

Sermon for the Second Sunday after Epiphany Year A
January 15, 2023
St. Michael's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Canon Michael J. Horvath
Gospel: John 1:29-42

Friday afternoon I was in the mood to watch something on Netflix. I wasn't sure what exactly it was, but I opened up Netflix and spent a good half hour just going through their selections. I quickly fell into a search spiral of too many choices and, after about half an hour I finally gave up and read a good book. Have you ever found yourself in that situation? It's easy to get overwhelmed by choices on streaming platforms like Netflix, at the grocery store, the library or even with the clothes in your closet. It's the classic situation of someone peering into a closet full of clothes and saying "I don't have a thing to wear!"

Today we find our friend John the Baptist again, and he keeps running into Jesus after Jesus has been baptized. What John does when he sees Jesus is essentially testify, he acts as a witness to the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus and God speaking as he was baptized in the river Jordan. A first inclination is to discount what John is saying, but let's remember that John was THE BAPTIST. People came from far and wide to be baptized by him so there was an element of authority that he had. They were inclined to believe him because the surrounding community had understood John to be holy, meaning set aside by God for God's purposes, and his was a first-hand experience of Jesus's baptism. But what's interesting is that John didn't try to persuade any of his disciples. All he did was point the way to Jesus "Look, here is the Lamb of God."

And when the disciples approach Jesus, Jesus asks them "What are you looking for?" And their response in the question of "Rabbi, where are you staying?" is reflective, I think, of their inability to see that what they have been looking for all their lives is standing in front of them. Perhaps it is a sense of utter disbelief. Could he really be our heart's desire? We believe he's the Messiah, but if we say it, we may be dreaming too big! Could my hope be answered? Could the world finally find the promised peace, love and compassion of God in this very mortal man? Is he what we're looking for?

I've been contemplating this very question as I prepare for St. Michael's Annual Meeting in February and our upcoming Vestry Retreat. What are we looking for? What are we looking for as a church, and what are you in the pews looking for in this community we call St. Michael's? And I'm not asking about the surface-level things, I'm asking about things that can transform us as followers of Christ, and ways that can transform the community in which we have the opportunity to show the love of Christ.

If we get honest with ourselves and turn a more critical eye to our church, perhaps we can give voice to deep desires that we hold for our community. That's when the question of "What are you looking for at St. Michael's?" starts to really be important. Too often to face our deepest longings, to acknowledge the emptiness of some of the things we thought had a lot of meaning, to inquire about what is of ultimate importance in shaping and forming our lives, is just not a "feel good" conversation. It can be too scary and too risky. Answering Jesus's question means getting real, being vulnerable, open and honest. And because being

vulnerable, open and honest is scary, we've gotten really good at talking about things that don't matter until something happens that does matter – a tragedy, the loss of a loved one, the trauma of a pandemic.

But this question goes to the heart of our relationship with God and it goes to the heart of what we're doing here at St. Michael's. What are we doing here? What is this all about for us as a community and for you as a Christian? Why are we here and what are we seeking?

And I'll be up front with you about what I'm looking for. I'm looking for God to point me towards the wounded places in our community and the world beyond. Towards the broken and the marginalized. To bring love, compassion and justice to those who are seeking it in their lives. I'm looking to share the joy of the Good News of Jesus with those who thought such good news was beyond their reach. I'm looking to be part of a community that knows that it cannot survive without the help of every individual who makes up that community. I'm looking for a church that loves unconditionally and practices radical hospitality to everyone, from the most faithful Sunday churchgoer to the stranger who walks off the street. I want a creative faith community that seeks to move beyond ancestor worship and slavish adherence to the memory of a church that existed twenty or thirty years ago. Jesus isn't bound by the past history of St. Michael's, and we can't be either if we expect to be here for another 300 years. And, most important, I long to be part of a faith community where every individual is willing to get up out of their pews and go out into the world to do the work God calls us to do. I'm looking for a community that isn't content to do what's easiest or safest for its reputation, but rather to move towards things that require brave hearts and a deep commitment to the way of Christ. This is what I'm looking for.

If you saw the email that Loretta put together with photos of all the things St. Michael's did in 2022, then you know that we're off to a good start and that many of these things are starting to come into fruition. But we can always find ways to strengthen our relationship with him.

So today Jesus presents you with an invitation. What are you looking for? What are your deepest desires in a life with Christ that only Christ can meet? Longings that can't otherwise be fulfilled by the myriad of choices that life presents us with? So many choices that we often give up and, in the end, leave Christ a distant second. Given that we voluntarily come gather each Sunday, ask yourselves what are your deepest longings as Christians? Where in your lives and in the life of our community are we experiencing emptiness? And what does it look like when we allow God to meet these deep longings and fill the emptiness?

Let's stop looking in the closet and saying to ourselves "I don't have anything to wear." Let's stop staring into a full refrigerator and moaning "There's nothing to eat." Sometimes what we crave most is right under our noses. The question Jesus asks is, ultimately, rhetorical, because what John's disciples were looking for, what they needed most, what they desired deepest, stood before them. They now only had to realize how much their lives and the lives of others could be transformed and changed beyond their wildest imaginations. The time is ripe for us, for St. Michael's, to realize the same thing. Amen.