

Living the Questions

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Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

During lent this past spring we wrote down our faith questions. Each Sunday we pasted them on banners in the front of the church. By the end of the Lenten season the many questions were not just a collection of color, but a beautiful part of our worship together. This is one of the distinctions of our congregation; we allow, even encourage, questions to be shared.

Adam and I had promised that we would try to address some of these questions in future sermons. Frankly, I have not been in a rush to attempt this, since the questions you all have are not simple. Here is a sample of some of the questions that people asked. I hope no one is offended by my sharing them. I don't know who asked them so can't ask permission. By now you may have forgotten what you wrote anyway.

If I am not the only reason my God-consciousness is episodic, ephemeral rather than constant and enduring why don't you, my creator, invade my awareness constantly?

How can God speak to one person one way and to another person so differently, with messages that are opposite to each other?

Why are humans, who are the most intelligent, also the most violent?

How can we be part of the solution to the violence in the world? Especially in the Middle East?

Can we really believe all these different things and still call ourselves a community of believers?

In some congregations voicing questions such as these might mean that you are not a true believer or that your faith is not strong enough or that you are following the wrong path. But if we read some of the mystics, like Teresa of Avila or John of the Cross, we know that though we are created to love God, God is still often elusive. Gerald May, in **The Dark Night of the Soul**, says that God is never truly knowable. All of our words are inadequate and our thoughts specific. One of the means by which we find our way toward God is through our wonderings. And so, here at HMC, we maintain the strange proposition that asking the hard questions means you are a “believer.”

Another way to think about questions is found in Psalm 139 that Hannah read part of this morning:

You discern my thoughts from far away.

You are acquainted with all my ways.

Even before a word is on my tongue,

O Lord, you know it completely.

Any questions that we have are already known by God. It is no offense to God to ask them. It is only a way of drawing nearer to the mystery of life, to that mystery that is God.

Of the many questions that were asked during lent this next one is one that has been asked from generation to generation.

Why? Why do the innocent suffer?

If we suppose that the purpose of the question is to draw us closer to God we might ask the question differently. What would it look like, in the words of the poet Rainier Maria Rilke, to “live the question?” What if instead of asking why the innocent suffer we asked, “How is it that the innocent suffer and how might I be part of that?” This is not the most comfortable way to begin looking for an answer. We would much rather avoid suffering than participate in it. We think it easier to sit on the sidelines and wonder why suffering happens than enter into

the suffering. When we “live the question” we try to understand the suffering and how we might be part of changing the situation.

There was an article in the *Washington Post* this week; you may have seen it — The Impassive Bystander. It was about a kind of suffering we might enter, if we dare.

A woman in a psych ward collapses in a waiting room. Though people see her and even approach her, no one does anything to help her, for over an hour. She dies, and it is all recorded on a security camera.

Why do the innocent suffer?

As the article points out, we are often critical of those who pass by, just as we might judge the priest and the Levite who pass by in the story that Jesus told about the merchant who was attacked on the road to Jericho (Luke 10). Despite our best intentions we seem to be susceptible to “bystander behavior.” As sociologists and psychologists have discovered, if there are others around that witness the suffering we take our cues from them. We look around to see if anyone else is responding. If no one else takes action we decide that everything must be okay. Or alternately we hope that someone else will take care of the problem. Intellectually we may know this is not an accurate response but in the moment it is unusual to override this avoidant behavior.

On the other hand, we can’t always alleviate suffering. We certainly can’t eliminate suffering. It is part of the human condition. But we can be more aware of it so that people do not suffer alone. We can be more present to each other in the suffering that is part of life. Certainly this is what we see in Jesus. He is present to those who suffer, who are ill or outcast. He is remarkable precisely because he interacts and blesses — and of course heals — those who suffer.

Let’s not kid ourselves, suffering is not an us-them problem, they suffer and we do not. We all suffer in some way: physically, emotionally, spiritually. Reaching out to suffer with someone else can put us in touch with our own suffering. We might, in fact, receive some healing or nourishment from the one for whom we felt sorry.

Jesus acknowledges that “the poor you will always have with you.” Jesus did not use his awareness of those who suffer as an excuse to live less than a full life. If we live with awareness of suffering, we are also more aware of the great joy in the world. As Rilke says, in living the questions we will one day live into the answer.

Another set of questions, presumably from three different people but they seem somewhat related:

What is the nature of heaven?

What is hell?

Why should I want an eternal life?

Finally, some easy questions! On heaven the writer Evelyn Underhill had this to say:

Heaven is to be
In God at last made free.

So if the nature of heaven is freedom in God, freedom in love, freedom in the unknowable, then would hell be the opposite? Bondage; being enslaved not to love but to hate, fear, anxiety, distrust.... We have often been taught that heaven and hell are places we go after we die, heaven is up and hell is down. And given the graphic parable from Matthew that we heard this morning it is no wonder we have this idea. Matthew depicts a fiery place of horror.

According to Kathleen Norris, hell was not depicted as a place of torment in the Hebrew bible until after Israel had experienced captivity in Babylon. Before the Babylonian exile, when people died it was understood that they went to a general place that everyone went to, sheol or the abyss. But after Israel experienced its own living “hell” it seemed that their tormentors must receive punishment. It was imagined that this could come after death, if it didn’t come in this life. (**Amazing Grace**, p.312)

Israel's oppression in Babylon is not unlike the context out of which Matthew is writing his gospel. The rule of the Roman Empire was cruel and brutal. The followers of Jesus were subject not only to the terror of the Romans but the ridicule of the religious authorities. The parable that Jesus tells of the wheat and the weeds is told to the crowds that followed Jesus. Some of them were devoted followers, some may have been skeptics, even infiltrators. So the true meaning of the story is saved until it is just Jesus and the disciples, alone in a house.

We could get caught up in the details of this parable. Who plants weed anyway? And why not remove the weeds so that the wheat can grow better, after all we know the other parable that Jesus told about the seeds that grow but get choked out by the weeds.

But here we have little time to wonder. The disciples ask what the parable means and Jesus, through Matthew, tells us, interpreting each and every point, turning the parable into an allegory.

The farmer sowing the good seed is the Chosen One; ³⁸the field is the world, and the good seed, the citizens of the kingdom; the weeds are the followers of the evil one, ³⁹and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the world, while the harvesters are the angels. ⁴⁰Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age.

It is conceivable that the pressure had grown so great on the followers of Jesus that they felt the need, like Israel in Babylon, to imagine some future punishment for those who made their life so miserable in the present. This would have been punishment for the Romans of course, but their thoughts might also have turned to the religious leaders. Who are the true followers of God's law and the prophets anyway? Are those infiltrators in the crowd like weeds?

Living in the empire as we do, an interpretation like this one, that Matthew's community gives us, might resonate. But we can also look for some other meanings in the story. One clear message is that whether one is wheat or a weed, the wheat cannot harvest itself. That is someone else's job. As seeds we are to grow as well as we can in this world. And although the one who "planted"

the weeds may think they are in charge, they will find out who really runs the ranch. When one is living under great oppression and threats of violence, there is comfort in knowing the farmer is in charge.

Still, as people who hold power, we ought to be more preoccupied with the hell that people live in this life rather than what might be yet to come. It is yet another invitation to “live the questions.” What is hell and is there anyway that we can be part of transforming that into an experience of heaven, of freedom, of love? How do we create space in our lives to live these questions?

And as for the last question, *why should I want an eternal life?* If what we have here in this life seems like heaven on earth, we probably have no need for a happily ever after. But for those who struggle, suffer and live in hell every day, an eternal life of freedom, happiness, love, of fire that illuminates but does not burn, seems like a real treasure for which to wait and hope.

There are plenty more questions left from Lent. But I want to return to one that I read at the beginning:

Can we really believe all these different things and still call ourselves a community of believers?

We might also ask, “Can we really *have all these questions* and still call ourselves a community of believers?” I think we can. Rachel Naomi Remens puts it this way:

“I have begun to wonder if the secret of living well is not in having all the answers but in pursuing unanswerable questions in good company” (**My Grandfather's Blessing**, p 338).

May we, this Body of Believers, be that company for each other, living the questions and living the journey toward God.