

January 15, 2017
Pastor Michael D. Costello

In the name of the Father, and of the † Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Many of you know that I love to travel to Germany. Specifically, I enjoy spending time in the city of Leipzig where Johann Sebastian Bach lived and worked as Cantor for over 25 years. The last several times I have been there I have worked to build connections between the churches there and our own; members of Grace's choir have sung for worship three times in Leipzig; and on my sabbatical in 2015 I had an opportunity to study some of Bach's original manuscripts in the Bach Archiv. These trips have made an incredible difference in how I approach sacred music here at Grace.

But getting to know the city of Leipzig has been a near twenty-year journey for me. The first time I ever travelled abroad was with my college choir in 1999. And in the year 2000, the 250th anniversary of Bach's death, my best friend from college and I decided that we would return on our own. And so we did. And when we arrived in Leipzig we checked into our hotel room and set off the next morning to explore the town. We walked and walked that day in the pre-smartphone era to the point that we had no clue where we were. As the sun was setting and exhaustion set in there was no way that we were going to find our way back to the hotel.

But, behold! We saw a taxi and decided to jump in. I knew just enough German to ask the driver to take us to the hotel next to the train station. After a brief silence he pointed off to his right and, sure enough, we were only about 50 yards from our hotel. We embarrassingly slipped out of his cab and walked to our abiding place for the night. We clearly had no idea what we were looking for.

In today's Gospel reading John the Baptist serves a role much like that cab driver. John was standing with two of his disciples when Jesus walked by. It was then that he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" Like two young college kids eager to find their way home, the two disciples followed Jesus. But when Jesus realized that they were following him he asked them, "What are you looking for?" They replied, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" "Where is your abiding place?" And Jesus said, "Come and see."

Jesus' question to those two disciples is worth thinking about for a bit. Perhaps this question should be reframed for us. People of God, "What are you looking for?"

We're all looking for something, after all. So what is it for you? Is it an improvement in a broken relationship, perhaps even in your own home? Is it freedom from a job that seems like more effort than it's worth? Is it relief from a bank account that is bottoming out? Is it the need for health and healing, whether in body or in mind? Is it some combination of these things, or something else? Hear Jesus' question for you: "What are you looking for?"

If we fast-forward in John's Gospel to chapter 18, we find ourselves in the middle of Jesus' betrayal by Judas. "Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they came [to the garden] with lanterns and torches and weapons. Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them, 'Whom are you looking for?'"

One of the things that I love about the Gospels and, specifically, John's Gospel, is the way in which the author makes connections using phrases that unify the gospel narrative and draw our attention, ultimately, to the truth of who Jesus is. To that end, I did something that I don't do very often, which was to blow the dust off of my Greek New Testament. I compared Jesus' question in chapter 1, "What are you looking for?" with his question in chapter 18, "Whom are you looking for?" Indeed, in both cases Jesus is asking the same question.

What were the disciples in chapter 1 looking for, even before they came to faith? Jesus of Nazareth, the one whom John the Baptist declared, "This is the Son of God." The reply of the soldiers in chapter 18 was clear, for they were out to arrest Jesus. "*Whom* are you looking for?" "Jesus of Nazareth," they said.

As it turns out, the *what* and the *whom* in John's Gospel are one in the same. This *thing* that everyone is seeking happens to be a particular *someone*, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

I said a minute ago that we're all looking for something. But perhaps we could reframe our lives as Christians to look for *someone* instead of *something*. After all, we can actually be in a relationship with a *someone*—Jesus—in a way that we cannot with a *something*. And the *someone* who died on the cross for us and for our salvation—the *someone* who began a relationship with you in your Holy Baptism—bids us all to find our abiding place in him.

In chapter 18, Simon Peter, who was brought to faith in today's reading through his brother Andrew, drew a sword to cut off the servant of the high priest's ear and then proceeded to deny Jesus three times. Yet, following his crucifixion, death, and resurrection, Jesus forgave Peter and called to him once more in chapter 21, saying, again: "follow me."

Lest we believe that we aren't good enough or worthy enough or rich enough or healthy enough or—well, you fill in the blank—know that God in Jesus Christ is the one who holds our lives, sins and all, in his loving arms and calls us over and over and over again to follow.

That is the reason we gather here each and every Sunday and sometimes more; to tell once more and hear once more and receive once more the loving grace of God, that most undeserved but necessary gift which sustains us in this life and prepares us for all that is to come. As Lutheran Christians we believe that the word of forgiveness spoken here is a word of forgiveness that comes from God. As we sing the words "Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world" and receive Christ's body and blood in the Communion meal, our sins are indeed forgiven and our new life in Christ is restored.

As you all know, this is an historic week in the life of our country. For some it is a week to celebrate and for others it is a week to mourn. Regardless of our political affiliations, we can all see that our country is divided and is looking for something—maybe for *someone*—to heal what is broken. As Christians we have a duty that flows out of our baptismal calling to proclaim that *someone* who can and will bring about a peace that surpasses our understanding.

Andrew fulfilled his call in today's Gospel reading by declaring to his brother Simon, "We have found the Messiah," and by bringing him to faith. Likewise, we can be a healing force this week by proclaiming Jesus Christ in our own words and deeds.

When we see others shaking their heads and asking what they are going to do in this divided state of affairs, we can say things such as this: “You know, amidst all of the wrangling going on in the last few months, I have really found peace in my faith.” Yes, you bashful Lutherans, we can actually say things like that. Out loud.

Like those who have gone before us, including the man whose life we commemorate tomorrow, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we can speak through whatever darkness we encounter in this world to proclaim the light of Christ, who makes all things new.

After all, there are times in our lives when exhausted and lost people will get into our taxi—that is, there are people who come into our lives at unexpected times—who desperately need *us* to point to that *someone*, that abiding place in which we find our true peace. “Here... here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

Fed by Christ, forgiven, and loved, maybe we should take a moment to ask those around us this week: *Whom* are you looking for?

Amen.