

Looking for Jesus
John 6:24-35
First Presbyterian Church, Sarasota
August 5, 2018
Rev. Glen Bell

When the crowd saw that Jesus was not there, they hurried. They got into their boats and they headed down the coast to Capernaum. They were looking for Jesus.

That's it. That's it in a nutshell. We come to worship, we listen to scripture, we cry out in prayer, we sit with a dear friend at the hospital, and we are looking for Jesus. We deliver our children to day camp every morning, we send our teenagers off to Montreat and Maryville, we sacrifice our time and energy and oomph, all because we want our children to meet Jesus.

Looking for Jesus is everything.

Years ago, a New York Times reporter interviewed Dr. Calvin Butts, pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York City. Abyssinian Baptist has long been one of the leading congregations of the metropolis. In a neighborhood marked by addiction and poverty and gangs, the church supports a diversity of key ministries.

The reporter asked Dr. Butts, "Do you think your church is making a real difference?" He responded that he truly could not prove the effectiveness of their programs. The reporter then asked, "So why do you keep on doing them?" Dr. Butts replied, "Because we read the Bible, and we know how the story ends."

You and I read the Bible. We know how the story ends. Every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

You and I read the Bible. We know how the story ends. God will wipe every tear from our eyes. Death will be no more, and mourning and crying and pain will be no more.

You and I read the Bible. We know how the story ends. The children of God will worship the Lord in God's presence. We will see God face-to-face. We will not need a lamp or the sun, for the Lord God will be our light.

That's why we keep looking for Jesus. We search near and far, even as we watch the destruction of God's beautiful creation because of the red tide here and the terrible wildfires out west. We look high and low, even if our hearts are broken as the latest Catholic priest or school teacher or sports coach is removed because of his sexual abuse. We look and look and look, even as our neighbors or our church or even our closest family members disappoint us. We keep looking for Jesus, even when our national conversation or a talk with a close friend turns loud and angry and awful.

We keep looking for Jesus. We need him. We need his love desperately.

My friend Morgan Roberts is a gifted pastor and preacher. His most recent book is *A Beautiful View: A Friendlier Christianity as a Way of Life*. In it, he points to the jumble of his growing up. His neighborhood was not only blessed with a beautiful view, but also home to a brothel. His grandfather was a street sweeper, his grandparents mostly illiterate, his parents and aunts and uncles never encouraged to finish school. Most of the neighborhood worked blue collar jobs at the nearby plant. He never dreamed he could go to college and graduate school.

One of his earliest experiences with church was quite a mix too. The people of the church were kind and gracious, but the pastor's "ministry could be likened to a travel agency that specializes in guilt trips."

That's how it is for us, I expect. Our personal lives, our family lives, our vocational experience, even our church experience is a great jumble. Some of it is a wonder and a blessing. Some of it fills us with gratitude. Other parts are discouraging, even overwhelming.

Through it all, we keep looking for Jesus. We are looking for the light through the darkness, the pearl hidden in a field, the gospel that transforms us from the inside out, the trust, the faith, the goodness that makes all the difference.

Jesus himself encourages us along this pilgrimage. “Don’t work for the food that perishes,” he says, “but the food that sustains you always, from the inside out.” And we respond, “What? What? What do you mean, Jesus? What are you all about? What is the spiritual path? How shall we speak and think and act to be a part of God’s work and ways?”

Do you notice how Jesus replies? He doesn’t talk about memorizing scripture or singing in the choir or band or teaching church school or working with our youth. He doesn’t repeat the Ten Commandments. I am in favor of all those things, by the way. But Jesus doesn’t mention them.

No, he says, this is the most important thing: You are invited to believe, to trust.

It is the most important thing – and sometimes a hard thing.

Charles F. Andrews was an Anglican mission worker in India over a hundred years ago. He was a friend of Mahatma Gandhi; indeed, he convinced Gandhi to return home to India from South Africa to lead the movement for justice and freedom. He was known in India as the friend of the poor.

Andrews wrote this, “What I have been seeking to learn all these years, through storm and stress, . . . is the character of God as it is revealed to us by Christ. God, our heavenly Father, is truly the Father of all mankind. He is no tribal God. He is bound up with no race. He loves mankind. His mercy is over all his works, and his goodness is made known to all the children of men. Even those who outwardly appear to deny him are still his children, embraced in the arms of his love.”

We live in a world of anger and resentment, a world of jealousy and self-centeredness, a world in which we are put down, rejected, misunderstood, over and over again. But we need not be defeated. We need not rehearse and remember all the ways we are not honored, not put first, not agreed with, not preferenced. We need not focus on the anger and resentment that swirls around us and threatens to claim our hearts, because God cherishes us. We are embraced by the arms of Christ’s love.

The irony is this: The main thing the world invites us to believe in is me, in our selves. We are encouraged to find our voice, claim our space, exercise our power, know our rights, to lead and act and vote and make a difference.

And again, I am in favor of those things – leading and acting and voting and making a difference. But the how and the why is critically important.

You and I are headed for disaster if our selves are the main thing, the only thing, in which we trust. If so, in the midst of the mix and jumble of human existence, we will lose our selves in the darkness of envy and resentment.

Trusting Jesus invites us to lean in, to warm our hands at the fire, to look for beauty, to enjoy, as Morgan Roberts puts it, a friendlier faith.

Trusting Jesus invites us to lean on him, to believe in his purpose. Trusting Jesus invites us to look beyond the challenges and disappointments. Trusting Jesus invites us to remember the end of the story, when the resurrection of Christ and his ultimate victory are fully revealed, when we see him standing triumphant over the sins and fears of our lives.

Trusting Jesus leads us to this Table.

The Lord’s Table is here every week. Each Sunday, in chapel, fellowship hall and sanctuary, we see the Table front and center.

The Table reminds us we are God’s children, cherished, claimed, fed, strengthened.

At our 11:00 am service this morning, we will sing / Just a few minutes ago, as the young people came forward for the moment with the children, we sang

Let us talents and tongues employ / reaching out with a shout of joy

Bread is broken, the wine is poured / Christ is spoken and seen and heard.

Jesus lives again! Earth can breathe again! Pass the Word around! Loaves abound!

I love that song! Through those words, beneath that melody, in the sweet aroma of the wine and the texture of the bread, you and I are reminded of God's great love for us in Christ. In this meal, in this holy moment, Christ is spoken and seen and heard.

That's why we celebrate on the first Sunday of each month. That's how the Table reminds us each week in worship. That's why there are members of our church who make certain they are here with us on the first Sunday of each month.

All of this feeds our faith. All of this enable us to lean on Jesus, to believe in his purpose. Truly, trusting Jesus invites us to look beyond the darkness and difficulties – and to remember the end of the story.

When I was twenty-two, I moved over five hundred miles one summer as I started graduate school. I loaded up a U-Haul truck and started on a great adventure. But before I departed, my mother bought me a table and some chairs for the kitchen in my apartment.

They weren't particularly fancy, those chairs and that table. But they witnessed to me that sustenance, food, the joy and necessity of eating are all a bedrock part of my existence as a human being. My mother, the person who patiently and lovingly taught me how to eat with a spoon, was the same person who provided a table for me as I headed off to graduate school.

That's how it is for you and me. As we see and feel and touch this Table, week after week, we are reminded that our spiritual nurture in Christ – God's joy and kindness and caring over us – is what makes all the difference throughout our lives.

We give thanks that whenever we look for Jesus, we find him at this Table – and in our hearts.