

Epiphany 2, Year A

January 15, 2017

John 1:29-41 *The next day John the Baptist saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel." And John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God." 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." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed).*

In our first reading today, the Prophet Isaiah wrote: "The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me." God's imprint, God's call on our lives, is from conception; it is in our DNA. Recent brain research has discovered that our brains are "wired for God."¹ We were *created* to be at one with God. So, when we are out of touch with our oneness with God (which is a definition of "sin"), we feel it as an ache, an emptiness, a desire, a longing to be at one with God again. St. Augustine famously wrote: "Our hearts are restless, O God, until they find their rest in you." That deep longing in our soul is only truly satisfied when we return to our intended union with God, that space deep inside us which has been called our "True Self," "being **in** Christ," "participating in the life of the Holy Trinity," or – to use the metaphor of both our first and last hymns today, "returning home."

The problem is that all too often we are out of touch with the **Source** of that longing, with the result that we try to satisfy our soul's deep ache and strong desires with things *other* than God. Jesus recognizes our difficulty in identifying the Source of our soul's longing. In our Gospel today, he turns to John's disciples and asks, "What are you looking for?" He wants them to identify and name what it is that their soul, at its core, most deeply desires. And he wants **us** to do the same.

What are you and I looking for? What will satisfy that deep longing in our soul?

I don't have to tell you that our culture is more than eager to answer that question for us. That deep longing, we are told, can be satisfied by a new smart phone or tablet, a new car, comfort food, whiter teeth, losing ten pounds – all of which, of course, can be had for a price. What really happens when we listen to these voices is that we confuse our deep soul-desire for God with *lesser* passions. The ancient Church identified some of these lesser passions: Pride, Greed, Lust, Envy, Gluttony, Anger, and Sloth – the so-called “Seven Deadly Sins”. The ancient spiritual teaching of the Enneagram adds two more deadly sins: Fear and Deceit.

My friends, all we have to do is open our eyes and we see these lesser passions, these “Deadly Sins,” being played out all around us. Wells Fargo setting up false accounts, Volkswagen faking their emissions, Bernie Madoff cheating his own friends out of millions – these are just a few examples of greed and deceit run rampant. Look at many of the advertisements on TV, in magazines, and especially on the internet, and we see how products are being marketed by appealing to our lust, envy, greed, gluttony, pride, and fear. Look at our recent presidential campaign and we can see how candidates hooked our fear and anger against certain groups of people: immigrants, Muslims, homosexuals, the media, anti-abortion groups, etc.; or our fear and anger about the frustrating state of affairs in our nation: jobs going overseas, the increasing difficulty of middle class workers to make a living wage, the soaring cost of health care, etc. Anger and fear; fear and anger.

Into the midst of all of this – in the midst of our world – comes Jesus' question: What are you looking for? What are you looking for? What are you looking for?

My friends, I don't think that the solution to these manifestations of the deadly sins is to be found in attacking them directly, or in summoning up more moral courage. Rather, I think the solution is to be found in seeing that we are trying to satisfy our soul's deepest longing for God by satisfying these lesser desires and imbuing them with ultimate significance. For I believe that underneath each of these lesser desires, these deadly sins, is the source of all true and good desire, which is God.

Episcopal monk Curtis Almquist writes: “...this thing in life called ‘desire’ is so strong because desire, at its deepest level, is a *reflection* of our being created in the image of God. We have been **created** out of ... the desire of God. It's God's desire to share this thing called life, and to be in union and communion... with [us] and with all that God has created.”²

The problem is that we often distort our God-given desires and longings, and direct them toward the wrong things, believing that **these** things will satisfy our God-infused longing. Fr. Almquist continues: “It looks to me like so much of that stuff being marketed [to us by our culture] ... is tapping into some innate and

eternal desire which God has woven into the core of our very being: a desire for love, for hope, for protection, for newness, for wholeness, for beauty and attractiveness, for strength and power, for gentleness.”³

Fr. Almqvist tells the story of his talking to a certain man one day about the man’s life. The man had a fine education, real depth of character, had achieved high visibility and considerable accomplishments, and was a success in every imaginable way. Brother Almqvist writes:

“At one point I asked him what he most wanted in life. He had a very clear answer. I would have imagined his naming something existential, something noble or altruistic or even eternal. What he most wanted in life? He named a certain Italian-made sports car, phenomenally expensive. He said he wanted one of these since he was boy. And I told him, ‘Well good for you, if that’s what you really want. Good for you!’ But it wasn’t what I thought he would [would have said]. Not even close. So I asked him why? Why this sports car? He told me about the engineering, the durability, the handling. He spoke of the beauty of the design. A very impressive car. I asked if he could say more, go deeper? He spoke of this car’s being rare, not many of them made, quite unique. I asked if he could go more deeply yet? Why did that all matter?

“Our conversation wound its way back to his childhood. He had been raised in neglect and poverty: ragged clothes, holes in his shoes, the object of merciless and cruel teasing as a young boy. And he had vowed that someday he was going to really matter, he was going to ‘make it,’ and he would prove it, for everyone to see, by owning this particular Italian sports car. By this point in our conversation we were both laughing and crying together: crying because of his appalling childhood which he had survived and conquered; laughing because he was still carting around this desire for the Italian car, and what that would mean. And he realized that his desire was a really good thing – his desire for the dignity of his birthright, to claim his self-worth, to succeed against impossible odds, to offer his own learning as a leader for others. He had simply **fixed** his desire on this car... and he realized that the car just scratched the surface of this **God**-given desire. He said finally, ‘maybe I don’t need to claim the car; I just need to claim my life.’ And I said to him, again and on a deeper level, ‘Good for you.’...

“Listen to your desire. Our capacity to desire is God-given. No matter how flimsy our desires, no matter how conflicted or shadowy or duplicitous or even **wrong** our desires may be on the *surface*, they are connected to something deep within our souls that really demands attention, and that is *good*. Our desires are worth listening to. They **do** need to be brought into the light. Many of us – certainly I – need help sifting through our life’s desires to see where they need to be deepened or purified, where they are connected to God’s gift of life for us...”⁴

So ask yourself this week, ask yourself throughout this Epiphany season: “What am I looking for?” and pay attention to your longing, your passions, your desires,

and where they are coming from. Don't settle for your first answer; ask yourself again and again, going deeper and deeper each time. "What am I looking for? What am I *really* looking for?"

"No matter how informed or deformed our desires may be, God is using our desires – past and present – to make us whole and to lead us, like with bread crumbs, to a door we probably would not otherwise have chosen or even recognized. Inside **that** door is home."⁵

AMEN

¹ <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/god/how-your-brain-wired-god>

² <http://ssje.org/ssje/2005/05/08/gods-desire-our-desire/>

³ *ibid.*

⁴ <http://ssje.org/ssje/2009/10/18/the-gift-of-desire-br-curtis-almquist/>

⁵ *ibid.*