



Sermon

November 11, 2007

Luke 20:27-38

32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Historic St. George's United Methodist Church

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Living the Questions

I read about some recurring dreams — or should I say nightmares — college students have at exam time.

In one, the student studies all night for the big test. Remember all night-ers? In this dream the student has crammed and no-dozed herself all the way to morning. She gets to the classroom and finds the door locked. She pounds and pounds on the door, but can't get in.

In another (I particularly remember this one) the student saunters into class one day, like it was any other day, only to discover, with great horror, THIS IS THE DAY of the big exam and for some reason never got the word.

The article said these dreams may persist after commencement, leaving the poor alum waking up in cold sweats, trembling all over before realizing imagination has been playing a cruel trick. As the realization that the student has *already* graduated dawns, there is a huge sign of relief. No more exams! Until the graduate goes to work, that is, and the boss gives a project with a deadline, or asks them to manage a critical situation and deliver a term- paper-sized report.

The gospel reading today is about a day when Jesus takes a test. Set in Jerusalem, just a few days before the Passover, so days before his arrest and trial, you might call it a final exam.

It was the Sadducees who brought the question. By this time everyone in Judah, especially religious parties within Judaism had heard about Jesus: miracle worker, healer, wisdom teacher, one who raised a little girl from death, one who came into the city with people shouting and waving branches excited about freedom and liberation. Word on the street was Jesus might be the next Moses or Elijah or even Messiah.

These Sadducees were learned men, members of a branch of Judaism who didn't believe there was an afterlife. So that's the subject for the test they want to give Jesus. This is their moment to give him the once over, to see if he will pass or fail.

Here is their question: If seven brothers die in succession and each marries the same woman, one after another, to whom is she married in heaven?

What? Excuse me? Is this the best they can do?

I am reminded of how would-be profound questions sometimes are less interested in actual answers than playing games with the unfortunate person being asked. Questions like comedian George Carlin remembers from his smart-aleck, class clown days in religion class at catholic school. "Father, if God is all powerful, can he create a rock so big he himself can't move it?" Sometimes question are asked more to trick or trap the askee, or to embarrass and show them up.

If you've been following the flurry of presidential debates on the TV news channels recently, you get the idea the whole exercise is more a quest for a sound playing "gotcha" with a candidate than coming to any substantive realization.

The "if seven brothers die in succession and each marries the same woman, one after another, to whom is she married in heaven?" question sounds like that type question to me.

There's a old rabbinic saying that goes something like "Rake the muck this way, rake the muck that way. It is still muck. Meanwhile, we could be stringing pearls for heaven."

The great 20th century theologian Karl Barth once said: "The Bible gives to every person and every era answers to the questions they

desire. We shall always find in it as much as we seek and no more.”

“...answers to the questions they desire...as much as we seek and no more...” According to Barth, the questions are as important as or even more important than the answers. Or will we be content playing Trivial Pursuit?

What are the questions that really matter? What are the questions that bring us in touch with and nurture a relationship with, as Jesus puts it, “not the God of the dead but the God of the living, for to him all of them are alive.” (Luke 20:38)

My sense of the Jesus of the gospels is that he has little time for religious leaders who want to play games. He has no patience with those who want to spin answers to prove how smart or righteous or perfect they are. Usually, those who waste Jesus time don’t come off too well. Like after the exchange in today’s gospel reading. Luke concludes this whole test-taking episode saying: Then some of the scribes answered, “Teacher, you have spoken well.” For they no longer dared to ask him another question. (Luke 20:39-40)

My sense of the Jesus of the gospels is that he has time for questions that are earnest and real. He always has time to turn someone, as the rabbis’ put it, from the muck and turn them toward “stringing pearls for heaven.”

Jesus always had time for questions like:

- Can you heal my child?
- I have a demon that torments me and I can find no rest. Can you help me?
- I have wandered off and lost my way. Can you help me to find the way back?
- No one will come near me because they say I am unclean. Can someone like me be loved by God or anyone?

When people ask Jesus these questions, as much with their lives as with their words — sometimes even before they can put together the words — the answers he gives are not a spin, slogan, sound bite or the stuff of bumper stickers. The answer he gives is himself.

If you think about it, when the likes of the Sadducees, the Pharisees and the Scribes — sometimes even his inner circle of

disciples — ask questions, many of them tricky, Jesus answers them in parables. He answers them in stories that will puzzle their minds and hopefully invite them to stretch their thinking, to look more deeply into the question. Having done so, Jesus hopes they will begin to look at the issue or the world in some new way.

But when women and men bring Jesus their deepest yearnings, when they are in times of testing, trial and trouble, he doesn’t merely talk to them; he engages them. When genuine people come with genuine questions, it isn’t what he says that you remember as much as who he touches, and how he touches, encounters and relates; how he invites people to journey with him along the way to God.

The Latin root of the word question — quaestionem — means to seek. It is where we get the word quest. So, to ask a question is to begin a journey, to begin traveling. It is less about destination and more about the way you get someplace. So, I’m thinking that Jesus was upset with the Sadducees because they weren’t willing to journey, they won’t leave the station. They want to keep things right as they are. They aren’t right or wrong. They are just raking the muck.

A book that meant a great deal in my college days was Rainer Maria Rilke’s Letters to a Young Poet. The back story is that a young aspiring American poet wrote Rilke, the then famous poet with questions about his art. In one of the letters Rilke replies to the inquiring student, “Love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a foreign language. Live the questions now. Perhaps someday far in the future...you will gradually live your way into the answer.”

The deepest questions we have, the real final exam questions in our lives don’t have simple answers. Often when we graduate from one set of questions, it isn’t long before another set of questions surface. Here’s the good news: the correct or exacting answer may not be as important as the questions themselves. Questions become doors and windows for the God, not of the dead, but the living to find some way through to us. The familiar words about Jesus being “the way and the truth and the life” are there

because with him and through him we live our way into the answers.

Maybe it's test time in your life right now. Like Jesus in Jerusalem, on the way to his final exam, it may feel like time is short and so precious. But there is always time with Jesus for questions, the real questions, the deep down questions that have us tossing and turning:

- Does God love me?
- Am I alone in this world because it feels that way some days?
- Is there room for a person like me at God's table?
- Will I ever find peace?
- I don't think I can believe everything exactly the way my mother and father did, or the minister wants me to. I don't know if I can believe that everything the Bible is literally true? Is there room in the church for me?

There will always be people like the Saducees who cannot ask these questions because they think a person needs to have all the answers. Often, if you don't come-up with the same answers they do, you don't graduate.

But, the best questions are the doorways and portals to new life rising from dead

ends, the best questions are the ones that call hope into despair, the best questions are the ones that open to growth and transformation through challenge and change.

Jesus and his way in the world is a door inviting us to think of a new world, a world where all the old rules may not apply. He invites the Sadducees, the church and all of us religious to lay aside the dead-end questions and think of a new world "not of the dead but of the living."

Maybe now is your questioning time. Don't get stuck thinking only about what you can do but what God can do. Remember what Jesus aid: "Ask and you will receive." How can we receive if we don't ASK?

God increase our faith enough to trust the deep down questions to you. Pat answers and regurgitated responses only work so far. Bring us to a new relationship with you and other friends in faith who open your open arms of grace and goodness to us. In all that we do, with all that we are help us to remember how much you love us; for Jesus sake.

Amen.

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