

“... the crowd came...looking for Jesus...”

Have you ever been looking for something? I don't mean looking for your keys or your car in a parking lot. I mean looking for something... more. Perhaps you have waxed philosophical about the meaning of life. Or tried to find the answers to your questions through becoming a devoted fan of a world famous celebrity or a follower of some guru or maybe even a preacher.

Perhaps like the followers of a rock band, The Grateful Dead. Many folks of my generation, including some friends of mine, are called “Dead Heads.” Over years and even decades, Dead Heads follow the group around the country and attend their concerts. For them, looking for Jerry Garcia was an experience that helped them find meaning in life. I don't get it, but I do admire the Dead Head friends I know. It seems to work for them. It was a bit ironic, though, that at the (reportedly) last ever Grateful Dead concert in Chicago this summer, the tickets were going for \$2,000 apiece. There is a high price to finding meaning.

If you have ever been looking for something—been a groupie or fanatic—you probably had an experience shared by many—you have been disappointed. If you are counting on a person or a group to meet your need for meaning, it is an up and down dynamic. It is somewhat like falling in love. You are looking for the answer. That famous person or spiritual leader appears to have the answer. And so you project all your hopes on him or her. And then as you go deeper into the relationship, you find that what they are offering falls short of what you wanted.

This happened with Jesus and the crowd as we found in the reading from last week's and today's Gospel in John 6. Jesus was in an “up” cycle with the crowd. He could do no wrong. He had miraculously fed them with bread and fish so that we're told the people wanted to make him king. You could not be more

of a rock star than that. But instead of encouraging their misguided adoration, we're told that Jesus simply withdrew from them. He did not want to be the object of their expectations.

But the people persisted. They wanted answers for their lives; and Jesus through his words and actions had convinced them that he had those answers. So in today's reading we're told they followed him expectantly like devoted fans. Jesus appeared almost rude to them. He told them they were just interested in what he could provide for them—a miracle of bread to feed their stomachs and his spiritual charisma that they believed could lead them to independence from Rome and thereby give them the meaning they wanted for their lives.

Even that initial rudeness from Jesus did not dissuade the crowd. They asked, basically, "What can we do to have meaning in our lives, to find what we are looking for?" Jesus did not give them a checklist. Instead Jesus gave them a simple, I think unexpected response—"believe in the one God has sent." In other words, believe in Jesus.

That answer seemed to excite the crowd all over again—but with a caveat. They wanted Jesus to do another miracle. That is what groupies need—another high, another proof that their guy will lead them where they want to go. But Jesus would not go there with them. No miracles on demand. Instead an invitation to them to believe in him so that their lives would be transformed in unexpected ways, just like the miracle of loaves and fishes had transformed their hunger.

Belief in Jesus was not about fulfilling the crowd's dreams and desires. Jesus made it clear throughout his earthly ministry that he was giving himself for the people, but not simply to give them what they wanted. And as the story of Jesus played out in the Gospels, his resistance to their wishes became more and more of a problem for the crowd. They wanted what they wanted and he would not give it to them.

So that was back then. How about now? Not only with gurus and groups, some people come to church with certain expectations. They want answers to life's problems. But they want the answers to fit within their existing comfort

zone of reality. They want to find the meaning of life. But if that deeper meaning challenges their political beliefs or shakes up their socio-economic status, then some become disappointed and move on.

That is the thing when we come looking for Jesus, whether two thousand years ago or today. Jesus wants to be found and he wants us to find that true meaning we are looking for and have such a hard time finding. The way to find that meaning of life is simple—believe in Jesus. But what does that mean?

There are at least two parts to believing in Jesus. The first is to connect to God by believing what the church proclaims and teaches about Jesus: God became human in Jesus. That mystery brings into focus in one human life the depth of God's love for us. The crowd and the leaders rejected Jesus and the way he made God's love known, so that Jesus was arrested and executed. But God did not abandon him; God raised Jesus from the dead. That mystery of redemption and resurrection is the beginning of new life not only for Jesus and his early followers, but for all of us, centuries later and around the globe. That is the great good news of God in Christ and through the church.

So to believe in Jesus, we need to believe that good news about Jesus and what Jesus' life, death and resurrection provide for us—grace; grace that brings forgiveness, the Spirit's presence and direction, and an inner strength that enables us to endure no matter what challenges and hardships we face in life.

To believe in Jesus is not a onetime thing. We gather from week to week to remember his story and its implications for us today. We gather to worship God and give thanks for all that God has done for us, especially in and through Jesus. And we gather at God's table to be nourished by the bread of life that we receive now in Holy Communion.

But that's not all. To believe in Jesus is described in today's Gospel as a "work." It is not only an intellectual assent as we might give to the creeds and theology; it is more than an emotional response that we might feel as we go forward for an altar call. Those aspects of belief are real—but they are not enough and they are not what Jesus meant when he talked about believing.

To believe in Jesus is to live into Jesus' life. None of us individually will be all that Jesus was during his earthly life. But his example as well as his grace are what we need to embrace if we believe in him. So that means we must live with Jesus' compassion commanding our lives, not only as individuals but as a community of faith. It is not okay to turn our face away from people who are suffering.

That aspect of believing in Jesus can feel overwhelming. There is a lot of suffering in the world. Many of us cope with that by not paying attention because we feel helpless. Or some of us (I hope very few) simply may not care and use our energy to protect ourselves and explain why "those people" are getting what they deserve based on bad choices, bad chemistry, bad families, or bad culture. But even when it is true that people make bad choices, we have choices to make, too.

If we believe in Jesus, our choice is to live into the commands of compassion. That does not necessarily mean going to Calcutta like Mother Theresa. But it might mean joining our parishioners who go to the women's prison in Alto to help incarcerated women maintain a connection with their children. It may mean committing to being a mentor for a newly paroled returning citizen. It may mean being available for our own youth, helping them to see the world like Jesus as they grow through the challenges of affluent adolescence.

Believing in Jesus is very different from following the latest guru or even a beloved rock band, a celebrity or a politician (maybe especially a celebrity politician). Believing in Jesus does not give us everything we want; but that belief provides what we need to be a new people, connected to God and filled with compassion for the people we meet in our daily lives and in the world around us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

