

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

August 4, 2024

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What are you looking for?

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Does anyone here happen to know what the first words Jesus utters in the gospel of John? I'll give you a hint...look at the title of my sermon. I've mentioned to you before the importance of the very first chapter of each of the Gospels; much of what you need to know about each Gospel's priorities and themes are laid out in their opening verses. Our reading for today hinges on those first words of Jesus, found in verse 38 of John 1, "When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, 'What are you looking for?'"

What are you looking for, Jesus asks some would-be followers. But I wonder what the crowd is looking for in John 6. Verse two tells us, "A large crowd kept following him because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick." Are they looking for signs? For healing? Then he feeds them...miraculously. What are they looking for after that? Bread? Free food? A steady source of what they need?

What are the people looking for? Well, at one point in chapter 6 we are told outright that the crowd was "about to come and take him by force to make him king."<sup>1</sup> Which...I mean...that just makes good sense, right? Make the guy who can multiply loaves and fishes king so no one will ever go hungry again! Jesus even calls them out on this: "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me not because you saw signs but because you ate your fill of the loaves."<sup>2</sup>

"What are you looking for?" Jesus asks. What needs are driving you? What deep motivations are prompting your actions? What patterns of thought and behavior are limiting your perspective? What are you hungry for? What's missing? I think all of these questions can be drawn out of these first words of Jesus. Important questions that every follower of the Way of Christ needs to grapple with, reflect on.

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<sup>1</sup> John 6:15b (NRSVue)

<sup>2</sup> John 6:26b

Jesus demands that the crowds look beyond their immediate hunger. Yes, they crave physical sustenance; poverty's iron grip has starved their bodies. Their need for bread is real, raw, and righteous. Jesus, ever compassionate, first fills their bellies without question or qualification. Yet, this mercy is merely a prelude. With urgency, Christ compels them to delve deeper, to confront the insatiable yearnings of their souls, the spiritual voids that drive them to this strange Rabbi preaching along the Galilean Sea. These hungers, Jesus insists, can only be quenched by the divine bread of heaven.

We find in this chapter an echo of both John 3 and John 4. Imagine the deep void that drives Nicodemus to risk his reputation and influence as an important Jewish leader by seeking Jesus out, albeit at night. Think of the insatiable yearning that must have been at the center of the Samaritan woman's words in John 4: "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water."<sup>3</sup>

Jesus invites the people he encounters to go deeper. To take a long, hard look in the mirror. Or, as Brother Rohr likes to say, we are caught up in the unfailingly compassionate gaze of God. What do we see reflected in God's eyes? Truth. Sometimes hard truth. But also, a compassionate, graceful, and loving truth. Throughout the Gospels Jesus invites his followers, invites us, to explore the truth; the truth of ourselves.

What hungers are driving you? What's missing in your life? I can only answer that for myself. Here's a few hungers that have motivated me over the years: a hunger for meaning and purpose, a craving for connection and community, a deep desire to be known, authentically known, a longing for delight and joy, a life-long need for healing and wholeness, and faith in the face of fear. There's a few voids and hungers that have driven me, what are some of yours?

Do you trust God to fill those voids? Sate that hunger? That's a hard ask, I know. So much of the world around us tells us there's **not** enough, there will **never be** enough. We live in a culture of scarcity that belies the abundance of God's creation. It's no great surprise that the constant stream of messages telling us we need this product or that outcome end up creating a constant feeling of "not enough."

Do we trust that Jesus is our bread? Do we believe that our daily needs will be provided for? Are we willing, once those needs are met, to go deeper into our hungers? Our needs? Let's be honest, we mostly don't trust that. We're typically unwilling to be that open and honest. Why? We don't like to admit we don't have it

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<sup>3</sup> John 4:15b (NRSVue)

all together. We don't want God to see our hunger, our deep need. We seem to think God doesn't already see all of that, how silly! How human!

In a powerful sermon on God's generosity, Lutheran minister Nadia Bolz Weber describes the shame that often keeps us from feasting on Jesus: "It's hard to accept not just that God welcomes all, but that God welcomes all of me, all of you. Even that within us we wish to hide: the part that cursed at our children this week, or drank alone, or has a problem with lying, or hates our body. That part within us that suffers from depression and can't admit it, or is too fearful to give our money away, or is riddled with shame over our sexuality, or cheats on taxes. All these parts of us we wish Jesus had the good sense to not welcome to his table are invited to taste and see that the Lord is good."

The question, "What are you looking for?" echoes through the pages of John's Gospel, a query that extends beyond the shores of Galilee to the depths of our own souls. Jesus, the Bread of Life, invites us to confront the underlying hungers that drive our actions and shape our worldviews. Are we seeking momentary gratification, power, or security? Or do we yearn for something deeper, more enduring—a connection with the divine, a sense of belonging, and a life filled with purpose?

To truly encounter Christ, we must be willing to acknowledge our deepest needs and vulnerabilities. This requires courage, humility, and a profound trust in God's provision. It means surrendering our desire for control and embracing the unknown. In the quiet spaces of our hearts, we may discover a longing for love, justice, or healing—hungers that only God can fully satisfy.

In a world that often leaves us feeling empty and dissatisfied, Jesus offers himself as the ultimate fulfillment of our deepest longings. He invites us to come to him, to be fed not only with bread for our bodies but with the living bread from heaven. As we journey through life, may we be guided by the question, "What are you looking for?" and find our ultimate answer in the love and grace of Jesus Christ.

Let us, then, approach the table of the Lord with open hearts and expectant souls. As we partake of the bread and wine, may we be transformed by the grace of God. May we emerge from this sacred encounter with a renewed sense of purpose and a deeper commitment to living out the Gospel in our world. In the end, it is not merely about what we seek, but about what seeks us, a loving, compassionate, and generous God. Amen.