, but folks were concerned that I might have a concussion. My mother rushed me home and put me to bed. That gave me a fair amount of time to lay there and get deeply concerned about how my father was likely to take to his son destroying church property in such a spectacular breach of Sunday decorum. Finally I heard him come in the front door, then climb the long staircase up to my room. I was filled with trepidation.

That is when my father taught me one of the great theological lessons of my life. He came in without any of the anger I expected and deserved, and instead brought me a gift – one of those little cards they handed out in Sunday School those days, maybe four by six inches. The lower half of it had a cross made of phosphorus, which would glow in the dark. And the upper half had

a picture of Jesus Christ. Receiving a gift rather than well-deserved punishment taught me, in ways no words could, what grace is all about. I actually think my father had a different lesson in mind: The picture of Jesus on the card was taken from Revelation 3:20, “Behold, I stand at the door and *knock*.” But it didn’t matter. I mounted that card on the wall beside my bed with a thumb tack, and it remained there for years until I left home for college.

I still have it. And in my mind’s eye, whenever I think of Jesus Christ, I see the picture on that little card, and remember the profound lesson of grace that it taught me.

Much has changed in those years since I charged through the glass door. The warm church family I knew in my childhood is long gone. Once I was surrounded by loving grandmotherly types who gave me hugs, encouraged me to excel, showered me with an extravagance of unearned love – a love that modeled what I thought the church was called to be. Today I see little grandmotherly ladies, and I know there are at least even odds that their gentle smiles and twinkling eyes disguise a deep animosity. Where once I had a warm feeling whenever I passed a Presbyterian church, I now make a mental calculation about how likely they are to welcome “my kind.”

The faces in the church have changed for me – all but one. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” As the writer of Hebrews tells us, “We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul.” “Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” Runners who look to each other, instead of the goal, are distracted. They risk colliding with others on the track, or may stumble and fall. We must run the course set before us with our eyes on Jesus Christ alone.

That brings me to the last thought I’d like to share with you this evening. When things appear most dark, when we’re most discouraged, or in doubt, when we’ve lost our way or believe the church has lost its way and taken us with it, perhaps it becomes difficult to see Jesus, or even want to look for him. Scripture promises us that, in those times, Jesus comes looking for us.

In the twentieth chapter of John, we find the disciples in a locked room. Their leader, Jesus, had been brutally humiliated and tortured and murdered on a cross. He died, and the disciples’ hopes died with him. There were tensions in the group. You can hear them now, Bartholomew berating Philip because he had persuaded him to come hear Jesus in the first place. “I left my family and lost my job, and now what? What was it all for?” “What ever deluded us into thinking there was any promise in all this to begin with?” (How many of us have felt that way after a General Assembly?)

But they hung together, because they were really the only friends they had left. They were now outsiders from the religious establishment, so outside in fact that they feared for their very lives. They hid, and locked the door. And then Jesus, the leader whom they deserted, the one who sacrificed everything for them on the cross, Jesus came looking for them. Came looking for them in their doubts and discouragement, came looking without reproach for their easy abandonment of what had been earned so dear.

It's not the first time we read this kind of story. We read earlier in John (Chapter 9) about the blind man, healed by Jesus. The man testified before the religious leaders, rapturous in his praise of the grace he had received, and the church turned a cold shoulder. His healing didn't conform to the law, he didn't have the learning the religious leaders had, his experience of grace didn't count. The man's own parents refused to stand up for him, they were so intimidated by the religious establishment. The man must have gone away despondent and doubting. Then Scripture tells us that Jesus went looking for him, and found him.

That's the comfort we have when things seem most dark. That's the very thing that makes discipleship possible, because let's face it, we're really not made of very stern stuff. We become discouraged, we start to doubt, we decide that we have better things to do, and then Jesus comes looking for us. If we're hurting, Jesus comes to us in the Spirit with sighs too deep for words, and hugs us close as a parent comforts a hurt and crying child. If we're doubting, Jesus finds us and invites us to put our hand in his side, to explore his wounds and believe again. If we're just fed up, discouraged with the prospects for success, Jesus comes to us with the witness of his entire ministry and reminds us that a single, solitary man changed the world.

The great 20th-century theologian, Karl Barth, wrote shelves of books about Christian theology. His *Dogmatics* alone – unfinished when he died – totals 9,138 pages. But when he was asked what the essence of the Gospel is, he was very clear: “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”

Jesus asks each one of us, every day, What are you looking for? If you're unhappy about how others act in the church, what is that to you? We are finally called to place our trust and hope, not in the Presbyterian Church, or its laws, or other Presbyterians, but in Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Jesus alone can make us disciples, and only Christ can give us community. And when we falter, as we all do, we can rely on his comfort and assurance – the loving parent who picks us up, dusts us off, gives us a hug, and tells us to try again. Those are the foundations of discipleship as I know them. Thanks be to God.