

“Where Do You Live?”

John 1:35-39

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Some years ago, I received a special invitation to visit the home of one of America’s richest men, a central New York businessman who has a net worth of several billion dollars—that’s billion with a B. He made his money developing shopping centers all throughout the northeast and was now promoting his MOST AMBITIOUS project YET- a proposed retail and entertainment project in Syracuse of over 4.5 million square feet which would include three major hotels with 1300 hotel rooms, an indoor aquarium, a water park, an indoor re-creation of the Erie Canal, a stadium and performing arts center, three golf courses, a 100 acre glass-enclosed indoor park, and a 20 acre artificial lake. There would be hundreds of specialty shops and high-end businesses to shop from. To cap it all off, the plan would also include a one million square ft. technology park dedicated to the development of renewable energy resources. A monorail would ferry people, not only within the complex itself but to and from the airport and other transport sites as well. Let me tell you, this guy knew how to DREAM BIG!

He claimed this resort would create approximately 120,000 new jobs and bring millions of tourists to the Syracuse area which the region desperately needed. However, his plan was not without controversy. In order to bring such a bold vision to fruition, he would first have to use the power of eminent domain to take over other people’s properties whether they wanted to sell or not (including one of our own Presbyterian churches) and secure one of the most generous tax-exemptions ever awarded a private corporation. He had sent out invitations to a group of select persons from all over the central New York area for the purpose of unveiling this grand plan and gaining our support for it. I wondered how I was ever invited to such an auspicious event and discovered that it was not only because I was the pastor of the city’s most historic church—First Presbyterian United--but that I also served on the boards of several important organizations there as well.

On the morning of the event, I drove to a specified location where a stretch limo picked me up and transported me right up to the front door of his exclusive MEGA-mansion. For the entire day, I along with a hundred or so others listened to him and a variety of spokespersons from Wall St. to the Wharton School of Business assure us that it was more than just a dream but that it could become a reality within a few short years. After a delicious lunch of duck a l’orange, we were then given free rein to wander anywhere we wanted throughout the property. We took advantage of the opportunity to explore one of the largest residences many of us had ever been in. We toured his bedroom, checking out his drawers and wardrobe closets; we explored his vast wine cellar and got lost in an underground garage so large it could easily hold a hundred vehicles.

Toward the end of the day, I was asked if I could be interviewed by a television crew he had hired to get our impressions of everything we had seen and heard. I said, “Why SURE!” I stood before that camera and looked straight into its lens as though I was personally speaking to the great man himself and said, “Mr. Congel, thank you for your hospitality but during the time I have been in Syracuse, I have learned that you don’t have the most honorable of reputations. You are known for being as tough a human being as you are a businessman, often forcing those

who work for you to take you to court just to get paid for their services. The economic situation in central New York is dire and the good people here are in desperate need of real hope. Your bold vision may give them that. I only hope you follow through on this venture and that isn't just another scheme to aggrandize yourself at the expense of the rest of us." I think the cameraman was surprised by my candor but I knew I wasn't speaking just for myself but for thousands of others who would have said the same thing had they had the chance.

Almost twenty years later, you can visit the site today, although the results might seem disappointing. You would see how his original dream, which captivated everyone's imagination by the sheer size and audacity of it, had been downsized to a PIPE dream, INSTEAD. Oh he did expand the original footprint of his shopping center SOME, but there were no hotels, no stadium or golf course to speak of; there was no glass-enclosed indoor park with an artificial lake, no technology park dedicated to the development of renewable energy sources with a monorail transporting persons to and from it. The 120,000 jobs never materialized, nor did the millions of visitors he assured us would turn out for it. It was really just another shopping center like so many others that dot the American landscape with many of the same stores catering to the same middle-class consumers. Much of the land still stands vacant- much like the hopes of SO MANY central New Yorkers who had initially bought into his dream.

I suspect that a SIMILAR air of suspicion filled those first disciples in THEIR first encounter with Jesus. You see, there had been many false Christs before, many false messiahs claiming to be the long-awaited hope that would redeem Israel- but none of their promises ever materialized EITHER. Jesus was thus one more in a long line of self-declared prophets. John the Baptist had told them that he—John--was just a WITNESS to the Messiah and NOT the Messiah himself. JESUS, on the other hand- now HE was the REAL DEAL! HE was the "Lamb of God" who takes away the sin of the world, the ONE whom they had sought for so long. However, before they were going to place their full faith in him, as they had in so many others BEFORE him, they would first have to hear and observe this man up close. You can only take so much disappointment before your hope turns to discouragement and ultimately, cynicism.

Seeing two young men--one named Andrew and another who remains nameless--scrutinizing him, Jesus turns to them and asks, "What do you seek?" or "What do you want? Why are you following me?" They had to have been somewhat suspicious of him. After all, the man was a carpenter—not a scholar or a prince or military man. He had no credentials, no contacts, no experience in leading a mass movement to speak of. Neither did he look the part of a liberator to any of them. They would have to investigate further before they could make up their minds about him.

This question "What do you seek?" is actually more than just a casual remark made by Jesus. He knows they are studying him closely; he understands that he's under serious consideration for the open position of "messiah" and that the local search committee has come to check him out and see whether he's a worthy candidate or not. But what Jesus is REALLY asking is what do they want MOST for their lives? What is it they desire ABOVE EVERYTHING ELSE? On the scale of human priorities, what is NUMBER ONE for them?

This is really one of the most profound questions that can be asked of ANY person. For many people in these anxious times, their greatest desire may be a good job and the financial security that comes with it, but we know that you can be the CEO of a Fortune 500 company and have all the money in the world and STILL feel miserable and unfulfilled inside. Money does

not guarantee happiness, something Jesus understood when he said, “What will it profit a man to inherit the entire world and yet lose his soul?” Others may desire sensual pleasure above all else, and so theirs become the hedonistic pursuit of one “feel good” moment after another whether the means to that high involves sex or drugs or alcohol. However, as the Bible says, “Sin may last for a season” but after that season is over, we’re left with boredom, depression, and a deepening sense of our own unfulfilled emptiness. For others STILL, that ultimate pursuit may be a drive for absolute control or power. There are those who want power because they want to DO something with it, to accomplish important things for the benefit of others. But THEN there are those who desire power as an END IN ITSELF, because they want to BE somebody. They have no purpose or agenda other than to DOMINATE and FEEL SUPERIOR to others. Of course, history has become a graveyard full of unchecked egos who went on to destroy themselves and others for all their naked ambition. And then for STILL others, their desire may be for nothing more than a happy marriage, a loving family, and fine friends. That’s certainly a worthy goal but without one essential ingredient, such relationships may not achieve the level or quality of love and devotion they COULD have had that one special additive been present.

And what is that ingredient, that necessary additive which fulfills and completes all relationships? Why IT’S GOD! Every man, woman, and child possesses a God-shaped void within his or her heart which only God can fill. Saint Augustine experienced that hole HIMSELF over fifteen hundred years ago and as a result came to the conclusion that “Thou has made us for thyself, so that our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee, O God.” That longing we experience, that emptiness and incompleteness that characterizes so many lives, is BUILT into us by God and ONLY God himself can ever fill it.

To Jesus’s question “What do you want?” they reply with a question of their OWN, “Rabbi, where are you staying?” “Where do you live?” It reminds me of the old joke: A priest asked a rabbi, “Tell me, why is it you Jews always answer a question WITH a question?” The rabbi replied, “Why SHOULDN’T we?” Well, the two disciples respond to Jesus’s question with another- “Where are you residing?” They really want to know who this Jesus is and what he is about before they allow themselves to get close and come to any conclusions about him. Therefore, they invite themselves over to his home for lunch. And so real faith for these disciples begins over a beer and a pastrami sandwich at Jesus’s place.

Now there’s a practical truth here. If you want to know what a person is REALLY about, then see where they live, have lunch or dinner with them, share a drink with them, see what books they read or television programs they watch. You let them into your LIFE by first letting them into your HOME. In one of my previous pastorates, the congregation liked to think of themselves as being the most friendly church in town, the church which was A FAMILY FIRST which opened its doors wide like great arms, inviting all kinds of strangers in to experience their warmth and generosity. I pointed that out to them one Sunday in a sermon which I’m sure surprised some when I said, “Don’t fool yourselves, folks! Oh yes, we certainly DO like to think of ourselves as friendly, don’t we. We’re all willing to welcome people into the church, going so far as to invite them to sit in our pews on Sunday mornings. However, if that’s really as close as we let them get to us—letting them share a pew with us one hour a week on Sunday morning’s and NO MORE--then we’re not REALLY friendly AT ALL. In fact, we’d hardly qualify to even be called “CHRISTIANS!”

You see, if you REALLY want to demonstrate your faith, you must first get PERSONAL with one. If it is a truism that home is where the heart is, the corollary may be EQUALLY true, that the heart is where one's HOME is. Therefore, learning to open up our homes to others-- those very intimate and private spaces where we return to relax and sometimes hide--is as tangible a proof of opening our HEART up to them AS THERE IS. This is why the theme of "hospitality" was so central throughout the Bible, because it was a real and public way of showing someone that you had an open, expansive, caring heart as well as a powerful way of manifesting the reality of God to someone.

Of course, this question "Rabbi, where are you staying?"--just like the previous one-- suggests more than "which motel or motor lodge are you currently getting a good night's rest at?" No, they are asking the MUCH MORE PROFOUND question "WHO are you? WHERE do you stand? WHAT are you about?" The Greek word translated here as "staying" is one of John's favorite words. It means "remain," "stay," "abide," "dwell," "be present," even "continue" and "endure." It's the same word that John uses later in his gospel when he says "The Father who dwells in me"(14:10) or "abide in me and I in you"(15:4) or "You shall abide in my love"(15:10).

Jesus's response to their question is "Come and see." We are then told that they took him up on his offer and seeing where he was staying, they remained with him for the rest of that day. Once again, Jesus's reply to the men signifies more than just, "Hang around with me for a couple of days and you just might find out who I am and what I believe in." The word "see" here is significant. John doesn't use the the Greek word "blepo" which means come and PHYSICALLY see. Rather, he uses the word "orapo" which is not physical sight but SPIRITUAL INSIGHT. Thus, what Jesus REALLY means is "Come and see and I will show you what it is that you are REALLY looking for, for that which you are SPIRITUALLY hungry and thirsty and DON'T EVEN REALIZE it." You see, Jesus didn't come to teach us a new philosophy or way of life- he wasn't simply a great moralist or philosopher. Rather, he came to open our eyes and our hearts that we might be introduced to a WHOLE NEW REALITY, to a BRAND NEW WORLD for us to enter into. He came to initiate a new union between ourselves and God that we might know his mercy and love and power, that we might experience new joy and new peace- both in our lives and in our relationships with others. And so when Jesus invites those initial disciples to "come and see," he is really inviting them to "remain" with him, to "stay" with him, to "abide" with him, to "dwell" with him, to "continue" in relationship with him that they might experience a whole NEW mode of existence for themselves- a NEW life grounded in God's forgiveness and love and peace and joy.

As a result of their visit with Jesus, Andrew is now convinced that Jesus IS the Messiah, the Son of God, and one of his first acts is to go to his brother Simon and witness to him, inviting him to experience Christ for HIMSELF. This is how Simon Peter came to be a disciple of Jesus- his brother Andrew was so excited and convinced by the testimony of Jesus that he shared the word with him. And, of course, we know that in time, Simon would receive the name Peter and become head of the group of disciples and first leader of the early church.

Well now that we've analyzed this passage, we are presented with a very strange encounter which ultimately issues in the calling of Jesus's first disciples, including Simon Peter. Note the movement in this passage. The pattern of events here is very important. It begins with our Lord's question to Andrew and another unnamed disciple, "What do you seek?" They reply

with a question of their own, “Where are you staying (or abiding)?” Jesus then issues them the invitation, “Come and see” which he repeats again a few verses later. We are then told that they stayed with him the rest of that day which ultimately resulted in their public declaration “We have found the Messiah.” Note the pattern John gives us here: they HEARD, they SOUGHT, they EXPERIENCED, and then they WITNESSED.

This is not only the pattern of Jesus’s initial encounter with his first disciples but the pattern John is giving to the early church, in fact giving to Christians EVERYWHERE. The first thing this account teaches us is that REAL faith, a faith that arises out of one’s innermost being does not start with a creed or theological argument or liturgical act, as important as these may be. No, it begins with the act of initially coming to Christ and then “seeing where he is staying,” that is, “staying” with him, “abiding” with him, “dwelling” with him, maintaining some of kind of relationship with him. It begins with a personal encounter that leads to a personal relationship with Christ. You can’t experience Jesus VICARIOUSLY, that is, through the experience of ANOTHER regardless of whether that person is your father or mother, your minister, or closest friend. You cannot know God through another person’s faith- it must be your OWN. And so the first question we must all ask ourselves is DO WE know Christ? Do we KNOW him as we KNOW our husband, our wife, our children, our siblings, or our best friends? Is he our conversation partner, a regular part of our daily life? This is to know MORE than just the story of Jesus’s birth, his life and ministry, his death and resurrection- it is to know THE STORY HIMSELF.

Some time ago, I heard how two different persons were chosen to give a reading of the same passage—Psalm 23--and it resulted in that reading receiving two very different responses. The FIRST person was an ACTOR- well-trained in diction and public speaking. He ascended the pulpit and before that packed house, gave one of the most stirring renditions of that famous psalm they had ever heard. Afterwards, the congregation rose to their feet and gave him a standing ovation. The SECOND man, A SIMPLE PREACHER, then ascended the pulpit and read it plainly and simply as he best understood it. At the conclusion of HIS reading, some people were sobbing, some were raising their hands in thanksgiving, and others were even on their knees praying. When asked why the reaction between the two readings of the same passage was so different, the old preacher said, “Well he knew the psalm- but I knew the AUTHOR.” That, my friends, is the difference between knowing ABOUT Christ, a knowledge which involves one’s HEAD, and knowing Christ PERSONALLY and INTIMATELY as FRIEND and SAVIOR- a knowledge which involves both the head AND the heart.

Secondly, the fact is that we would much prefer to “see” before we commit ourselves to following someone- it would only make sense. A REASONABLE person would avoid a rash decision and want to understand thoroughly first what it is he or she is being asked to commit himself to. Jesus, on the other hand, asks us to “COME” FIRST and THEN we will finally see- and not just see with our eyes but see with our SPIRITUAL eyes, with our HEARTS as well. This is how REAL discipleship begins- following and then seeing and then getting excited enough to tell others about that which we’ve experienced.

And then we have a responsibility to SHARE what we experience WITH OTHERS if that experience truly proves to be a vital and meaningful one for us. If we discover a deeply meaningful relationship with the living God that leads us into an entirely new reality or existence, then wouldn’t that somehow motivate us to want to share that same reality with

someone ELSE, ESPECIALLY if it promises to deliver us from all the guilt and self-loathing in our lives and take us to new levels of living and loving and forgiveness. I know that as Christians, we have no problem testifying to the fact we have heard of Christ, have sought him for our lives, and have experienced a life-giving relationship with him. But too often, this cycle of faith ends right THERE; it never gets COMPLETED. We fail to WITNESS to that faith, we fail to SHARE the blessings that relationship has brought to us, and yet, this is what “discipleship” is all about. It is as D.T. Niles, the great evangelist to India, once explained, “one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.” Christianity can never be just a PRIVATE EXPERIENCE, it’s never just “Jesus and me.” Rather, our calling as the people of God is to spread the audacious claims about who he is and what he has done for us, and to welcome as sisters and brothers all those who want to come and see for themselves. And yet, “how can they come, how can they BELIEVE in our Jesus if they never hear?” the Apostle Paul once asked. His answer to his own question was simply “the CHURCH,” that’s how! People must learn of him through you and through me- and THAT, my friends, since the day of Pentecost and the BIRTH of the church, is and must remain our HIGHEST calling. Let us pray...

*Heavenly Father, we are all in some way or another looking for God, looking for a place to call home, looking for someone- something big and important enough to commit our lives to. When all is said and done, that person is only Jesus- the one who revealed to us that God is love, the one person who promises to never leave or forsake us but has prepared a new home for us when our sojourn on this earth is over. May that reality fill our lives with a renewed commitment to follow him wherever he might lead, and a readiness to share that love to any who may be hungry and thirsty as we ourselves once were. In his name we pray. Amen.*