

A man called the church with a question this week.

I picked up the phone.

He got right to the point: **“I want to know how to become a Christian.”**

What?

I want to know how to become a Christian!”

The way he phrased it – straightforward, matter of fact, made it clear that he wanted a direct answer, not some meandering conversation qualified by Christian lingo or presumptions.

Usually, people want to know what kind of church this is, whether we’re Catholic or something else. If he had asked that, the answers would have come rolling off my tongue.

But he wanted to know how to become a Christian. We talked for ten or fifteen minutes. His straight-forward questioning seemed honest. The longer we talked, the more it felt like we were connecting. But you know how sometimes you finish a conversation – and then after it is over, you keep thinking about it – and realize that there was so much more you could have/should have said? That was me after that phone call.

His question was, “How can he become a Christian?” Is that the right question to ask? We live in a world of labels – we label people who look different, speak different, think different, or come from different parts of the world. When those labels get pasted on you, they become a barrier to full understanding.

In some regions, the label “Christian” is taken to mean you are part of a tribe where people all think alike, believe the same things, and vote for the same political party. Phrases from the bible come to mind: Philippians 2:2:

Then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.”

If becoming “A Christian” requires us all to think alike, dress alike, or vote alike -- I think we’re in trouble. I’ve never been in any group of Christian people who all think the same way. There are examples out there of communities where people all recite the same views about things; that’s the function of the ancient Creeds – Apostles, Nicene, but in my view, reciting a creed doesn’t make someone “a Christian.”

Would it have been a good starting point for the caller; asking him about becoming “A Christian?” I have questions about those historic creeds myself and didn’t offer them as a way to become a Christian.

Would baptism provide what the caller was looking for? It’s one of our two sacraments. I briefly reviewed how Jesus was transformed in his own baptism – hearing those words from above about being the Beloved of God. I didn’t offer that in that short conversation, because I know that many of us were baptized as infants, before we had any idea of what it meant. The phone call was too short to develop a theology of sacraments.

I did have a question for him – did he want to become “A Christian, or to become “Christian.” It seemed important to me. Being “A Christian” can be a noun; a status; a defining label. “A Christian,” A Citizen, a Grandparent. But it doesn’t convey behavior. Doesn’t suggest a purposeful life.

I suggested that being “A Christian” might not be the same thing as “being Christian.” **Being A Christian** suggests a membership or belief status; but it needs one thing more:

Being Christian suggests behavior, a life of action – loving your neighbor as yourself, etc.

He didn’t seem to pick up on what I was saying, so we continued our conversation. I said that there are many different answers to his question.

Some Christians say that one has to be born again.” It shows up in the Gospel of John 3:3: *Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."* ...

There’s great truth in that – but being *born again* isn’t just a once and done thing. Evangelical Christians talk about accepting Jesus as your “Personal Lord and Savior.” I told the caller a little about that. (I wish I had also said that being “born again” is the road we’re on. In each new day, a part of us dies, and is reborn, with new opportunities for life. We pause from time to time, aware that we’re ready to make some new beginnings). That is some of the truth, but it doesn’t say enough about **Being Christian**.

However I might have described being “A Christian,” I had the feeling that it would not do justice to the vision of loving God and following the way of Jesus. You can accumulate all of the labels and still be nothing more than a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal (to quote 1 Corinthians 13). Or as cattle ranchers say, “All Hat and No Cattle.” One can look the part, but avoid the work.

“Being Christian” is not the same as being “A Christian.” Being Christian means arranging life around the Love and Justice of Jesus (as Our new Southern New England Conference of the United Church of Christ proclaims, “living the love and justice of Jesus.” It means seeing that the homeless have a place of safety, the hungry have access to food, the sick have access to healing, and that the downtrodden aren’t left alone in their remorse. To follow the way of Jesus means to establish justice and fair play as a way of organizing economies and technologies. But how do you get to all that in a chance conversation?

The caller seemed like someone who was ready to engage the question – but a 10-15 minute phone call isn’t enough. I would want to know more about the background of his question. Where did it come from? What has he learned from others? What has made sense to him and what is just plain confusing?

I would want to invite him to live into his question with a group of other people – live the question in community. And I would want each of us here today to help create responses. Knowing how to be Christian isn’t the private knowledge of

ministers – if one is supposed to have an advanced degree in it, then it’s the wrong question to ask. We church professionals have some background in the question. But it’s our faith community – the whole family – who walks the path of Jesus together.

If that caller had asked how to find our church, what time we hold services, the meaning of our “Open and Affirming” commitment – I would have had no problem answering.

These things are the external realities that keep us rolling forward. When you live and work in a Christian environment, you don’t always have the deeper answers in mind. You think about putting worship bulletins together, about writing sermons, about talking with people, about going to meetings, but you don’t have conversations with people wanting to know **how to become a Christian**. But the caller was asking for a deeper insight into Christianity, itself.

In a few minutes we’ll meet to receive and vote on this congregation’s annual budget. It’s a document that guides our work for the coming year – but it also carries clues about Being Christian -about living the love and justice of Jesus.

Money is connected to mission. Church buildings are connected to the people who dwell in them. But let’s consider how we all are connected to the life of being Christian.

Let’s enliven this gathering place so that the deeper questions are heard, discussed, and put into action.