The Most Practical Thing

Jesus’ question to John’s disciples is one of the fundamental questions in life. “What are you looking for?” (Jn. 1:38). Jesus always asks probing questions, and we should pay special attention to his questions. As he speaks for the first time in John’s gospel, he poses a practical and fundamental question. What are you looking for?

It seems like a simple enough question, but it is loaded with meaning. If you were to name one desire that supersedes everything else, what would it be? Teens: Is it the nicest gadget or latest phone? Is it acceptance or a true friend? Young adults: Is it clarity about what to do in life, a successful job, or finding a husband or wife? Parents: Is it job stability, your children’s safety, balance in life, or a strong spiritual life? Elderly: Do you want good health, strength in adversity, reconciliation with family, or peace with God? What one desire supersedes all else?

The Word of God is living and active. Today Jesus asks us the same question that he asked the disciples. What are you looking for? That question affects everything else we are about. It affects how a husband and wife relate to each other. It governs the values that parents pass down to their children. It influences how a college student chooses a major or searches for a job. It impacts our political activity, or what we want in political leaders. What are you looking for?

A week ago, I went away for a retreat. The year 2020 was a long battle, and I was looking forward to a restful break. Most of all, I wanted to be renewed spiritually. By the end of the retreat, I felt re-centered. I felt renewed in the one thing necessary – the primacy of God. With God in charge, all shall be well. That was how I felt about things. That is my deepest desire. To maintain the primacy of God.

As I reflected on this gospel, I realized that God inspired St. John to write the two questions in this narrative (Jn. 1:35-42), both Jesus’ question and the disciples’ question. None of the other gospel writers narrate these two questions, only John does. Jesus asked them, “What are you looking for?” They replied with their own question, “Rabbi, where are you staying?” (Jn. 1:38).

In essence they said, we want to be with you. Where are you staying? We want you to have a relationship with you. We want to sit at your feet and learn from you. Rabbi, we want to be your disciples. Where are you staying?

Only through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit could St. John the evangelist give us such a beautiful teaching with two simple questions. Both questions originated from the heart of God. The Lord created the human person with a deep desire to be in relationship with God. That is why the disciples asked Jesus, “Where are you staying?”

As you come to Mass today, are you in touch with that deep yearning for God? St. Augustine was searching until he was 32 years old. He lived with a woman for more than a decade and had a child out of wedlock. At his conversion, he wrote, “Lord, our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” At 32 years old, he finally realized that all his desires – for pleasure, for a relationship with a woman, for success, for esteem – by themselves could not satisfy him. Underneath all those desires is a deeper quest. Our hearts are restless until they rest in God.

That yearning is God-inspired. It is our spiritual DNA. The first three commandments speak to this deep yearning. They express the truth of being created by God and for God. They command us to keep God as our first priority, and to rest in God by setting aside a day of rest and thanksgiving for all that the Lord does. One of the best reasons to come to Mass is to rest in God.
In chapter 15 of John’s gospel, Jesus gave us a new commandment which perfects the first three commandments. He said, “Abide in me, and I in you. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it abides on the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in me… As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Abide in my love” (Jn. 15:4,9).

The verb for “abide” also means to dwell, to remain, or to stay (with someone). The same Greek verb is used in the question, “Where are you staying?” John’s gospel begins with two disciples asking Jesus where he is staying or abiding. It ends with Jesus commanding his disciples to stay with him and to abide in his love. If we obey this commandment, all shall be well.

2020 was stressful. Who knows? 2021 may be more stressful. In times of stress, you must keep your priorities straight. If you keep God first, everything else will work out. This is the most practical thing.

Fr. Pedro Arrupe is an example of a practical man who kept his priorities straight. He was the Superior General for the Society of Jesus from 1965 to 1983. However, in 1945 he was living in Hiroshima when the atomic bomb was dropped. Fortunately, he was far enough from the bomb that he was not injured or killed. The windows were shattered, the doors blown off their hinges, and he was thrown to the floor.

His first reaction was to get on his knees and pray for guidance. His religious community welcomed 150 injured Japanese into their novitiate house. Fr. Arrupe’s experience was far more traumatic than anything we experienced in 2020. He not only reacted in a practical manner, but with strength in adversity because he had his priorities straight. Later, he wrote a beautiful reflection that poetically expresses his top priority.

Fr. Pedro Arrupe wrote: “Nothing is more practical than finding God, than falling in Love in a quite absolute, final way. What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination, will affect everything. It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning, what you do with your evenings, how you spend your weekends, what you read, whom you know, what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy and gratitude. Fall in Love, stay in love, and it will decide everything.”

Fall in love with God, abide in Christ’s love, and it will decide everything. It is the most practical thing.