

TEXT: John 1:29-42  
THEME: Finding is in the following  
SUBJECT: Vocation  
TITLE: Desire

Second Sunday after Epiphany  
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What are you looking for? When Jesus asks this question, he is not wondering if you have lost your car keys or your cell phone. Jesus' question is intended to tune your soul, to initiate the quest for what your soul, above all else, desires. What are you looking for?

The human heart is a theater of longings. Some of these longings relate to basic human needs necessary for our survival, for food and shelter and security. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says God knows you need these things and God has provided abundantly for these basic needs to be met.

Some of our heart's longings are for things we don't need for survival but believe we need to be satisfied. We long for success, for the privileges afforded by success; for status, for the recognition and deference afforded by high status; for wealth, for the power afforded by wealth. What experience teaches is that no matter how much power, prestige, wealth we possess, our desire for more is not quenched but inflamed.

Nelson Rockefeller, when he was one of the wealthiest men in the world was asked how much money was enough. He responded "A little bit more." This insatiable desire for more is the reason all religious traditions teach the necessity of self denial, the recognition that my desires must be conditioned and modified by the desires of others for what is necessary for life. Self-restraint is necessary for the well being of others, and it is necessary for the deeper longings of our own hearts to be revealed.

We make a grave mistake, however, if we conclude that our longings, that desire itself, is suspect. Gregory of Nyssa, a fourth century spiritual master, says the fact that our very nature as human beings is characterized by longing is an important theological statement about humanity. Human nature is seen as *essentially* restless because of its orientation towards a reality outside itself. For Gregory faith is always a longing and trust directed away from itself and towards an object which it will never comprehend.

The pilgrimage must begin with the stirring of desire. Our desiring is a response to being attracted, desired, and loved by God. The contemplative tradition is grounded in the notion that the desire for faith is faith, the desire to know God is knowledge of God, for such desire arises only in response to the reality and presence of God.

The nature of God is limitless, thus there is no end to our longing, a longing we may begin to satisfy in this life, but which, according to Gregory and many others, will continue to draw us ever deeper into the reality and mystery of God through all eternity.

So. What are you looking for? Whatever it is the finding is in the following. Note the movement of this story. John tells the disciples to "*Behold* the lamb of God." Jesus invites the disciples to "Come and see." Beholding, seeing for yourself what or who is worthy of your life comes first.

What the disciples see is someone who is worth following and in the following they find fulfillment of the deeper hungers of their hearts. Only at the end of the story, at the end of the Gospel, do the disciples find faith. The movement is from beholding to behaving to believing.

Learning how to discern which desires are authentic, true, holy, which desires are worth following, is not like book learning alone. It comes only through practice, through trial and error, through failure and forgiveness. Following graduation from high school, Darcey, daughter of a Lutheran pastor, went off to college, spent a year studying in France, fell in love and stayed in France until her lover loved someone else.

Devastated she returned to the US. She finished college and completed a master's degree in writing. Desire became her life's organizing principle. The intensity of the desire was more important than the object of desire. In fact she found that her desire was stronger if the object was aloof and nihilistic.

After a couple of decades in the far country, the birth of a daughter, the failure of a marriage, she realized she could not outrun her longing and loneliness. She could see a vast spiritual wilderness at the center of her life. She needed to find a way to live within this bewilderment rather than pretend everything was alright.

Her experience of church made it hard for her to return. Eventually, her longing prevailed and she found her way to Grace Reformed Church. Many Sunday's the singing, the sermon, and the prayers seemed to rise up and form a passageway to God. Then, on Easter Sunday, the sermon was so off-putting, Darcy slipped from the pew and walked out of church.

Fortunately, for Darcy, that experience neither squelched her longing nor destroyed her hope of finding fulfillment. Darcey met Sister Leslie, a petite woman with hazel eyes and wire-rimmed glasses. Darcey told the nun her life's story, concluding "At the moment, I am kind of a mess."

Sister Leslie smiled and said, "You were being smoothed. Now God is calling you. The ambivalent parts of your life, the painful parts, these are the holy parts. This is where God resides. God is working in you, trying in your pain to get your attention."

No matter what sedative any particular culture offers to lull the soul into a forgetful sleep, the soul continues to hear the timeless call that comes at once from within and from beyond all things. Sooner or later, the sleeper must awaken for human fulfillment resides in self-transcendence, in relation to the God in whose image and likeness we are created.

The longing that survives all failed attempts to find fulfillment, is God's desire for you to "Come and see."

May the light of God  
illumine the heart of your soul.  
May the flame of Christ  
draw you into the fullness of love.  
May the power of the Holy Spirit  
free you to live fully  
this day, tonight, and forever.