

“Where Do You Live?”  
John 1:35-39  
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March 23, 2025

Years ago, I received a special invitation to the home of one of America’s richest men- a Central New York businessman who possessed a net worth of billions of dollars. He had earned his fortune developing shopping centers all throughout the northeast and was now promoting his most AMBITIOUS project TO DATE- a proposed retail and entertainment complex in Syracuse of over 4.5 million square feet that 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.

He claimed this resort would create approximately 120,000 new jobs and bring millions of tourists to the Syracuse area which the area desperately needed- or so he claimed. 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 select group of 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 eventually learned that it was not only because I was the pastor of such a well-known downtown church—First Presbyterian United--but I also served on the boards of several important organizations in the city and my support for the project couldn’t hurt.

On the morning of the event, I drove to a specified location where a stretch limo picked me up and ferried me straight to the front door of this man’s enormous mansion. For the entire day, I and hundreds of 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 on 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 looked straight into the camera 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 pray

you follow through on this venture and that isn't just another scheme to enrich 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.

Now, more than twenty years later, many of the promises made that day stand unfulfilled with much of the land on which the hopes of so many Central New Yorkers were galvanized remains largely undeveloped. The mall continues to struggle like so many other commercial venues strewn throughout America- there are no hotels, waterparks or golf courses attached to it; no stadium or performing arts center; no monorail or hundred-acre, glass-enclosed indoor park to speak of. Most GLARINGLY, no 120,000 new jobs were created along with millions of tourists flocking to the region as promised. And if you mention the owner's name, people just shake their head in disbelief and disappointment as they are left wondering to themselves only what might have been.

Well I have to suspect that a SIMILAR air of suspicion filled those early disciples in their first encounter with Jesus. You see, there had been many false Christs before him, many false messiahs claiming to be the long-awaited hope that would redeem Israel- but none of THEIR promises ever materialized EITHER- as they saw it, Jesus was one more in a long line of self-declared prophets. John the Baptist, however, thought OTHERWISE. He told them that while he was just a WITNESS to the Messiah and not the Messiah himself, Jesus was the REAL DEAL- the "Lamb of God" who takes away the sin of the world, the ONE whom Israel 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.

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?"- a question that becomes the very first words uttered by our Lord in the Gospel of John. I have no doubt their SUSPICIONS had to have MULTIPLIED once they discovered he was no scholar or a prince or military man but rather just a SIMPLE CARPENTER, of all things. 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 in these increasingly difficult 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 we learned two weeks ago when we looked at Jesus's question, "But 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” and after that season has ended, all we’re left with is boredom, depression, and a deepening sense of our own unfulfilled emptiness.

Of course, there are those who seek POWER because they want to DO something with it- they aspire to accomplish important things for the benefit of others. But then there are those for whom power becomes nothing more than AN END IN ITSELF. Their ULTIMATE pursuit is ABSOLUTE POWER OR CONTROL FOR THEMSELVES- an INSATIABLE DESIRE that often drives many of our politicians and captains of industry. They simply want to BE somebody and have no other purpose or agenda 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.

More GENERALLY, people’s desires may be for nothing more than a happy marriage, a loving family, and fine friends. That’s certainly a worthy goal but lacking one essential ingredient, such relationships may not achieve the level or quality of love and devotion they COULD have had had that one special additive been present. And what is that special sauce, that one important ingredient which fulfills and completes all relationships- it’s none other than God! It’s often said that every man, woman, and child possesses a God-shaped void within his or her heart and ONLY God can fill it. Over fifteen hundred years ago, Saint Augustine experienced that hole HIMSELF 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 an 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 a question of their OWN- “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 where they can conduct their interview over a beer and a pastrami sandwich.

Now there’s a practical truth here and that is 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, your INNER SANCTUMS; if you want to influence someone, you must first become personal with that individual. 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--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 others as there is. As one of our dearest friends tells it, they knew they’d made friends for life with Rose and me when we invited him and his wife over to our home for dinner TWO DAYS after they attended our church for the very first time. 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, and 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 “at which motel or motor lodge are you currently getting a good night’s rest.” No, they are asking the more BASIC 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 for and do not even realize.” You see, Jesus did not come to us 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, an entirely new world for us to enter into. He came to initiate a new union between us 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- an entirely 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 for the pattern of events here is highly significant. 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 that day and this 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, 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 BEST FRIENDS, our MINISTER? Is he our CONVERSATION PARTNER, a regular part of our DAILY LIFE? This is to know MORE than the story of Jesus’s birth, his life and ministry, his death and resurrection- it is to know THE STORY HIMSELF!

I once heard a wonderful illustration that applies here. 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. 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, “He knew the Psalm, but I knew the AUTHOR.” That, my friends, is the difference between knowing ABOUT Christ, a knowledge which involves the head, and knowing Christ PERSONALLY AND INTIMATELY AS FRIEND AND SAVIOR. That is 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.”

Friends, Christianity can never just be 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?" as the Apostle Paul once queried. His answer to his own question was simply "the CHURCH," that's how, that people must learn of him through EACH OF US for THAT remains our high 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.*