

What Do You Want?

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

June 25, 2023 AM Sermon

Reverend Peter Jonker

John 1:35-39

Because it is SERVE Sunday, we will take a break from our Psalms series and we will kick off SERVE week thinking about the verse that will be at the center of the week for these young people. John 1:38 is that verse, and in it we hear Jesus' first words in the gospel of John. Up to this point John has told us lots of things about Jesus. John starts out with his grand proclamation of Jesus' eternal power and glory and grace. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God!" But now for the first time Jesus speaks, and it's a very interesting first line. It's a question; a question for the disciples and ultimately for all of us.

"Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, "What do you want?" What do you want? Those are Jesus' first words in the gospel of John. What do we make of this question?

It would be a lot easier if we could hear Jesus' tone of voice and see his body language. Because you can ask this question in a lot of different ways. A person could ask that question in a frustrated tone of voice.

"Whaddaya want!?! Why are you following me!?! Leave me alone!" I seriously doubt that's Jesus' tone here.

It could be that Jesus asks the question in a straightforward, 'May I help you,' kind of way. Maybe Jesus turned around and saw the two men and said, "Oh! Hey there! What can I do for you? What do you want?"

That's possible but ultimately I think that this wasn't Jesus' sense either.

I think, and this is so Jesus, I think that when Jesus asks that question, he's shooting an arrow at the soul of Andrew and the soul of John. I believe that (and commentators agree with me) that this question was meant to search the desires of their hearts: "I see you gentlemen are following me. You seem to be looking for something. Tell me, what do you want?" That's not just a random guess on my part. If you know the gospel of John, you know that everything Jesus says in John has weight and depth, and so you would think that there would be weight and depth in his opening words. The Greek word translated 'want' is the word *zeteo*. It's usually translated 'seek.' It's the same word Jesus uses in Matthew 6:33 when he tells his disciples: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God." It's not a word you use for a passing fancy or a small desire; it's a word you use for a deep, sustained inclination. It's a word you use for a hunger of your soul.

So these two young men, Andrew and John, who are barely older than teenagers, barely older than you, start following Jesus around. Just following him, not saying anything. Just following him. Jesus sees them. He stops. He looks them up and down. "What do you want? What do your souls seek?"

It's a good question Jesus asks. It's a question that really gets right at who you are. You are what you love. You are what you want. It's your wants that drive you in this world. If you really want to get to know another person, you ask them questions about their wants, their loves. I went online this week and found get-to-know-you questions suggested by professionals. These are the kinds of questions they suggest could work on a date. What's the place in this world where you are happiest and most content? If you could choose one living person, one contemporary person to have dinner with, who would it be? Your house, containing everything you own, catches fire. After saving your loved ones and pets, you have time to safely make a final dash to save any one item. What would it be? Why? These are the best sort of get-to-know-you questions, and they are all essentially versions of Jesus' question. They are just different ways of asking, 'what do you want?'

So how about it. What do you want? What are the desires and hungers that are leading you? Could you answer Jesus' question? Do you have a sense of who you are and what desires are moving you? Or are you just not thinking about it that much? Are your wants and desires just leading you around without examining them? Jesus' 'what do you want' question is a call for us to pay attention to our desires, to examine them. Because our wants are powerful, soul-shaping forces in our life. And believe me, if you are not paying attention to your wants and desires, there are lots of other people paying attention to them. There are thousands of really smart and creative people who think long and hard every day about how to shape your desires, about how to change what you want.

Let's do a little exercise. Indulge me here. You LaGrave members know I almost never ask for congregational participation, but let me try something here, because I think it will be helpful. I am going to list a series of names; raise your hand if you know who this person is. Addison Rae. Jojo Siwa. Mr Beast. Liza Koshy. Zach King. Emma Chamberlain. Lele Pons. Dixie D'Amelio. Huddy. Charlie D'Amelio. Note: the majority of hands stayed down in the congregation. There were many more hands up in the front amongst the SERVE crowd.

Who are these people? These are influencers. Some of you are wondering, what are influencers? They are on Instagram and TikTok and Youtube, each of them has 10's of millions of followers; most of them younger gen Z types. As the name suggests, influencers are in the business of shaping the wants of their followers. They are a staple of marketing. When companies want to sell products, they look for folks who have lots of followers on their social media accounts and they pay them money to use or plug their products on their Instagram or TikTok feeds. It works. They have the sales data to prove it. There are a lot of people in this world whose goal is to become an influencer. This whole ecosystem didn't exist 10 years ago. But it's huge now. Billions of dollars change hands. All this to say: you may not be reflective about your wants, but other people are deeply reflective about your wants, and they are working to shape them, to make you want what benefits them.

And so now this morning, in this short hour, where we've all managed to raise our eyes from our screens for a few minutes, Jesus looks at me, and he looks at you, his eyes see down to our center, and he says "What do you want? Tell me about your desires." How do we take this question? Where is he going with this question? Where will he take us if we actually engage with him on this question?

I can tell you what he's not doing with this question: He's not asking so that he can give you what you want and fulfill all your desires. Jesus is not saying to Peter and Andrew, "What do you want? Tell me and I'll give it to you." Jesus is not the genie in the lamp. There is a stream of Christian faith that sometimes seems to sound as if this is what Jesus is saying. The health and wealth gospel tends this way. Believe in Jesus and he will give you prosperity, he will take away all your diseases, he will fill up your bank account, he will make your dreams come true. That's absolutely not what Jesus means here.

Honestly, when Jesus looks us in the eye and asks us, "What do you want?", he knows that our wants are a mixed bag. Many of our wants need fixing. We often want trivial or even self-destructive things. Have you ever had the experience of getting what you wanted only to find that it didn't give you near the satisfaction you thought it would? I remember when I was a kid, I didn't have a TV. All my friends had one; a nice color TV with cable. Our crummy little black and white TV broke when I was 5 and my parents never replaced it, so I had no TV. Man did I want a TV. All my school friends were talking about Happy Days and quoting the Fonz, and I had no idea what they were talking about. When I was 17, I got what I wanted. We got a TV. A big 19 inch Toshiba. The TV weighed about 75 pounds, and I thought it was glorious. It had a remote control the size of a brick, and the red LED channel number would change when you pressed its buttons.

So, I finally got what I always wanted, but guess what? Do you think that TV increased my happiness or made my life better? Not really. Watching Magnum PI or Family Feud or the A Team was distracting, but it didn't make my life better. If anything it dulled my senses.

Here's the truth. If we take an honest look at our wants, we will find them wanting. We don't always want what's good for us. Our wants are too thin, too small, too trivial. C.S. Lewis makes this point in one of his sermons. He says that when Jesus looks at our wants, when Jesus looks at our desires, he "finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, [We are] like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a [gutter] because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased." Jesus offers us abundant life and we settle for TikTok. When Jesus looks at us and asks what do you want, it's not an innocent question. Actually it's a dangerous question. If we tell him, if we let him in, if we follow him, he will come in and he will change everything. He will renovate our wants, and sometimes the renovation might not be so gentle.

So, there are really a couple of ways you could go. Like so many people in the world, you could lead an unexamined life. You could avoid Jesus' question. You could avoid thinking critically about your wants and you could just live your life. Just chillin'. Letting things happen. As a result, you get blown around by the

trends. Your wants are wide open to whatever influencer happens to get your attention. Lots of people live this way, of course. But it's not a very rooted life, it's not a meaningful life. Live this way and you will find yourself flitting from pleasure to pleasure, trying to fight off boredom.

Or you could open yourself up to Jesus' renovation. You could let the Holy Spirit start to go to work on your wants and let him slowly transform you. Let the Spirit start to build in you the mind of Christ. Let the Spirit root you in the life of Jesus. Something old and beautiful, something abundant, something life giving. You could let the Holy Spirit plant you in the life of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. You could open up your hearts to the life of Jesus, a life which is rightly called eternal.

I'm not going to lie to you: that second path is not easy. If you go that way Jesus will plant his love in you, the Spirit will gradually teach you to love like him and that's not a light, fun, surface level love; that love will put you deep into people's lives. You will rejoice with them and laugh with them, but you will weep with them and bleed with them. It's a much harder path but it is richer and stronger. It's eternal.

How do you open yourself up to that second path? I want to finish by saying something about that, because our passage has something to teach us about that. It starts with a relationship. It starts by giving yourself to a relationship and a community. Notice that Jesus doesn't explain who he is and what discipleship means before they follow. He doesn't say, 'I'm the messiah come to change the world, sent by the Father.' He doesn't have a long explanation of who he is, why he's come, who he plans to save.

He doesn't give them a job description laying the obligations for being a disciple. They ask, "Where are you staying?" And Jesus responds, "Come and see." "Stay with me." And that's it. They follow and the adventure begins. They are on the path. They are going to experience some of the hardest and most beautiful things they will ever see. Jesus will change them. They start with the relationship and then they learn.

That's how it works with Jesus. It doesn't work to stand on the sideline and try to figure him out before you follow him. You have to jump in. Lots of knowledge works that way. You can't learn to swim through explanations. I can't teach you how to swim by giving you a text book or a speech. You can only learn to swim by getting into the water, you need to feel the buoyancy of your body, the way the water lifts you up, the way it interacts with your body as you move, the joy of it. The boys jump in the water with Jesus, and once in that relationship Jesus teaches them to swim.

Why am I telling you this? Well, on a very personal level, for you Serve participants, I want this deeper eternal life for you, and so I want you to jump in the water. This week you will be with a lot of people who will be new to you, if you want the second path, the deeper path, you should jump into all of that. Give yourself to the relationships that God will put in front of you this week, give yourself to the worship, give yourself to the work, open yourself up to the experience and watch as the Holy Spirit begins to change you. Watch as he starts to renovate your desires. Or you could try to resist. You could hold it all at arm's length. You could try and stick with that shallower, emptier life. I guess what I'm saying is, the question facing you is: "What do you want?"

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