

“Living the Questions”

Haggai 1:15b-2:9, Luke 20: 27-38

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How many of you have ever been told you are not allowed to question God? It is advice freely offered by well intentioned people. Folks who see God as supreme and all knowing and think we should accept whatever God says and whatever God does without question. This kind of advice is so difficult to hear or accept when something unexpected or tragic happens in your life. When a spouse leaves or a child is killed or a loved one lingers with an illness you have many questions. Denying them is not only bad advice it is bad theology. There are never any guarantees we will receive answers to all our questions. But, we need to know we can at least ask them.

If God is the God of love, compassion, and mercy can we not ask God anything? The confirmation program develops its curriculum each year around those student's questions. Why do bad things happen to good people? What is my purpose in life? Where is God when my father or grandfather or best friend dies? Is there a right way to pray? Only they know the questions for which they seek answers. Young people need to ask questions. We all need to ask questions. Asking questions is how we learn. I have a six year old son and he is full of questions. Sometimes I hold my breath when he looks like he's getting ready to ask a doozy, but I wouldn't have it any other way. Before he's done I have already said a prayer that God will give me the words to speak some truth to his question, no matter what it might be. A young faith becomes a mature faith whenever we are encouraged to doubt or wonder or even question God. A growing, strong and dynamic faith is one where we love the questions as much as we love the answers.

Asking questions is the best way to grow and mature in one's faith. Faith is more than the ability to quote scripture or memorize Bible verses. Our understanding of God grows as we face the tough questions and look at things from new angles in light of those questions. A professor of theology once told his students, “I want a good fight in here every week. We'll never learn anything from being nice to each other. If you believe something strongly, state it strongly, and those who disagree should batter it with questions. That's the only way we'll learn what things can stand up under

pressure and deserve to be considered truth.” We are all seekers of truth, but none sole possessor of it. Truth is not fragile. Truth can take the heat. Truth longs to be wrestled with and lived out. Truth will not disintegrate when challenged or questioned.

In the gospel lesson this morning Jesus reminds us that “God is not the God of the dead, but of the living for to him all are alive.” When we find ourselves in dark and difficult circumstances we need to know that no question, no emotion, is off limits with God. You may feel as though you need God especially when your child is sick or you’ve just suffered a miscarriage or you’re dad has been in an accident. You ask questions of others and of God, as a way of trying to figure out what has happened. Why God? Why me? Why my child? Why my dad? Did I do something to deserve this? Are you punishing me? You may look back and wonder why you asked these questions, but you should never feel ashamed for asking them. It is a blessing to know that you can. God receives all our questions and God may even answer some of them. But we should never be afraid to ask.

Asking the questions is an important part of the healing process. God knows all our questions. God knows the questions before we know them and waits patiently until we are ready to ask them. Asking them, saying them out loud or writing them in a journal helps us to move through the pain or confusion. Asking the questions is for our benefit, not God’s. When we deny the questions, when we push them aside and refuse to acknowledge them or face them, they don’t actually go away. They just become submerged and eventually this denial begins to effect all our relationships; with others and with God. Facing these questions openly and courageously does not guarantee we will find the answers, but at least those nagging questions can’t take on a life of their own. One preacher admits, “even if you don’t really find an answer, you have a good chance of finding a creative way of living with the question.”

Jesus did not avoid questions. In fact, he encouraged genuine, heart felt, soul-searching questions. He was not afraid to ask questions himself. In the moments before his death he cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” He never received an answer, but he was never afraid to ask. Neither should we be afraid. God sent Jesus to live among us so that we would have someone to whom we could bring our questions, someone who lived as we live and experienced some of the same things we experience.

No matter what it is we face, we can bring to Jesus our questions, our doubts, our wondering, indeed, he delights in it.

The story we hear this morning from Luke's gospel is about a different kind of questioning. This encounter with the Sadducees takes place late in Jesus' ministry as he heads toward Jerusalem in preparation for his death. A group of Sadducees approaches Jesus but they are more interested in tricking Jesus than getting answers to their questions. These Sadducees didn't really want to know Jesus' views on resurrection. They did not want to follow him. Their aim is simply to make him look bad, to discredit his theology, and to give fuel to their enmity. Jesus however sees immediately through their deception. Jesus will make time for anyone with genuine questions. However, if you are looking for a way to make yourself look better at his expense, you will receive something quite different from Jesus.

This section of Luke's gospel is full of last minute questions. Jesus asks "will you follow me?" The people ask "do you think it's right to pay taxes or not?" Jesus asks, "will you follow me?" they ask, "can you explain the resurrection to us?" Jesus asks "will you follow me?" they ask "what about the women with seven husbands, to whom will she belong in the afterlife?" They don't want answers. They use these questions to buy time and perhaps make Jesus look a bit foolish as well.

There is a Jewish saying that says, "rake the muck this way, rake the muck that way, it's still muck. Meanwhile we could be stringing pearls for heaven." How often do we waste time raking the muck instead of stringing pearls for heaven? I imagine these some of these questions were their way of raking the muck. How often do we play word games instead of seeing the Christ right before us? How often do we play these games instead of mustering the courage to ask the questions for which we truly seek answers? We fuss with the stuff that really does not matter. We listen to bad advice, worry when we shouldn't worry, shut God out and shoulder the burden on our own.

Karl Barth, the great 20th Century theologian once said, "the Bible gives to every [person] and to every era questions as they deserve. We shall always find in it as much as we seek and no more." Do we use our questions as a way of keeping Jesus at arms lengthy, as a way of avoiding having to go deeper in our faith? Or are we courageous enough to ask the tough questions that will ultimately lead us to deepen our relationship with Christ?

Sometimes in the midst of our questioning God answers, perhaps not always as we have anticipated. Often we think God has ignored us because we do not get the answer we thought we might receive. However, God has a way of surprising us. Sometimes the answer comes and we miss it. Sometimes God answers us several way through several our question in several ways different people, but we don't hear it or just can't figure it out.

Jesus has no time for people who want to trick him or use his answers to prove how smart or righteous or perfect they are. Jesus welcomes questions that are born of deep struggle and soul searching. Questions like: Can you heal my child? I have a demon that continues to torment me, can you help me? No one will come near me because I am unclean, will you love me? These were the questions our ancestors asked, but they are not unlike the questions we also ask. Can you heal my child? Can you help me stay sober? Will you help me be strong enough to stay on my medication so the voices won't continue to torment me? Will you give me the strength to say goodbye to my mother and release her into your loving arms?

God welcomes both our doubts and our questions so long as we do not use them to avoid Christ's question to us—"will you follow me?" When we say yes to Jesus we are bound to have questions. That is a sign of a faithful disciple and Jesus would have it no other way. This is not an easy journey we've undertaken. Yet, there will always be one to whom you can bring your questions, a wise and supportive person, one who will not turn you away or think any question too silly or stupid. How many times has someone reminded us of that the only stupid question is the one we do not ask?

The saints in life were not always those who lived righteously. I imagine however, the saints in your life might be the people to whom you can bring your deepest questions. Those with whom you know you are always safe, the one who listens attentively and is honest with you. A saint might be the one from who you could always expect a straight answer or a truthful admission that perhaps she simply did not have an answer to give. Today may we give thanks for Jesus who encourages us to live our questions? May we thank those faithful companions who know enough when to answer and when to admit they do not know? Jesus says, "Our God is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive." May we always be alive to the questions, asked and yet to be asked, and trust in the God who will always be there to receive them. May it always be so! Amen

Sources:

Rev. Porter Taylor, "Love the Questions," Sermon on Luke 20:27-38, November 7, 2004.

Nathan Nettleton, "Reclaiming Doubt," sermon on November 12, 1995.