

January 15, Epiphany 2A (*John 1:29-42*)

## **What are you looking for? It's a good question, maybe the only question.**

by [Michael Rinehart](#) in the [January 2023](#) issue

I had received three speeding tickets in one year. It was a personal record. I wasn't proud. The State of Iowa, in its wisdom, said that I should take a defensive driving course. They insisted, really. If I didn't, they would take my license away. Could I do my job if I couldn't drive? Probably, but what would the congregation think? This was before online classes, so I toddled off to a Saturday morning class for a few weeks, to be instructed on the finer points of obeying the law.

Some people in my class were unhappy to be there—really, really unhappy. Angry even. Many had been court-ordered to attend this class following a DUI or DWI conviction. I sat quietly in the back of the room, keeping my head down and my mouth shut. Then the instructor called my name.

"Where do you live? What do you do? Why are you here?"

I realized I was in a recovery group. "My name is Mike. I'm a pastor. I drive too fast." There it was, for all the world to see.

At the end of the second class, the instructor pulled me aside, apparently for one-on-one tutoring. "Why are you here?" he asked.

"Because I got three speeding tickets."

"No, really, *why* are you here?" It was an existential question. I wasn't sure how to answer. "Where are you going in such a hurry?"

"Well, the first time I was going to . . ."

"No, where are you *going* in such a hurry?" Ah, he meant in *life*. Another existential question. Again, I had no words. "Life is short. Take your time and enjoy it," he said. Now he was preaching. "There is just a grave waiting for you down that road." Ouch.

Now you're going to bring up my mortality?

Then he pastored me: "What are you looking for?"

I had heard this question before. I had preached on it. Now it took on new meaning. What was I looking for in life that caused me to move so frantically through the world? I went home and looked up John 1. Two disciples follow Jesus, and he turns and asks them, "What are you looking for?"

There it was. In my head, Jesus' voice took on the existential tone of my teacher/pastor to deadbeat dangerous drivers.

It's a good question, maybe *the* question. When someone shows up in church for the first time, what are they looking for? Direction? Meaning? Hope? Something spiritual? Will they find it? When an unchurched couple asks to be married in the church, what are they looking for? A reminder of the sacred? A blessing for a long journey? To start out on the right foot? When someone is trying to decide on a job change or a career change, what are they looking for?

In John's Gospel, Jesus always shifts from small talk to the deeper questions. A woman is talking about water, and Jesus shifts the conversation to spiritual thirst. Nicodemus asks how one can be born a second time from the womb, and Jesus begins talking about spiritual rebirth. The crowd marvels that Jesus gives sight to a blind man, and Jesus starts talking about spiritual blindness. How many times have I missed the deeper question behind the question?

What are you looking for in life? Indeed, what makes life worth living? We audaciously claim that it's about relationships, with God and one another. Love of God and love of neighbor. When we come to the end of our earthly journey, there are few if any possessions that we will say made life worth living. It will be the relationships: the love we gave and received. Like the disciples in John 1, perhaps we hope following Christ might keep us focused on what matters.

"Where are you staying?" John's disciples ask. Literally: Where do you abide? Where do you dwell, Jesus? We want to be there, wherever it is.

"Come and see," Jesus responds. Abide in my love. That's what I'm looking for. Show me the way.

I still speed. I don't know why I'm wired to barrel through life, but every time the needle shows I'm going too fast, I remember my existentialist driving instructor, and then I hear Jesus asking in his voice: What are you looking for?