**“Finding God in the Questions”**

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“What is the best question anyone has ever asked you?”

I happened to be making one of my very occasional trips onto Facebook last week, and someone had posted this question on their “news feed”, asking for responses. What is the best question anyone has ever asked you? I was intrigued. I’d never thought much about this before. But it didn’t take me long to come up with my answer. How about you? I won’t ask you to share your response, but just think about it for a second. What is the best question anyone has ever asked you? What made it such a good question?

The responses people posted on this Facebook page revealed different understandings of “good”. “Will you marry me?” was the most frequent response. One funny one was: “I’ve got an extra ticket to the Grateful Dead concert…want to come?” One person responded with, “Well clearly it’s: what is the best question anyone has ever asked you?”. These all suggested that a good question is good because it leads to a good outcome for the person. But some responses suggested a different understanding of a good question: “How much joy can you stand?” “What’s this really about?” “What is one thing you know for sure?” “How’s that working out for you?” “How do you suffer?”

A really good question can open up far more pathways into our souls than a really good answer can. A lot of times, we in the church forget this. For all kinds of reasons we become attached to “the perfect answer” about the nature of God, or “the perfect answer” about what the Bible says about X,Y, or Z, or “the perfect answer” about morally right way to act in a certain situation. But I’ve found that we, or at least I, sometimes use answers as a way of shutting down inquiry rather than opening it up. Ok, got the answer. File that away. Now I can move on.

 Of course, sometimes in church and in life you have to move forward in a particular situation and having an answer on which you can build something is necessary. But frankly, I think those kinds of situations are less common than we tend to think. And there is a cost to being too quick with an answer. Good questions invite us to think more deeply; good answers tend to invite us to stop thinking. Alas, more often than not the church tends to prefer living in the domain of answers; while God tends to prefer living in the realm of questions. One of God’s greatest blessings is that whenever the church comes up with an answer, sooner or later God usually brings up another question for us to consider as a challenge that answer.

If we need proof that God was in the question business more than the answer business, we need only to look at Jesus. Jesus spoke in questions a lot more than he did answers. He asked a lot of them; provoked even more. They were usually, short, very open-ended and often quite challenging. Here are a few: “Who do you say that I am?” “Why are you anxious?” “Why do you ask me about what is good?” “Do you want to be well?” “Do you love me?” “Why have you forsaken me?”

Are any of these the best question you’ve ever been asked?

Jesus asked these questions not because he wanted his disciples and followers to get the answer right, but because he wanted them to learn something about themselves and about God through the process of considering the question. Of course to do this, you have to spend time considering the questions. You have to think about the questions both on your own and in conversation with others. You have to commit to staying with the question, even when it challenges you in ways you’d prefer not to be challenged. I’ve been pondering my “best question” for about eight years now. How much time have you given your best question?

A good question takes time to do its work. That’s why when Jesus asked questions of Pharisees and Sadducees and scribes in the Bible, they tended to fall of deaf ears. Because those folks sought immediate answers that would allow them to end the discomfort of living in the ambiguity and hypocrisy that Jesus’ questions pointed out. The disciples do a little better – not because they get the answers right – but because they continue to hang out with Jesus long enough that eventually they understand the depth of the challenges his questions offer to them.

In today’s Gospel we see the very first question Jesus asks of his earliest disciples. The set-up of this passage, from the first chapter of John’s Gospel, is a little confusing. Basically, John the Baptist and some of *his* followers are hanging out in the street. Jesus walks by and John tells them that they should follow Jesus now, not him anymore. So they start to follow Jesus. Jesus notices, turns around and zings them with the first of what will be many, many, loaded questions over the course of their future friendship. “What are you looking for?”

It’s a question that Jesus asks everyone who wants to follow him -- whether around the villages of Galilee in the 1st century or in our post-modern 21st century lives of work, family, and recreation. “What are you looking for?”

Last Sunday night in Confirmation class, one of our 9th graders asked a version of this question. We were discussing how people became attracted into the life of early Christian communities in the years right after Jesus’ life, back when they were illegal and marginalized and, frankly, risky to be part of. One student raised her hand and asked, “Why did people want to follow Jesus?” To my ears, this is just another version of Jesus’ question to his first followers “What were they looking for?” The brief discussion that followed opened my eyes to something about my own attempts at answering that question for myself….attempts I’ve been making for a long time now.

I realized last Sunday that, when I hear this question, I tend to jump immediately to the question of what am I hoping Jesus will do for me. I don’t mean that in the way a 4 year old wants God to send her a pony or to help the Patriots win a play-off game. I mean, rather, that I tend to think first about what my experience of God will change for me in my life. How it will give me a greater sense of meaning and purpose, perhaps a little more self-discipline in some things, a little more compassion and generosity in others. I think about how it will bring me comfort when I face some of life’s bigger challenges, and strength in the moments when I face more uncertainty than I can bear.

But, you know, I rarely think first about what my experience of God will change for others, and for the world. I rarely answer Jesus’ question “What are you looking for from me” by saying, “I’m looking for how I can make violence in my community less prevalent.” “I’m looking for what I can do to promote greater economic quality among those who I live and work with.” “I’m looking for a deeper understanding of how racism, misogyny, and other forms of oppression are at work in my life.” “I’m looking for a personal pathway to play a greater role in social transformation.”

It’s not that I don’t want these things; and it’s not that I don’t think Jesus can offer these things. It’s just that I don’t tend to lead with them when I think about Jesus’ question “What are you looking for?” And now that’s got me thinking. Because those early followers of Jesus were really much more about the second kind of desires than the first. Jesus’ earliest followers were much more interested in the transformation of the world into the Kingdom of God, a place of radical social and economic equality, broader freedoms for all people, and universal compassion – than they were in feeling more comfortable about themselves. Christianity back then was risky, illegal, punishable by death in the Roman Empire. Back then, you didn’t follow Jesus to find greater comfort, you actually gave up comfort to follow Jesus -- because you believed in a greater purpose for your life beyond yourself.

These are the kinds of new realizations that good questions can lead us in to. How about you? How do you answer Jesus’ question to his first followers today? “What *are* you looking for?” And what does that reveal to you about what you hold to be most important, most meaningful, most desired?

God is always asking us these kinds of questions – and if we listen hard enough, we can always hear them -- even when the church is too quick to answer and explain them away. God asks us these questions both through Jesus’ words in the Bible, and also through the words of Christ spoken through prophets and saints throughout history: those people who, it seems, can do nothing else except question our society, our public values, the lack of justice and compassion in our common life together. People like, Martin Luther King, whose holiday we commemorate tomorrow – or Nelson Mandela, or Mother Theresa, or Bill McKibben. Their questions are tough, their voices are loud, and the answers are so slow in coming that it can be tempting to tune them out. But they are the voice of God speaking to us – not in answers, but in questions. Challenging us to go deeper in our self-reflection as individuals and as a society. To get at the root of our most basic desires, hopes and resistance. That is, really, what makes a good question, or at least, a holy one.

So, what *was* the best, toughest, most soul-searching, holiest question anyone’s ever asked you? And have you ever wondered at all about whose voice it really was that was asking…? Amen.