

What Does It Mean to Seek God?

Psalm 63:1, Matthew 6:33

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Back in the '90's, every pastor seemed to be starting a "seeker service." If you wanted to reach people who don't come to church as it is, you had to start a new worship service which might appeal to them—with contemporary music, a screen, and a casual atmosphere. It was part of what we then called "becoming seeker-friendly." We kicked ours off in 1991 in New Jersey on Easter Sunday. The newspaper insert promoting Easter services referred to the seeker service as "Bluejean Blessings"—which I cringe at now, but which was meant to say that even the pastor would be coming in jeans.

We did attract a few people who might not have tried a traditional service, but in retrospect I think we made two basic errors. First, we overestimated the extent to which people who don't attend church are actually "seeking"—or seeking God, in any case. Second, we created a division between seekers and those who had already found. What is clearer to me now is that we are *all* seekers. It is that basic humility as a seeker that is attractive to other seekers, not the attitude that I already *have* everything you *need*.

The word "seek" appears all through the Bible, and often it appears as a command to God's people. Sometimes the command is to "seek peace and pursue it," "seek justice," "seek righteousness." But about a fourth of the time the command is to "seek God." That can't have meant that they had misplaced God and needed to go looking for him. It can't have meant that they never knew God at all; they had been saved by him and were called by his name. It must have meant that although they were God's people, God's presence and reality were not obvious to them. They had to focus on God; they had to look for God in their life and in their worship. To seek God mean to orient themselves to God and to pursue God rather than other goals.

Jeremiah 29:13 says, "When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord." That phrase "with all your heart" reminds us of the Shema which Jews recite every day, the Great Commandment to love God with every shred of our being. Love for God means not only obedience but *desire* for God—a yearning to know God, a longing to see God.

In the movie *Amadeus*—the Best Picture of 1984—there is a scene in which Mozart's older rival composer Salieri reflects on why Mozart's music is so powerful. He says, with jealousy and wistfulness in his voice, that it is a sense of longing and yearning, an unfulfilled desire that cries out through his music, as if Mozart was hearing the voice of God and striving to express it. He was a man who longed for another world, and his music was a result of that yearning. That's what seeking is about: longing, yearning, striving for something or someone just beyond our knowing.

Psalm 63, which I chanted earlier, and which many monasteries pray every morning, begins, "God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water." That is a good way to start any day. This day I will seek you: I will be looking for signs of your presence, I will be listening for a word from you, I will be paying attention for evidence of your love. But it is more than attentiveness: it is a thirst. It is an acknowledgement that I *need* God in my life the same way I need water. That's the same way Psalm 42 starts out: "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul

pants for you.” The image there is not an annoying Block Island deer hanging around your house; it’s a desert deer wandering the hills of Judea in the dry season, looking for a small *wadi*, a creek bed where occasionally water runs. It is a creature desperate for water, because its survival depends on it. That is the psalmist’s cry: like a deer in the desert, I am desperate for you, O God.”

That is the attitude of those who seek God. Jesus said in the Beatitudes, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for a right relationship with God, for they shall be filled. Blessed are those who want only one thing—those of undivided heart—for they shall see God.” When we come here on Sunday morning, do we arrive hungry and thirsty? IHOP used to advertise with the slogan “Come Hungry. Leave Happy.” Maybe Harbor Church should try using that slogan, too. If you come hungry, you will leave happy. If you come full, you will leave unhappy.

The strange thing about hunger for God is that once you taste God, you just get hungrier. Your appetite for God is never sated. No one ever pushed back from the table of God and said “I can’t eat another bite.” Eugene Peterson says, “Worship does not satisfy our hunger for God: it whets our appetite.” Seeking God is not something you do when you are an unbeliever looking for God, and then don’t have to do anymore because your search ended in Jesus. Jesus is not a piece of information you learn from a tract and that’s it; Jesus is a person you develop a relationship with, and your knowledge of him is never complete.

When I was in seminary we used to pick on fundamentalists and call them “fundies,” but we could just as well have called them “findies.” They were the ones with the bumper stickers in those days that said “I found it.” They thought of seeking as part of their past. Their yearning and thirst had been satisfied. And notice: they did not say “I found him” or “He found me” but “I found it”—as if I took the initiative, and as if what I found was not a person but a secret, an idea, a plan.

The seeking the Bible talks about is the seeking of those who have already found. Augustine expressed it famously: “I have tasted you and [now] I hunger and thirst after you.” The Quaker writer Howard Macy has said that “the seeking for God that is born of discovery has a hound-like quality.” When I’m walking Percy off-leash and he smells a deer, it’s all over. He is *seeking* that deer with all his heart, all his soul, all his mind, and all his strength. That’s what it’s like for *us* when we catch the scent of God. It’s not that we are satisfied with a scent. It’s off to the races.

It’s like tasting Lay’s potato chips: Bet you can’t eat just one. Or more like chocolate: has anyone ever eaten *one* M&M? Or stopped with *one* Hershey kiss? “When we get a taste of God, we know that we must have more; we know somehow that we can never have enough” [Macy]. A Flemish mystic of the 14th century named John Ruysbroeck wrote about that:

*All we taste, against all we lack,
is like a single drop of water against the whole sea,
for we feed upon His Immensity, which we cannot devour,
and we yearn after His Infinity, which we cannot attain.*

When I say that I am a seeker, I do not mean that I do not know what I believe. I mean that my basic orientation is toward God, that I am looking for more and more of the one I have tasted in Jesus Christ. I am hungry and thirsty for his reality and his presence, and I experience my love for God as longing.

Do you come here with that longing in your heart? That is not the *only* emotion we feel when we love God. We may feel thankful, or comforted, or elated—or, on the other hand, chastised. But I can’t imagine a spiritual life that does not begin with seeking and yearning. I

can't imagine love without yearning. Listen to these four lines of poetry from Psalm 73 (25-6) in the Jerusalem Bible:

*I look to no one else in heaven,
I delight in nothing else on earth.
My flesh and my heart are pining with love,
my heart's Rock, my own, God forever!*

Wow. I want to be able to say that.

When Jesus says that we are to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, he brings to us all the history of the commands to seek God in the Old Testament. "What is it that you are seeking?" he asks. Are you seeking—like the Gentiles who do not know God—food and drink and clothes? Or are you seeking God? If you seek first—before everything else, as your top priority—the kingdom of God, by which he does not mean heaven but God's reign here and now; if you seek God's reality and presence in this world, and you seek his righteousness—it's the word that elsewhere is translated "being made right with God"—then the small stuff will take care of itself. If you understand that the main thing is your relationship with God and your awareness of what God is doing in the world, the everyday needs will be taken care of. Do you believe that? How much of your mental and emotional energy is spent seeking food and drink and clothes, and how much is spent seeking God? Jesus is asking this question to those of us who are already believers.

There is a revealing moment in the personal testimony the apostle Paul gives in the third chapter of Philippians, and I have thought about that moment for over 25 years now as a precious insight. In verse 10 he says "All I want is to know Christ" (TEV). What? Doesn't Paul already know Christ? Don't we assume that Paul was the *first* guy with an "I found it" bumper sticker? Wasn't his message "I know the Messiah and you don't"?

But here Paul is saying that knowing Christ is his *goal* in life, which he has not yet achieved. "I don't say that I have already attained this or reached the goal, but I press on to make it my own." Paul says, "I [still] want to know him [fully]." Then he spells that out. I want to know the power of his resurrection—his eternal life operating in me. I want to share in his sufferings as a way to know him. I want to become like him in his death so that I can become like him in his resurrection.

I am *still* seeking God in Christ, Paul says, and I will always be seeking until the day I see him face to face—for now we see just a dim reflection in a mirror, now we know in part, but then I will know him the way he knows me. And, Paul says, the process of getting to know Christ is transforming me both by his life in me and by his death in me—and as I *seek* Christ I am becoming *like* Christ both in his suffering and in his eternal life.

This is my experience of the Christian life: a life of continual seeking to know him, seeking to love him. Becoming a Christian is not an off-on switch—I saw the light and that's that. I met Jesus and—ka-ching—the great transaction's done. Yes, I met Jesus, and I am sick with love. My love for him and the longing and the joy are all one. As with any true romance, even when I am with him, I long for more of him.

But as with any true romance, it takes two to tango. The Bible shows us that God is sick with love for us as well. While we are seeking God, God is seeking us. Jesus says to the woman at the well (John 4:23), "The Father is seeking people who will worship him in spirit and in truth." And Jesus' definition of his own mission was that he came (Luke 19:10) "to seek and to save that which was lost"—like a shepherd seeking a missing lamb, or a woman seeking a missing coin, or a parent seeking a missing child. This is not a game of hide and seek. When we

seek him with all our heart, he will let himself be found, and when we find him we become convinced that he was seeking us all along.