

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

January 18, 2026 (2nd Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A)

John 1:29-42

Thank you to Rev. Patty Bjorklund, FLC, Brainerd, for the idea

Two men are following Jesus, and they must have been noticeable, because Jesus turns and engages them directly. He asks them, "What are you looking for?" WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?

I just want to stop here and consider how these men would have received such a question, out of the BLUE like that. It's a GREAT question, an ETERNAL question. What are you LOOKING for?

No doubt, the culture in which we live will gladly ask and ANSWER that question FOR us.

What are you looking for? Let US TELL you...they say:

You need that new pair of cool running shoes!

you need this brand new car!

you need whiter teeth!

you need to lose weight!

you need to look younger!

you need to be cool and stylish!

you need, you need, you need!!

Our commercial culture will convince you that THEY KNOW BEST what we need, WHAT we are looking for. And it can all be HAD -- at a PRICE. So you are ESPECIALLY going to need a BOATLOAD of money!

Now, we all know that TRUE WEALTH, TRUE ABUNDANCE comes from blessings that MONEY CAN'T buy – meaningful relationships, satisfying work, purposeful lives... these are blessings that are intangible. And yet, the noise and clamor of our culture CONSTANTLY DEMANDS our attention, and it's difficult to ignore, telling us that THEY KNOW BETTER.

And so the battle continues, making that question all the more important... and the answer hangs in the balance... what are you LOOKING for? What do you TRULY LONG for?

I'm reminded of that famous theory that came back to light in the Covid years. As the experts tried to explain to us WHY our society was not only sick, but even the HEALTHY ones were so GENERALLY out of sorts and ANXIOUS during the pandemic. What were we looking for THEN?

One of the answers those experts pointed us to was the famous Maslow Hierarchy of Needs. Psychologist Abraham Maslow developed a theory about how our WHOLENESS, our FULFILLMENT as human beings could be described like a pyramid, built step upon step of levels of needs.

You might remember this theory, because it goes back decades.

(Show the pyramid on screen.)

The most basic level is our Physiological needs: Food, Water, Air, Sleep, Shelter, Warmth. Physiological needs: Basic survival needs. Most of us are fulfilled in this area, but we have a food shelf and community meals, so there are certainly some who are not having that need met.

Once our Physiological needs are secured, we advance to level 2 – our safety needs: physical safety, health, well-being, financial security, stable housing, protection from danger. Safety needs.

This is what we were MISSING during the pandemic. We didn't feel safe. Even if we never left the house, we never FELT SAFE in all that time.

And THESE days now, we're being REMINDED of ANOTHER aspect of that. We were anxious because, even if WE were well, we were concerned for our family, and our friends, and our neighbors.

How do we imagine our brothers and sisters in Christ in and around the CITIES are doing with this level right now, with all the violence and unrest. How must THEY feel? Fear and anxiety abounds.

The security they once knew has been shattered. They fear for their safety, and we fear FOR them and WITH them. Even out here in GREATER MN, we ALL can feel the RIPPLE effect can't we?

Our needs for safety are, without a doubt, INTERRUPTING our lives, and interrupting our journey toward wholeness and fulfillment, according to Maslow.

So, even if we feel pretty confident with the NEXT level – level 3: called “social connection,” the need for healthy relationships, feeling accepted and belonging;

Or even if can say that our level 4 needs, called “Esteem Needs,” the need to feel valued and confident, are within our grasp;

Even to the point of level 5, which is achieving “self-actualization,” the need for personal fulfillment, achieving purpose in life;

Even if we feel confident in ALL of that, in WHO and WHAT we can BECOME, we are HELD BACK, or even FALL back, for the lack of that level 2 issue, that lack of SAFETY – concern for ourselves AND OUR NEIGHBORS.

What are YOU looking for? Jesus wants to know, just as he wanted to know from the two men who followed him.

And as they stood before Jesus, they respond with a rather curious question of their own. “Rabbi, where are you staying?” And Jesus simply says, “Come and See” –

no negotiation, no preaching,

no need for miracles or parables,

no secret password,

just “come and see.” Come with me. Let me show you.

But, of course, there was more going on there than just taking them to the place he was staying. He took them to a safe place.

This happened yesterday.

(Show pic Jake Lang trapped in window)

Jake Lang, a LITERAL self-proclaimed White Supremacist, showed up in Minneapolis to hate on Muslims and the Somali community. He expected a rally, big crowds of supporters, and for ICE to be there for protection. But ICE didn't show, and only a SMALL group of supporters came, and a HUGE group of very upset protesting Minnesotans. The Protesters threw snowballs at him, water balloons, and sprayed silly string, as Jake Lang went into his usual tirade against blacks and Muslims and Latinos. And then the crowds had had enough. They closed in, telling him that, with everything going on, this is not the place or the time. He was eventually cornered into a building by the crowd chanting at him, telling him he was horrible. Punches were being thrown. Everyone wanting to get AT Lang for his behavior, for taunting an already volatile situation.

Look at him. He looks terrified for his life at the crowd surrounding him, and of this Black man who is standing in front of him. The look in Lang's eyes is as if he thinks he's going to die...But contrary to Lang's lifelong feelings about Black people, this man didn't want to HURT Lang. This man's voice is yelling something DIFFERENT, telling people to stop, to back up, to leave him alone. He was there blocking with his OWN BODY, between the angry crowd and Lang, and extending his hand to lead him to safety.

(Show pic Jake Lang saved by black man)

The man pictured here, gripping his arm and eventually escorting him to a safe place — is the one who decided to put differences aside, and help, rather than join the crowd. This good Samaritan came to Lang's aid despite understanding that LANG HATED HIM. Despite his spewing racist hate and awful things about Black Minnesotans, and illegal immigrants. Despite all the horrible things, despite having a hundred people at his back, pushing to GET AT this modern day Nazi, this man chose to protect a stranger, even an enemy, in his moment of dire need. In the most terrifying ordeal of Lang's life, he was aided by a person who HE considers LESS than him. A random stranger, a

Black man who LANG HATES, based on NOTHING more than the COLOR OF HIS SKIN, came to his aid, showing him basic human empathy. By getting him to a safe place.

I hope his heart changed, even just a little bit. Maybe made him think a little about HOW he got out of there with his life. A safe place can do that.

What are you looking for?

Think about the Youth Center, that meets in our Ed Wing. Last week, we heard that they have over 200 kids who have registered there, who have been there at least once, and they have over 50 kids every time they meet, every Thursday and Friday. Why is that? It didn't start that way. They began with just around 15, but it grew. Why? Because it's a place where the kids feel safe, and valued, and they're fed too – another basic need. And it grew and grew, and is growing, and still grows. Because a safe place matters.

What are you looking for? Come and see. The invitation between Jesus and these two men is ALSO the invitation between Jesus and US. It's not JUST a PLACE, it's a RELATIONSHIP.

And this is where it ALL BEGINS with Jesus. This is where his MINISTRY begins. With a question and a response.

What are you looking for?

Come and see.

Come and see what I have to show you.

Jesus says, "I have a place for you. I KNOW a place that's SAFE."

In fact, as we will soon see in the stories in the coming weeks, JESUS IS that SAFE PLACE.

Amen.