

Baccalaureate Mass

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May 17, 2001 | St. Ignatius Church

Readings: Micah 6:6-8; Romans 12:1-13; John 1:35-39

This weekend we celebrate success – yours and the University’s faculty and staff. In the midst of the pomp and circumstance of commencement, we hear as a background theme, the most basic, haunting, human question that Jesus asks disciples of every age and temperament, “what are you looking for?” You must be asking that question these days of transition, and not for the first time. Jesus posed the question to two people who, we are told, were “following Jesus” because they “heard what he said.”

These are two loaded phrases that require further reflection. “Following Jesus” in the Gospel means more than just “walking in the same direction as.” “Following Jesus” is what those who really “hear Jesus” do, and “hearing” in the Gospel means more than just listening to the words.

Because these two “heard” Jesus, they “followed” him, and were straight away confronted with the question “what are you looking for?” In the gospel of John, this is not the formulaic “what d’ya want?” that we hear from every salesperson in every mall in America. This is the substantive and unsettling question about what to do with your life and what you ultimately want from life. This is not a job or career question but a “who and how are you going to be in the world” question. The question is not unique to Jesus; the question is hard-wired into every human heart. The force of Jesus’s question comes not from its originality but its universality – you may be asked this question by Jesus, Buddha or Mohammed, the death of a friend or a cancer diagnosis, the break up of a relationship or a personal failure. If the question of meaning and purpose is universal, so is our propensity to avoid it.

I am reminded of a former student who when diagnosed with terminal cancer was asked what it was like to be twenty-four and dying. He replied, “it could be worse, like being fifty and having no values or ideals; or being fifty and thinking that booze, seducing women, and making lots of money are the real ‘biggies’ in life.” This person knew what he wanted and where he would not find it.

The people who “hear” and “follow” Jesus are those who wrestle seriously with the fundamental human question “what do you want?” We live in a culture whose answer to that question is that my ultimate responsibility is to me; where the ideal is to get to the well first; where the race goes to the swift, the smooth, the smart, the shrewd, the savage -- and too bad for the rest. This message echoes through the halls of government and a justice system that sees more African American males in jail than in school. It echoes throughout our “sweet land of liberty” where one of every five children grows up below the poverty line, with empty stomachs and stunted minds. We hear it in the violence of our streets and schools and televisions. We see it in that half of the human family hungry for bread or justice, for peace or freedom, for understanding and compassion, for a God who does not seem to be there.

In stark contrast to what our culture tells us about life’s meaning, our religious tradition has a different take, if not a definitive answer, to the deepest question of the

human heart. The first reading tells us what God wants – from us: do justice, love tenderly, walk humbly together. The second reading urges us to replace the rugged individualism of our culture with the realization that we are one people of God, members of one another. As such, we are created to share our gifts cheerfully and generously not hoard them or expend them on ourselves. In the gospel story, Jesus directly asks the question “what do you want” only to answer it obliquely with an invitation to “come and see.”

They came and they saw and they stayed with Jesus through it all. They learned that the path to what they were looking for was not broad and easy but narrow and steep, and led through Cana, Nazareth, Gethsemane and Golgotha to the fullness of life and love that is our completion. Clarity came very slowly and only over time for the disciples; and, you know, it still does. The first disciples caught glimpses now and again, but not until Jesus was raised up from the dead did they understand what he meant when he told them if they would save their life, they must lose it. It is not a matter of looking around for ways to suffer – to shut out joy and laughter – it is simply an acknowledgement of the authentic demands of our graced humanity and a recognition that there is no cheap grace.

We catch glimpses of what we want, from time to time, if we risk following Jesus. A classmate of yours who was initially reluctant to tutor in the Mission, subsequently wrote “this experience taught me if I want to see changes in the world, I cannot wait for someone else to make them. I have to take initiative and do my part in making change.” Another classmate reflecting on a course in Tijuana wrote, “what I have seen and experienced has taught me not only about the issue of La Frontera, but also about myself and kind of work or focus I want to take in the years ahead.” My hope is that your USF education has furthered your progress along the narrow path that will take you to your deepest “wants” because their satisfaction is what we are all looking for, and we should settle for nothing less.

This evening, we are blessed to hear Jesus’ invitation to come and see most poignantly extended to us through Bishop Gassis, who works tirelessly to open the world’s eyes and heart to the catastrophic sufferings of his people in Southern Sudan, over two million of whom have lost their lives and four million been displaced in a war waged by the Sudanese government against its own Christian and African people. Like Jesus with the first disciples, Bishop Gassis in a recent interview invited his listeners to, “come and see, come and touch us, come and put your hands around us, and caress us! Because love is a virtue of the strong and courageous: one who is a coward will never love.”

We believe the love that ultimately satisfies the deepest longings of our hearts is found in God, but God gives us love in bits and snatches now, if we are courageous enough to accept it and give it away. May you be blessed with lives rich in meaning and purpose.

As you come to the table for the last time as students at USF, may you see here in the bread broken and the wine poured out for others the beginnings of the answer to the question that lies deep in every human heart, “what are you looking for.”