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## **“What do you seek?”**

**by Amy Hollis**

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Last week during the children’s time we talked about the rippling effect of water. For as a stone is dropped into a body of water the displaced water continues to move and be transformed just as God’s love continues to have an impact on creation. We are moving through the story of Jesus from his birth at Christmas, to the visit of the Magi on Epiphany, to the baptism of Jesus in the river by John, and now to the calling of the first disciples. So today the question before us is “What do you seek?” or “What do I seek?” or even “What do we seek?” This question is the first statement Jesus makes in the gospel of John, and it triggers an immediate response from John the Baptist’s followers. In Jesus, they found what they were seeking.

Today I would like to share with you places God can be seen and experienced in the wider creation, in communities of faith, and in individual lives. Love can transform us and our communities and that great love is something sought by many. Some might even argue that love known to individuals, communities, and throughout creation is something sought by all, even when they cannot articulate it. Today “What do you seek?”

Our congregation does a wonderful job of ministering to the community nearby and farther out through our Social Action involvement, eco-justice work, donations of food for the hungry, mission work and so much more. We can celebrate the service and work that has been accomplished. All these actions work to help people find what they seek – transformation through God’s love. This week my eyes were opened to other needs in our wider community that I now share with you because of the need for the transformative power of God even for those in prison.

This week much of my time was spent focused on completing my final seminary course. I selected the course more for its schedule and location than my interest, but what happened was that I was reminded of a great need present

in society, and it turned out to be a very appropriate course to end this stage of my education. Tuesday morning eighteen students and one instructor gathered to explore ministry to the incarcerated. The next morning we met once again, but our classroom for the day was not the comfortable room at Hartford Seminary, but instead Hartford Correctional Center. As each door closed and locked behind us we were keenly aware that we were stepping into a culture unlike the cities and towns we were from. The rules of the society inside prison and the day to day dynamics are unlike any I have spent time in.

Eleven hundred inmates currently reside there with no fresh air, no windows through which one can see trees or sky, and no visible ability to make choices for oneself. Yet in a way it is free choice we hope inmates will claim for themselves in a way that enables them to conquer the addictions so prevalent amongst the incarcerated. Many chaplains and staff pointed to the need for God's transformation in the lives of the prisoners and for each to name that "what they seek" is God's love. Chaplain Laurie Etter, who has served as a prison chaplain for 28 years, reminded us that, similar to 12-step programs, the only way to make it through addiction and reintegration is through relationship with a higher power. Laurie has been part of the transformative work going on at York Correctional Institution in Niantic through a program called Chrysalis. The image of the chrysalis is used in part to connect the individual transformative work a caterpillar does with what we do as individuals in our faith journeys. A few years ago I had the honor to sit with women in the program who shared their faith journeys; these women had the hope that they would one day be seen for more than whatever actions brought them to York. One amazing statistic is that women who have completed the Chrysalis program have a recidivism rate of merely 12.5 percent, compared to the 68 percent rate in the general population of incarcerated individuals.

With a majority of prisoners in the US incarcerated due at least in part to addiction issues chaplains face not only the task of ministering to individuals who have broken social mores, but also underlying and ongoing addiction issues. Sadly, few seem to be called to minister in prisons, yet the need is great. It is not something that I feel well suited for, which leaves me wondering how communities of faith can help all types of people find a positive answer to "what they seek."

As Jesus begins to talk in the gospel of John he asks two of John's followers "What do you seek?" I am reminded of the need for each of us to identify what it is we seek. What are we looking for in our relationship with God? The personal journey needs nourishment, just as the community does.

I'm going to make an educated guess here that each of us practices our spirituality in a unique way. I still remember a conversation with a friend a few years ago who was seeking a community of faith that would help her find a personal spiritual practice. This is not an easy task, for it is not a one-size-fits-all answer. Some I know start and end each day with prayer and meditation, while others read literature which engages their thought processes in ways which may at times open up more questions, some listen to music, others create with art. Spiritual practices need repetition, just like learning to ride a bike or even sing a new song. The process of learning engages the mind in a different way when it becomes a habitual practice.

Personally I love the practice of Lectio Divina, and blending it with art. Lectio Divina is a method of reading scripture in a prayerful way that dates back to teachings of the early Christian thinker Origen in the year 220 CE. It includes reflection, responding, and resting in the Word of God in a way that can add nourishment and connection with God. It may not be for everyone, but is one practice that can be done both individually and in groups.

To begin this practice one might start with silence or prayer followed by the time of "Lectio" when a selected passage of your choice would be read slowly several times. As one who was not a strong reader as a child I find this process very helpful for I do not feel like I am in a race to see if I can figure it out on the first go through. The second step is "Meditatio" which is a time of reflection and application. Often the individual will select a word or phrase that seems to be of importance to them at that moment, even if they do not know why. Third is the stage called "Oratio" which includes time to be in conversation with God; this is not a planned prayer, but a dialogue of the heart. Finally, the practice concludes with a step called "Contemplatio" where one sits leaving an opening for God to respond. This is not about expecting a response from God, but is simply leaving space, for a conversation needs openings for both sides to communicate.

Communities are made of up many people on individual pathways and as such we can celebrate the various ways in which we connect with God. When I think about individuals seeking alone I am reminded of the character in Plato's allegory of The Cave who is seeking to understand the whole without leaving the cave. Our individual understandings and connections to God are vital, but we also need the perspectives found through relationship within communities of faith and all of creation. John the Baptist is introducing Jesus to us in the Gospel of John. It would seem that Jesus would not need the introduction, but John is able to say things through his own lens and understanding. John proclaims that Jesus is not only the "lamb of God" but also the "Son of God" on whom the Spirit has descended. John also stands as an intermediary between Jesus and two of

John's disciples when he exclaims "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" and draws their attention to Jesus.

John the Baptist directs our sight and that of his followers to the "Son of God," and after that not so subtle way of introducing Jesus, the disciples turn to follow. Jesus' response to their actions was to inquire of them "What are you seeking?" or "What are you looking for?" Their immediate response is calling Jesus "Rabbi" or "teacher." So in response to Jesus' question we hear the followers in one word acknowledge that what they seek is the one right in front of them.

I am amazed by stories of individuals who share that invitation to Jesus in their day-to-day life. In many ways John's actions were those of the one offering the invitation to another to know wholeness. It can be a challenge to invite others to the table and to share one's personal faith journey, but there may be times our individual spiritual paths open us to share the transformative love of God with another. The Baptist seems unconcerned about sharing Jesus; he is so exuberant after the encounter at the water that he wants to share the Good News and cannot contain himself. Have you ever wanted to share the connection you know to God with others? My guess is that it is not a secret, and that those around you are impacted by your individual faith walk.

My hope is that we can continue to know God's transformative love as individuals, communities and as a creation. The one at work in individual lives continues to knit us together through our commonalities and our distinctiveness. We are beloved children of God and as the words of the American Baptist Preacher Martin Luther King Jr. can remind us "Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend." God's love can transform individuals, communities, and the world. Amen.