

What Are We Looking For?

John 1: 29-42

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!...The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, ³⁶ and as he watched Jesus walk by he exclaimed, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” ³⁷ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. ³⁸ 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?” ³⁹ 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 day I was driving around town when I found myself behind a vehicle with a bumper sticker. Now I love reading bumper stickers, so I got closer to the bumper so I could read it. There it was: a bumper sticker on the back of a car that read, “Do you happen to follow Jesus this closely too?” Oops! It caught me, and it was an introspective moment where it made me wonder how closely I *was following* Jesus. In the gospel, Jesus attracts his first followers. And as he notices they are following on his bumper we hear him say his first words: “What are you looking for?”

It's an introspective moment. One that makes any of us pause and think: “What are we looking for?” “Why are we following him?” How might we answer? After all, there are a lot of versions of Jesus in the world. Maybe if we were being honest, we admit that most of us grew up in some Christian context that said we needed to follow Jesus, but never asked us to think about *why we follow him*. Perhaps we follow because we feel comforted and protected. Maybe there is something about Jesus which points to the best way to live our lives. Maybe it is simply what everybody else is doing so why not! “What are you looking for?” Jesus asks. “Why are you following me?” How might we answer his question?

Look at the story and it seems from the disciple’s perspective they are following because Jesus is the one who is going to “take away the sin of the world.” Notice the word for “sin” here is singular. It’s corporate. It is something in our collective humanity which moves in opposition to the way of God. It is systemic and is threaded throughout our historical story. The first time the word “sin” is used in our bibles might surprise us. It’s not in the garden when the first humans eat the fruit off the forbidden tree. It’s actually in the following chapter when their oldest son, Cain, gets so consumed by rivalry that he plans to harm his brother. And God visits and says be careful, “sin is lurking at your door.” It’s singular. For the first disciples, Jesus is someone who will put an end to the violence we so often inflict upon our siblings. He is someone who will fix a system which depends on violence and scapegoating others to get ahead. And they follow him because he is the one who will take away the sin of the world.

Except, here’s the issue. Systemic sin is still here. Racism is still here. Violence and scapegoating are still here. While some laws may have changed, racism has gotten craftier. School choice is a crafty way of keeping schools segregated. Voter ID laws, a sneaky attempt at silencing certain people’s voices. The truth is we don’t have to look very far to see that while some things have changed, many things have remained the same. Maybe you’ve read in the

paper about the school district in Georgia? In Effingham County some of the schools have banned their students from wearing “Black Lives Matter” t-shirts. They say, much like with the resistance to teaching children African American history in schools, it makes white kids feel bad about themselves. But notice there is no ban on anyone wearing a confederate flag t-shirt. Never mind how the symbol makes a Black child feel. The macro and microaggressions against our siblings of color are alive and well. Jesus is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Well news flash: systemic sin is still here.

So then Jesus offers an invitation. “Come and see,” he says. It is the second thing he says in the gospel. To see things in a new light; to experience who Jesus is and what he is about for themselves and then to follow him in the same way. Once we see something clearly, it is impossible to unsee it. You see, as much as Jesus condemns violence and exclusion and systemic injustice, he doesn’t stop it. Instead, he exposes it for its true nature. He resists without retribution. He doesn’t return violence with violence, but with light and truth and grace upon grace. It is the same strategy of those in the civil rights movement who we celebrate this weekend. A non-violent movement which exposed America’s violence for what it truly is.

When I was in Birmingham, AL—on a pilgrimage of the civil rights trail—I learned that the Commissioner for Public Safety at the time, Bull Connor—who ordered the attack on children at Kelly Ingram Park with police dogs and water hoses in the name of “public safety”—almost did nothing in response to the protest. He almost sat on his hands. He was advised to let it fizzle out. Except the sin of white supremacy lurked at his door, and he couldn’t help himself. And so, while a major network was airing a documentary on the Holocaust, a news flash interrupted the scheduled program to show scenes of Black children being hosed with forces so powerful the water was stripping the bark off of the trees. And those watching the horrors of white supremacy in Germany saw the same evils of white supremacy in our back yard. A new light shined on what was happening on our soil, and it was exposed. Once we see something clearly it is impossible to unsee it. “Come and see,” says Jesus. Come and see who I am and what I am about, so you can follow in the same way.

So church, how closely are we following? The late Rev. Carlton Eversley said something that stuck with me. He said, “White churches are notorious for thinking that talking about racism is doing something about it.” Perhaps it is a first step, but my friends we are beyond talking about it. My hope is as a Matthew 25 church we continue to take concrete steps to eliminate America’s original sin. It will ask us to put our money and resources where our words are, and to put our bodies on the line in the name of justice and love. It will ask us to resist without retribution. And to not allow *their* hate into *our* hearts.

So today we recommit to exposing racism while working toward eliminating it. It’s every disciple’s calling: to expose systems of injustice while doing what we can to help take away the sin of the world. To “come and see” who Jesus is as the one who exposes violence without giving into it. And maybe, just maybe, in the process we discover who we are as his disciples, and truly what it is we are looking for.