

If Jesus Is the Answer, What's the Question?

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Preaching on:

Mark 1:29–39

We're only in Mark, chapter one. Mark, chapter *one*. Jesus has hit the ground running. He has called his disciples, he has taught in the synagogue, he has cast out demons, he has cured the sick. He has already had to sneak off in the dark to get a little peace and to pray. And when his disciples find him, they tell him, "Everyone is searching for you." *Everyone* is searching *for you*.

I wonder if that line is true in some larger sense than the disciples could have imagined. I wonder if *everyone* is searching for Jesus. I believe that everybody is searching—or at least hoping—for something. The condition of many people outside of the Church, or another religious tradition, is that they don't necessarily know what it is exactly that they're searching for. But they're all searching for something that will satisfy some deep longing within them. And the condition of many people inside of the Church is that because the answer to the question has been provided to us all along (Jesus is the

answer, of course)and we didn't necessarily have to discover it for ourselves, many of us have not truly experienced the question that I believe Jesus is the answer to.

And so we're something like the people of the planet Magrathea in Douglas Adams' novel *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. After waiting 7.5 million years for their supercomputer, Deep Thought, to produce the ultimate answer to the question of life, the universe, and everything, the computer spits out the response "42." 42? After expressing dismay that they've waited 7.5 million years for the number 42, Deep Thought explains to the Magratheans that this is indeed the answer, and that the problem is simply that they don't truly understand the question yet.

And so the possibilities in my mind of these two groups of people getting together are limitless. On the one hand, the unchurched seekers who are walking the streets every day trying to find their way and longing for a sign to point them in the right direction. On the other hand, the churched seekers who have long held and studied the map of the city and who long to experience the profound miracle of being lost and then found. If we mix the questions and the answers we're going to get a chemical reaction that produces energy, light, heat. In other words, transformation.

Soren Kierkegaard, the great 19th century Danish philosopher, theologian, and existentialist argued that truly hearing and responding to the Christian message demands a personal transformation, a leap of faith that sets one apart from the crowd. This is a challenge in a Christian environment or culture, where Christianity is often taken for granted and not lived out in the radical manner that Kierkegaard believed the New Testament portrays.

In Kierkegaard's view, the very familiarity of Christianity paradoxically makes it more difficult for individuals to genuinely engage with and understand the Christian message. He believed that in spaces where everyone is considered a Christian by default, the radical and demanding nature of true Christian faith is often watered down or ignored. Kierkegaard has convinced me that if the story of how we came to be Christians and the story of how we got to the answer of Jesus is simply that we were raised in a Christian land or in a Christian church, instead of a story about a radical encounter with a God who heals, exorcises, and saves, with a God who has transformed your life, then our story will always lack the existential depth and commitment to be able to convince anyone (including very often ourselves) that our answer matters.

If I'm right about this, then the unchurched should be able to find Jesus inside this sanctuary. But only if, those who are churched and holding the answer, have first found Jesus outside the sanctuary—Jesus not in the form of an answer, but Jesus in the form of "the least of these," Jesus in the form of human beings living, and enjoying, and suffering a human life. Jesus can only be convincingly offered as the answer if those who hold that answer have truly experienced the question for themselves and the transformation that comes when the key is fitted to the lock and the door that blocked your way is finally opened wide.

Do you believe that Jesus is the answer? If so, what question or what experience or what deep longing in your life has Jesus provided the answer to? It's the answer to the second question that makes your answer to the first question matter. No one is going to care that Jesus is our answer unless we back that answer up with a story, with an experience, with some measure of devotion and love scratched out of the hardships of this life. That's why addicts in recovery are some of the best evangelists. Because they've lived and suffered through some of the worst experiences of what it's like to try to satisfy the terrifying longing at the center of life with stuff (like drugs and alcohol) instead of with (what the 12-steps call) your "higher power."

To me, Jesus the answer must always be secondary to Jesus the question. And that means, as a church, we should orient ourselves first and foremost toward those who question, rather than orienting ourselves first and foremost to those who have the answer. We should prioritize those who seek, rather than those who have found. We should prioritize our own doubts, our own questions and experiences, our own failings and longings. We should tell these stories to one another. We should tell these stories in church. Because nobody wants an answer from somebody who doesn't seem to understand the question.

Everybody is searching for something. And Jesus is an answer available to every person that can bring profound meaning, comfort, healing, challenge, love, and purpose to our lives. Whether we are unchurched and longing for an answer or churched and longing to experience our answer actually transforming our lives, we are all searching for Jesus. And we will find Jesus most fully when we come to embrace the true meaning of what it means to be searching for Jesus—the simultaneous experience of being both lost and found. This is the point of convergence where transformation can happen for all of us, where Jesus ceases to be an answer and becomes what he truly is—the experience of everything that truly matters and the grace and love that surround us all.