

SEEKING CHRIST Mark 1:29-39

Sometime back Dr. Phil Berry took a picture outside a roadside convenience store. The store was on the Texas border on the highway leading to Colorado. It was one of those portable advertising signs with flashing lights along the top meant to lure in travelers.

At the top of the sign it read, “Last chance Lotto Texas, clean restrooms, snacks.” Then, at the bottom of the sign, almost like an afterthought, it read, “Jesus is Lord.”

“It’s like, on the way out of Texas, whatever you need, they have it,” says pastor Glen Schmucker referring to Berry’s picture. “A little snack? A place to freshen up? A place to do a little gambling? A little bit of Jesus? Whatever you need, they’ve got it.”

Perhaps we shouldn’t be too cynical. At least, they’re making an effort to share Jesus, even if he doesn’t have top billing over clean restrooms or the Texas Lotto.

I heard recently of someone else who sought to share Jesus in a somewhat unconventional way. A couple in Canton, Ohio thought they saw the image of Jesus in the wood grain of a door in their house. This image was so striking that they cut it out of the door and carried it with them when they moved to another house. They kept it because the thought of it gave them encouragement.

The interesting thing is that 41% of the people who responded to an NBC online poll concerning the image claimed that they saw Jesus too. However, the wife claims that it could also be the Virgin Mary, and 6% of the people who responded to the poll did see Mary and not Jesus. It makes sense that Jesus’ image should appear in a door, says one commentator. After all, Jesus did say, “I am the door.” (John 10:7) And he was a carpenter.

Of course, we see this kind of thing all the time. One lady in St. Petersburg Florida claims seeing Jesus’ image in a potato chip!

My guess is that we see what we want to see, and our deepest yearning of all is to see Jesus. Our deepest yearning is to encounter God. And so, in our search for meaning our eyes pick up patterns that, while random, seem to reveal God’s presence. And that gives us peace and . . . hope. And we want the world to know what we’ve seen.

It is also a reminder to us of how popular Jesus still remains in the secular world in which we live.

Have you ever noticed how often Jesus appears on the cover of *Time* and *Newsweek*? Someone once asked the religion reporter for the *Washington Post* why that was. His answer was that

every time Jesus is on the cover of these magazines, they see a spike in their sales. Jesus is commercially attractive. He is still popular with lots of folks--people like you and me.

He was also popular when he first began his ministry two thousand years ago. The scene we have in our lesson from the gospel of Mark takes place at the house of Simon Peter where Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law. After reporting the healing of Peter's mother-in-law the writer of the Gospel of Mark says this: "That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door . . ."

Think of that, "The whole town was gathered at the door . . ." I guess this was the first-century equivalent of the flash mob. They didn't communicate by cell phones or Twitter. They had to do it the old-fashioned way, person to person. But it worked. The whole town gathered at the door. Everyone wanted to see Jesus.

A little further on we read, "Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: 'Everyone is looking for you!'"

In the vernacular of today, *Jesus was a rock star*. Everyone was looking for him.

I don't know how to say it without it sounding like a cliché, but I believe that even today people everywhere are still looking for Christ. They may not know his name, and they might use religious symbols and terminology that is different from what you and I would ever use, but they are searching for Christ all the same.

After all, he is the way, the truth, and the life. And all people, everywhere, need what only Christ can offer them.

Everyone needs a sense of direction for his or her life. *In a sense everyone is, to one degree or another, lost. Where are they going to find direction for their lives except in Jesus?*

It's like something that Dr. Lee F. Tuttle once told about that almost affected the course of the Second World War. In December 1944 the U.S. Army and its Allies were on the offensive. For six months they had rolled with relentless precision across Western Europe. But suddenly, one December day, a major portion of the mighty Allied juggernaut ground to a halt. A counter offensive had been launched by the Germans. If that counter offensive had succeeded, the end of the war might have been indefinitely delayed. As it was, the German drive almost did succeed, and a part of that was due to some brilliant strategy devised by the defenders of the Third Reich.

A few days before the Allied operation, German soldiers dressed in American uniforms, together with American jeeps, were parachuted behind American lines. These “soldiers from the sky” carried no weapons. Their single mission was to discover the roads over which reinforcing Allied armies might travel and change all the signs which pointed to strategic towns and villages. And this simple task of turning the signposts to give wrong directions had deadly consequences. When the defenders in the “Battle of the Bulge” called for help as the Germans attacked, many of the reinforcements never arrived. Whole battalions were lost while trying to find their way across a countryside where the signposts were either down or wrong.

Dr. Tuttle’s point in relating these events was to say to us that we live in a time when many of the signposts have been torn down: moral signposts, ethical signposts, theological signposts. Because of this, many of us lose our way in life.

Have you ever been lost while traveling? It is a terrible experience. Maps no longer seem to make sense. When other people try to help, it often only makes matters worse. Well, the same thing can happen on the road of life. When we are lost, life no longer makes sense to us.

The years pass so quickly. And many of us have no idea what we’re here for. We feel lost. Where can we turn for direction for our lives? *There is only one place that is reliable. We can turn to Jesus and find in him that for which we are so desperately searching. We see in him what we were created to be—sons and daughters of God.* We are precious people who have been bought with Christ’s blood. When we turn to Jesus, we rediscover our purpose, our sense of direction.

But there is a second thing we find in Jesus--we find someone we can follow. Christ not only points the way, but he goes with us and leads the way for us—he is the way.

There is another true story that comes out of World War II. A platoon of American soldiers was stranded on one side of a mine field they had to cross. The commander of the platoon came up with a plan: one man would walk across the mine field, leaving clear footprints for others to follow. If this first man hit a mine, then another man would take his place and would also walk across the field in his footsteps . . . until he fell as well, and so on . . . until finally someone had cleared a path for all the soldiers. It was a great plan, but it seemed guaranteed to leave some casualties.

The young soldiers, with their hearts in their throats, agreed to the plan. However, they wondered, which one of them would be chosen to walk the field first? To their surprise, it was their commander who began walking first across the field. As their leader, he insisted on risking his life for the sake of his men. The commander crossed the field safely. Following closely in his footsteps, all the soldiers made it across the field as well.

That's leadership. That's courage. That's being willing to lay down one's life for one's friends. And, of course, that is what Christ did for us on Calvary. Not only does Christ point to the direction we are to go, he goes before us, giving his life that ours might be saved.

The writer of Hebrews in the New International Version of the scriptures calls Christ “**the pioneer and perfecter**” of our faith. Jesus is a pioneer in the same way that the company commander in WW II was a pioneer. *He takes the dangerous path and clears the way for us. Jesus does not ask us to go anywhere that he has not gone before himself.*

The writer of Hebrews tells us that we are to fix our eyes upon him, in the same way that those soldiers fixed their eyes on the company commander in order to make it through the mine field of life and death. *Christ gives us a sense of purpose and direction for our lives. Christ leads the way and beckons us to follow.*

But there's one more reason the world longs to see Jesus. When we follow him, he leads us to a specific destination--life with the Father. When we follow Jesus we discover abundant life . . . not because we deserve it, but because of what Christ has done on Calvary.

Sometime back, *The Christian Century* magazine carried a story by Lillian Daniel. Ms. Daniel told the story of a large collection of Southeast Asian pottery that her parents owned. Daniel says her parents had collected this pottery on several trips to that part of the world over the years, and carefully kept it in their home.

However, there was always one piece in this beautiful collection that always seemed out of place. This piece had once been a fine antique vase with a cream glaze and blue Japanese design, but now it was damaged. And yet her parents kept it amid their finer pieces, even though it was a mass of cracks, crudely glued together with what was obviously the wrong type of adhesive. Ms. Daniels notes that everywhere the 20 or so pieces of that vase met one another, glue had bubbled out yellow as it dried, leaving the vase grotesquely scarred.

She says that she once suggested to her mother that she get rid of that one ugly piece of pottery. And so her mother told her the story behind the vase and why they could not part with it.

Her father had bought that vase when he was a journalist covering the Vietnam War. Returning home, he had wrapped and hand carried the vase as he traveled the long journey back in taxis, on several airlines, and several buses. He protected it through the entire journey back before walking up his driveway with this special vase in his hands.

At that very moment, as her father walked up the driveway, his two year old daughter rushed toward him with her arms outstretched for an embrace. Surprised and elated, her father tried to

hold on to the vase and yet also open his arms to his beloved daughter. When he did that, the vase fell and broke into pieces. Ms. Daniel, of course, was that two-year-old. She ends her story like this: “Thus it was that night, my mother pulled out the glue, she repaired the vase, and she pronounced it precious.”

That cracked vase was almost as precious to her mother as we cracked and imperfect vessels are to God. Those who trust in Jesus and seek to walk in his steps are the recipients of abounding and overflowing love and grace. And even though we are imperfect in our service to Christ and humanity, God’s love for us and acceptance of us never ceases.

It’s like a story that Tony Campolo tells. The story is set in Heaven. St. Peter handles admissions at the pearly gates according to the story and the Apostle Paul acts as the administrator of the celestial kingdom, taking a monthly census of Heaven’s inhabitants.

But something doesn’t add up. Each time Paul counts the number of people in Heaven, his number far exceeds the number of admittances that Peter has registered. This discrepancy mystifies them both for quite a while.

Then, one day, Paul runs up to Peter and excitedly shouts, “Peter! Peter! I figured out why our numbers don’t match. I figured out why there are so many more people in Heaven than you’re letting in at the pearly gates. It’s Jesus! It’s Jesus! He keeps sneaking people over the wall.”

Jesus offers unlimited grace to all who would trust their lives to him. You may say as I do, I don’t deserve God’s grace. That’s all right. You and I are among those whom Christ will sneak over somehow. That’s what grace is all about.

No wonder people advertise Jesus on signs for clean rest rooms and the Texas Lotto. No wonder people see Jesus on doors, and even on potato chips. *Everyone deep down wants what only Jesus can provide.*

“Everyone is looking for you. . .” said the disciples to Jesus. It was truer than they knew. And it is still true today. He is the answer to every man’s, every woman’s, every young person’s deepest need. He gives us direction and purpose for our lives. We never need fear what lies ahead for he goes with us. He never takes us anywhere he has not been himself. He is the pioneer and the perfecter of our faith. And the destination is sure--abundant life with the Father. Isn’t that what you are looking for today?