

“Healing Questions”
October 3, 2021

I Kings 19: 9b-15a
Mark 10:35-52

Last Wednesday I received an email from a student at the University who has been worshipping with us this fall. With his permission, I want to share it with you. And I always want to assure you that I will never repeat in a sermon something anyone writes or says to me without his or her permission.

The student wrote: “Hi Bill, there’s something going on by Tippie that you might be interested in. There is a group of men yelling at students that they are sinners and going to hell. I asked some questions, but they never really answered. What should I do in a situation when men are preaching hate and fear of hell instead of love?”

A good question—especially in light of this current sermon series exploring various ways in which we might respond to people when we disagree with them. This morning I want to explore the use of questions in conflict. The student seemed to anticipate my sermon. As he said: “I asked some questions, but they never really answered.”

We might want to ask such people, as God did to Elijah: “What are you doing here?”
What is it that brings you to yell at these people?

I’m a big advocate for asking questions. But I think this is only helpful when they are asked in openness to people that will receive them with openness and respond with honesty.

As it happened, I saw the ranting men over on the Anne Cleary Walkway when I went to mail a letter. When I responded to the email, I wrote: “Once a year, usually in the fall, groups like this show up. They make a lot of noise, attract some attention, and move on. I think you discovered the reality that they are not open to any genuine conversation or to answering any meaningful questions. I think in most cases the best approach is to ignore such people and continue with your life that *does* show love and acceptance and welcome. Questions can also be helpful in the right circumstances--but as you say, these guys weren’t really interested in a dialogue.”

As I said last Sunday, it’s often best to just not try to engage with some people.

The Episcopalian bishop, John Spong, died last month. Twelve years ago, he issued a “manifesto” in which he said:

I have made a decision. I will no longer debate the issue of homosexuality in the church with anyone.

I will no longer engage the biblical ignorance that emanates from so many right-wing Christians about how the Bible condemns homosexuality, as if that point of view still has any credibility.

I will no longer talk to those who believe that the unity of the church can or should be achieved by rejecting the presence of gay and lesbian people.

I will no longer temper my understanding of truth in order to pretend that I have even a tiny smidgen of respect for the appalling negativity that continues to emanate from religious circles where the church has for centuries conveniently perfumed its ongoing prejudices against blacks, Jews, women, and homosexual persons with high-sounding, pious rhetoric.

He concluded: “Those arguments are no longer worthy of my time or energy.” Those words seem appropriate at any time, but especially on this Iowa City Pride weekend.

My guess is that the good bishop lived out his days in peace and tranquility.

There are times when, instead of engaging in a tug of war, it’s best to just put down the rope. If this is not the beginning of wisdom, it is certainly a way down the path.

There are, however, times when questions might help conversation and lead to a deeper understanding.

Jesus was known for the questions he asked. But as I went looking for texts for this sermon, I was struck by how often Jesus reserved his questions for times when there wasn’t an argument. He didn’t often bless his opponents with a question.

But when a genuine opportunity for dialogue arose, Jesus often responded with questions—and especially the question that he asked twice in this morning’s Gospel lesson: “What do you want?” I’m convinced that the question “What do you want?” is a very religious question. Indeed, it was often the only question Jesus asked of those he encountered.

It asks about what is most important

It questions the actions and the speech of others, seeking their ultimate purpose.

It does the same with our own actions and speech.

Jesus walks out of Jericho and comes upon Bartimaeus, the blind beggar, sitting by the side of the road.

Like many blind people in the gospel stories, he is similar to the disciples, who also must have their spiritual blindness cured by Jesus before they can see the new way of life to which they are called.¹ We, too, sit with that blind man, we stand with the disciples, needing new, clear sight.

In his misery he is not thinking of others. He cries out for attention. Listen to him: “Jesus, have mercy upon me!”

The crowd of people following Jesus responds very much how we might expect followers of Jesus to respond. They tell Bartimaeus to be quiet. You know how followers of Jesus can be—knowing just what everyone else should do, silencing those who are too loud.

Jesus responds differently.

He stops.

And asks: “What do you want me to do for you?”

The God of mercy comes to each of us asking a simple question: “What do you want?”

What a great question to ask someone else!

And what a difficult question to answer—even for ourselves.

Many people have a good idea of what is bugging them. Many are good at saying quite quickly and clearly what they *don't* want. Many know exactly what they would like *somebody else* to do.

Do you know people like that?

Ask them what they want.

Or ask yourself what *you* want.

Few people are able to give much of an answer. But if we can wait long enough and if we will listen carefully enough, as the answer forms first in the heart and then in the voice, we might come to a deeper understanding of the other person: learning their hopes and desires—even if they are far different from our own.

When we speak from what we want, when we listen when others give voice to that, we can enter into genuine conversation with one another in the presence of God.

Without missing a beat, Bartimaeus says: “My teacher, let me see again.” He knows what he wants. He knows what is of great importance to him.

Are we willing to talk like that?

Are we willing to help others talk like that?

Asking “What do you want?” is not a way of shutting someone down or winning an argument. It is a path to relationship.

Jesus tells Bartimaeus: “Go your way; your faith has made you well.” With renewed sight, Bartimaeus follows Jesus on the way.

Recall the other story from Mark that we heard this morning.

James and John come up to Jesus and say: “Jesus, do us a favor.”

Again, the same question from Jesus: “What do you want?”

Well, they say, they’d like to sit by Jesus’ side in his glory—one at his right hand, one at his left. It seems only appropriate to them, I guess. After all, they’ve been hanging around him for some time now. There’s got to be some reward coming for all of this.

This time Jesus responds to their answer with another question. Perhaps he is aware that we rarely say all that needs to be said at first. Perhaps he is aware that even when we think we know what we want and can give voice to it, we really haven’t thought things through all the way.

Jesus asks: “Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?”

Asking what is wanted is an important first step.

The next steps asks: “And what are you willing to *do*, what are you willing to *give*, to get it?”

Again, these are the kind of questions that, when asked in good faith, not to shut someone down, might lead to new understanding, to deeper relationships.

Questions bring a new wholeness if we can wait for the answers and live in them for a while.

It’s not always easy to talk with those with whom we disagree. As we have seen in recent weeks, there is a time for silence. There is a time for listening. And there is a time to ask questions.

Sometimes asking a simple question and waiting in silence and expectation for the answer can open new possibilities for all involved.

John Woolman was a Quaker who lived in the mid-eighteenth century. He had a goal—abolishing the practice of slaveholding among American Quakers. For thirty years he visited and challenged his wealthy contemporaries who use enslaved people for their labor. He neither scolded nor shamed.

He asked questions: What does the owning of human beings do to you as a moral person? What kind of institution are you binding over to your children?

Nearly a century before the Civil War, American Quakers freed those whom they had enslaved.

What do you want? And what are you willing to do?

ⁱ: NIB--Matthew