

Quest Sermon Series 1 of 8
“What Do You Want?”

Dear Friends, Greetings this morning, in the name of our Lord Jesus, on this first day of our new worship schedule and the first day of what we will be referring to, from now on (between services), at 9:45, as our Middle Hour. Today it's more on the introductory level, with a chance to see what's coming up and how to be involved. Next week it all starts up with an opportunity for all of us, Sunday mornings and midweek, to be encouraged and challenged and strengthened in our faith-walk with Christ.

Today is also the first of eight Sundays where we will be focusing (during our sermon time) on some of the many questions Jesus asked throughout his ministry. We'll be taking on in these (next eight weeks) eight of Jesus' (most important) questions (to his followers) in an attempt to understand not only what he was asking (of them) back then, but to be challenged with what he is still asking of us today.

What I want to do today are two things. First, I want to frame this series by spending the first part of our time talking about one of the methods Jesus used in his teaching ministry and, in so doing, what he was trying to accomplish. Jesus had a way of teaching that was built (more than anything) around his ability to ask questions. He was a master at asking questions. I want to spend the first part of our time framing this series.

The second part, from there, what I want to do is to go after one of the first questions Jesus ever asks, and one of the first (and most important) questions we need to answer. As followers of his, if we're serious about our relationship with Christ, today's question is one we cannot avoid. Two things: I want to frame the series and I want us to be challenged with one of Jesus' questions. (We good?)

Alright, let's get into it, starting with Jesus' teaching ministry. I don't know about you, but (at least, for me) living in a world (as we do) filled with (a long list) of unanswered questions, I've always felt a sense of peace and assurance (as a Christian) that (in Jesus) we find answers to some of the most important questions (in life) we face.

For example, as a sinner in the sight of a sinless God, how do I know I'm forgiven? The answer we've been given is in Jesus. As one who sees (more clearly) each day that life on this earth is short, how do I know when that day comes (and it's over) that I'll find myself in heaven? The answer we have is in Christ.

It keeps on going. How do I know I'm loved? (The answer is Jesus.) How do I know God cares about my life? Look at the cross and what God has done for you in his Son and the answer (to that question) is obvious. God cares more than we might realize. (He really does.) To all of life's biggest and most important questions, God's answer is Jesus.

Having said that (and it's all true), it's fascinating to me that Jesus (throughout his ministry) asked far more questions (of his followers) than he ever gave answers. Jesus was much more likely to ask a question than he was to provide an answer.

Go through the four gospels, (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), and I'll bet you'll be surprised. In those four stories of Jesus' life, Jesus asks (a total of) 307 questions – 307 questions asked by Jesus. In contrast, Jesus gives answers to less than ten. What that means is, (in his ministry), his life, Jesus is more than thirty times more likely to ask a question than he is to give a direct answer.

It happens all throughout. Start at the start. In Luke's gospel, when Jesus was only twelve years old, (remember that story), in the Temple, his parents couldn't find him, so they went looking. When they finally

found him and expressed their anxiety, because he was lost, what does Jesus do? He asks a question. (He asks two questions.)

He says, “Why were you looking for me? (And then he says), “Did you not know that I would be in my Father’s house?” The very first words out of Jesus’ mouth (in the gospels) were questions.

It’s the same thing on the other end of his life, after he was raised from the dead, Jesus continues to ask questions. On the road to Emmaus, (remember that), with those two travelers, (he asks), “What are you discussing together as you walk along?” Standing on the shore with his disciples in a boat, (he asks), “Do you have anything here to eat?” In his final conversation with Peter, (after his denial three times), Jesus asks, “Do you love me more than these?”

Jesus, (in his ministry), was far more likely to ask a question than to give an answer. In fact, the truth is, if you’re looking for an Answer Man in Jesus, you’ll probably find yourself being more than a bit disappointed. But if you’re willing to face and be honest (with yourself) about the questions he asks of you (in your life), you might find yourself on a quest you didn’t see coming.

That word “quest”, which is the title we’ve given to this series, has the same root as the word “question.” It’s interesting, in asking questions of us, how Jesus is leading us on a quest. (That’s what he’s doing.) And not a quest to find answers to the questions we happen to (come up with) in life, but to be challenged by the questions he asks of the answers (in life) we think we already have.

Giving answers has a sense of finality. Questions keep us searching. Answers bring closure to whatever is being discussed. In contrast, questions are open-ended, giving us a chance (in our search) to be changed.

The questions Jesus asks are not too dissimilar (in purpose) from some of the stories he tells. Jesus asked a lot of questions in his ministry. He also shared a lot of stories. In his stories (his parables), Jesus didn’t give us all the answers. What he did was to frame the questions that would lead to the answers.

By design, after sharing a parable, (telling a story), the listener, (the one hearing it), still had to do some work...by design. It was the same with his questions. The goal in his parables and in his questions was not simply to pass on information, to tell us about the way things are, but to ask the hard questions that would lead to transformation, and begin to give us a glimpse into the way things might be.

It’s not surprising, in his teaching ministry, that Jesus, as a Jew, used one of the teaching methods that was common among the Jewish Rabbis. Almost all of the Rabbis (in Jesus’ day) were good at asking questions. In fact, there’s an old Jewish joke about the rabbinical habit of asking questions. (Have you heard it?)

The question: “Why does a Jewish Rabbi always answer a question with a question?” The answer: “Why shouldn’t a Jewish Rabbi answer a question with a question?” It was a common practice in Jesus’ day, asking questions, causing the listener to think. In the gospels, Jesus is addressed as Rabbi because he was (and is), among other things, a good teacher. And a good teacher (a good rabbi) like Jesus knows just what questions to ask.

And so we come (today) to one of the first questions Jesus asks (in his ministry), as well as to one of the first questions you and I have to face as his followers. It’s a simple question asked by Jesus. It’s a straightforward question put in front of us by our Lord. But the answer (to our Lord’s question) isn’t quite so simple and straightforward.

Remember the context? The context for Jesus’ question was in the calling story of some of those first disciples. (We read part of the story this morning.) John, chapter one, in John’s gospel, a different John (John the Baptist) was gathered with some of his followers. John the Baptist had a great following. His ministry was to prepare the way for Christ.

In the story (the context) John the Baptist is with two of his followers, when (all of a sudden), Jesus is there. When they see him (they see Jesus), John says (to his followers), “Look, the Lamb of God!”

When they hear this (these two followers), they leave John and begin following Jesus. Exactly what was supposed to happen: preparing the way for Christ, pointing people to him, it actually worked. They left John and began following Jesus.

And that's when it happened. When Jesus saw them (saw that they were following), what he did was, he turned around and asked them a question. He asked, "What do you want?" As they were following, he asked them, "What do you want?" It says they told him they wanted to know where he was staying. Jesus said, "Come and see." So they went and they saw, and they spent the day with Jesus. And John, (the gospel-writer) tells us "it was about the tenth hour."

And so the questions begin, and so the quest (of the Christian life) in following Jesus has its start. "What do you want?" when it comes to Jesus. What are you hoping to find when it comes to Christ? What are you looking for? What do you want to see? What hour (in your life) is it (or was it) when you finally began realizing that Jesus just might have something (in his life) that you really need in yours?

It's an easy question in some settings. "What do you want?" "What are you hoping to find?" It's a harder question when it comes from Jesus. It's a soul-searching question when it comes from Christ.

I was in Macy's (at the mall) the other night (with my wife, Mary), in the Men's section. We were looking for clothes that I might be able to wear on Sunday mornings. I've learned (over the years) to always take my wife with me when I'm picking out Sunday morning clothes. For some reason, she has a better eye than I, (if you know what I mean), when it comes to that kind of thing! It was a good night. We actually found some. I'm wearing them. What do you think? Did you notice? Pretty sharp.

In the Men's section, looking for Sunday morning clothes, it was an easy question when the clerk stepped in to help. "What do you want?" she asked. "What are you looking for? What are you hoping to find?" No problem with that question. A new jacket, a pair of pants, a couple of shirts that match. It was an easy one to answer...in Macy's...shopping with my wife. It's not always so easy in life; going through it and trying to figure out what we want.

"What do you want?" when it comes to Jesus. "What are you hoping to find?" when it comes to your relationship with Christ: a confidant, a companion, a co-worker: a Master, a Teacher, a Friend; a Lord, a Savior, a God?

Years ago, I don't know if you're familiar with the group called U2? They're still singing. There was a song (years ago), sung by the lead singer, Bono, titled "I still haven't found what I'm looking for." It was a fun song, a (somewhat) up-beat song, but it kept coming back to the same refrain. By the time it was over, it was obvious that the singer had not only "not found what he was looking for," but (by the time it was over), it was obvious that he didn't even know what he was looking for.

What are you looking for in life? What do you want to find when it comes to Christ?

Have you ever gone to the refrigerator, you're hungry, opened the door and just stared in? It's full of options, every shelf, things you could take and eat, all kinds of choices...but nothing grabs your attention, doesn't even (come close) to what you think you want, so you close it up and walk away?

Many people spend their lives like that, a longing for something, staring at the possibilities (the many options this world offers), but end up closing the door and still wondering.

What do you want? What are you hoping to find? All kinds of things are possible. Financial security? A good reputation and career? A happy home life? A strong and solid education? A life-partner, a close friend, a word of forgiveness from that one you've hurt, or a word of "I'm sorry" from that one who let you down?

All of these are good things in life. These are all good things. They really are. (Don't miss the point.) These are all good things! I want those things in my life, too. There's nothing wrong with them, nothing wrong at all. But it's not enough, it's never enough, no matter what happens. It doesn't finally and fully fill the void.

Saint Augustine said that our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God. The philosopher, Pascal, said there's a God-shaped void in each of us, and until God (who has that shape) fills the void, it'll never go away.

Sounds a lot like what we find in the Bible, in the Old Testament, in the words of the psalmist, who writes, "As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God" (Ps. 42:1). It sounds a lot like what Jesus said (in the New) when he talked about living an abundant life.

There's an emptiness, there's an unfilled void, there's a longing within each of us...and until we recognize the need (we have) and allow the Lord to fill it, it'll never go away.

And so the quest begins, and so the journey that ultimately leads to the cross and the empty tomb has its start. Along comes Jesus, asks a simple question, and life (if we're honest) can never be the same again.

It's easy at Macy's. Not too hard staring into the fridge. It's not quite so simple when the question comes from Christ. "What do you want? What are you hoping to find?"

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we thank you for loving us as you do and for walking the path that led to your death, that we, in turn, might have life. We thank you, also, for asking the hard questions that cause us to consider, if not to reconsider, the priorities and values and directions of the life we've been given. Lord, as we start this new school year together, help this to be the beginning of a quest, led by your questions, that would ultimately draw us closer to you, and, in so doing, bring us that much closer to each other and to the true and lasting meaning and purpose for which we've been created. We pray this all in your name. Amen.