



Grace Church

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins  
Rector

## TWO QUESTIONS

### Sermon for Epiphany 2, January 14, 2017

*Readings:* Isaiah 49:1-7; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-42; Psalm 40:1-12

*Sermon text:* 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.

Two questions. The first: What are you looking for? The second: Where are you staying? The first is asked by Jesus to two people who are disciples of John the Baptist but who are intrigued by Jesus, having heard John describe him as the Lamb of God. The second question is asked by one of the two to Jesus. They are not sure what they are looking for but they would like to spend some time with Jesus and find out. He tells them, “Come and see.” And so, as the evangelist John writes, “They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day.” Afterward one of the two, Andrew, found his brother Simon, who will be called Peter (the rock) by Jesus and become a leader among the twelve disciples. Thus Jesus, according to the gospel of John, begins gathering his disciples in the camp by the Jordan with John the Baptist. Next week we will hear a different version of the calling of Andrew and Peter from the gospel according to Matthew.

What interests me are the questions. One is asked of us, those who call ourselves followers of Jesus, and those of any faith or none but who are equally addressed by the question: what are you looking for?

What are you looking for? *¿Qué están buscando?*

What are you looking for? Take some time to think about that.

Some answers pop up: Food and shelter. Friends and family. Love and happiness. God and truth.

Or maybe what pops up are less abstract, more mundane things: maybe you're looking for Waldo, a good meal, a TV show... But these need to be rooted in the broader landscape of a well-lived life.

Instead of things, maybe you look for experiences—traveling all over the world, going to see shows and events. But how often do we diminish the experience in a rush to record it? Here let me take a selfie in the presence of beauty or celebrity [or this wonderful parishioner sitting up front].

Or maybe, as Simon and Garfunkel sang long ago, “We’ve all come to look for America” (which one, you may ask? red or blue). Here is the third stanza of “America,” a beautiful poetic sketch: “So I looked at the scenery, She read her magazine; And the moon rose over an open field. “Kathy, I'm lost”, I said, Though I knew she was sleeping. “I'm empty and aching and I don't know why.”

“I’m empty and aching and don’t know why.” Long ago, St Augustine wrote in his *Confessions* that he had looked high and low but failed to find life’s meaning and goal in any of the things, ideas and people of the world. Only God can fill the God-shaped hole in our soul, he concluded. So that’s what the two disciples were looking for. They were looking for God, and they thought, rightly, that Jesus knew where to find him.

Where are you staying? ¿*Dónde vives?*

Jesus answers, Come and see. *Vengan a verlo.*

This past Wednesday we began a two-week class on praying with icons, an ancient spiritual practice of the Eastern Orthodox stream of Christianity. We looked at a number of examples, ancient and modern, and read Henri Nouwen’s short book of meditations on four icons, *Behold the Beauty of the Lord*. The first meditation is on the icon of the *The Holy Trinity (Troitsa)* by Andrei Rublev, perhaps the most famous of all icons. Here is a copy. It shows three angels around a table with a small dish of food in the middle. Behind them is a tree and there is a building off in the distance. We know from the story in Genesis that the setting is the map of Abraham and Sarah and the angels, appearing as travelers, have come to tell them that Sarah, though quite old, will bear a child, the promised child, next year. We also know, from the title of the icon and the history of its making and interpretation, that it is symbolic representation of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Father and Son are looking at each other while the Son, in the middle, blessed the food—the lamb that Abraham and Sarah have offered, which also symbolizes the Lamb that will be the life of the Son incarnate as Jesus Christ. The Spirit, on the left, looks toward the Father and indicated the base of the table, in the center of which is a symbol of the world. We understand this is a circle of blessing and love, from which will flow the salvation of the world.

Henri Nouwen encountered a copy of this icon while on retreat during a period of exhaustion and depression. He was an acclaimed writer and teacher at the height of his power, a tenured professor at Yale and author of books on spiritual practice. But he found himself, as Dante before him, wandering in a dark forest at the midpoint of his life. He went to Switzerland, to a home for people with profound mental disabilities called L’Arche, which was conceived and run as a community of shared responsibility and love by the founder Jean Varnier. “At L’Arche, people with disabilities, and those who assist them, live together in homes and apartments, sharing life with one another and building community as responsible adults. Everyone is believed to have the capacity to grow and to mature into adulthood,



and to make a contribution to society, regardless of the physical or intellectual limitations with which they may be living” (Wikipedia entry on L’Arche). There are now hundreds of these communities around the world. And indeed Henri Nouwen spend the latter part of his life living in one, and spoke and wrote about it.

But, as I mentioned, at the time of his initial stay he was suffering from depression and exhaustion. There was an icon of the Holy Trinity in his room which he gazed upon for hours. Gradually he began to sense that this circle of angels was what he called the house of love, and that he was being given a choice—or a call—whether to stay in the **house of love** or return to **the house of fear**.

The house of fear—where the world tries to keep us, where we are constantly threatened by enemies, where we need always to be ready to defend ourselves, ready to fight, never to forgive, never to trust, never to be vulnerable, never to love.

What are you looking for? Where are you staying? Do you want to live in the house of fear? Or do you want to stay with Jesus in the house of love?

The house of love is not some mansion in the sky. It is the same building in the same world as the house of fear. But somehow there is abundance, not scarcity, friends not enemies, welcome not attack, where people listen to each other and to God, rather than shout at each other and claim God is on their side.

It is not naive or foolish to stay in the house of love. Nor is it easy. We are constantly being pulled and tempted back to fear. It takes practice. Sometimes people with profound disabilities—as judged by the standards of the world—are the ones who can live there best. They can teach those of us who are constantly working and and striving and fighting to stay afloat, to stay ahead, to do unto others before they do unto us. And then say, well, that is what everyone does.

But that is not the truth. You find that out in a place like L'Arche, in communities that actually practice the Way of Jesus. Churches are supposed to be those kinds of places—and I think here at Grace we do a pretty good job. But church is a learning community, a hospital ship for wounded sinners, not an an ark of the already whole and holy. We depend on each other and learn through listening to the word of God—prayer and study—and service to those in need. We are here to learn and grow. We are looking for God. Let's find him together.

In Christ, Amen.

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