

DO YOU SEEK ANSWERS? OR PRESENCE?

(08/04/19)

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 35:1-10
James 5:7-16
Matthew 11:1-6

Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." (Mt. 11:4-5)

This past week, as I struggled to be a pastor and/or psychotherapist to several individuals who are struggling with chronic pain, serious disease, or who are going through a difficult time, people whose faith is being challenged by the events of their lives, I was reminded of a pastoral conversation that took place in the early years of my ministry. The man who contacted me informed me that he was looking for a church, but first he would like to speak with the pastor to determine how he/she would answer several religious questions.

I found this refreshing. Many parishioners are apologetic about asking the "big" questions under the assumption that "real" Christians shouldn't have questions. They should never question what they were taught in Sunday school, in CCD, or what it says in the Bible. As those who attend our study groups can testify, if you have questions about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the spiritual journey, the efficacy of prayer, the meaning of life, and why the world is the way it is, you have come to the right place. That is, as long as you aren't looking for answers!

The man began our meeting by saying that since I was a religious professional, he wanted to hear what I had to say. I told him I didn't consider myself a religious professional, that I am more of an amateur, but I said I would give it a try. The man took out his notebook and began to read his questions.

The first question: "If God is all good and all powerful, why is there evil in the world?" I told him it probably had something to do with free will, a gift that is so precious that God tolerates the consequences of its abuse. This answer was not acceptable. The man told me it was logically inconsistent (though I'm not sure why). I then suggested that perhaps God is not all good and all-powerful, at least in the way we commonly define those terms, that God might have a shadow side or that there is an ontological reality to evil, a power that can truly possess us. This also didn't fly. I finally had to tell him I didn't know the answer to that question.

The second question: “When we have so much food in this country, why do people starve to death?” I responded that this was an easy one: it is because we don’t share. The man wanted to know how a God who cared about little children could allow them to go to bed hungry. I said I thought God cares about little children and does not want them to go to bed hungry, but God basically wants us to come to our senses and share our food with them. If we all followed the teachings of Jesus, we would do this. The man was not satisfied with these answers.

Third question: “If God is just, why did a prominent celebrity go free when everyone in the country (with the exception of twelve people) believed he was guilty of killing his wife? I told him that was also an easy one: the celebrity had a lot of money and an excellent team of lawyers. The man said this was a travesty of justice. I agreed. When he asked how God could allow this to happen, I said I didn’t see God as a micromanager, determining the outcome of every event. I suspect that God might want us to improve our legal system, e.g., by taking the death penalty off the table since our legal system is obviously flawed. The man said I hadn’t really answered his question. (I thought I had.)

The next question: “Why do some Mafia dons live to a ripe old age while some little children die of cancer?” I replied that it might be a matter of genetics; some criminals are just physically healthier than some little children. This wasn’t the answer the man sought. He asked if I thought the Mafia don would be punished after his death. I said I had no idea what God did with souls, with that little spark of consciousness that lives on after the death of the body. Part of me would like the Mafia don to be punished, but this isn’t a central part of my theology and I don’t find it particularly comforting. Decisions regarding the balancing of the scales take place above my pay grade. Once again, the man found my answer less than satisfactory.

The man then asked why history is basically a record of war. First, I told him I agreed with his assessment of history. In the past century alone, over one hundred million human beings died as a direct result of war. I told him I thought mankind was responsible for an awful lot of suffering. This conversation took place before I became politically correct. Now I would have to say “humankind.” I wouldn’t want to give the impression that most of the wars throughout history were caused by men. However, come to think of it, they were! As Michael Moore has suggested in his book, *Stupid White Men*, most of the problems he has encountered in his personal life were caused not by bad or angry black men but by “stupid white men.” This has also been my experience. This answer, too, was unacceptable.

The final question from his notebook was in relation to how long this suffering is going to last. When is the kingdom of God going to be established upon the earth? When will Satan finally be defeated? Did I think that Christ's Second Coming would occur in our lifetime? I noted that Jesus said it is not our job to determine the day and the time, but we should always be ready, living each day fully, living each day as if it were the last. This, too, didn't fly.

I began to realize that this man was unhappy with life the way it was, or with his life as it was, or at least as he experienced them. If his ultimate question was why the universe is the way it is, why human beings are the way they were, and why his life has turned out as it has, my answer would have to be, "I don't have a clue." As a psychologist, however, I might be able to help him with the last one.

As I sat there pondering how to respond to questions that I considered legitimate but unanswerable, at least by me, my eye happened to fall upon a quote by the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke which was posted on the bulletin board over my desk. In his advice to a young poet, Rilke tells the young man to

Be patient with all that is unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves. Do not search for the answers, which could not be given to you now because you would not be able to live them. Live the questions now. Perhaps someday far in the future you will gradually, without even knowing it, live your way into the answers.

I find this quote fascinating because Rilke is saying that we don't *get* the answers; we can't be *given* the answers; we *live our way into* the answers. This is a very important distinction! He also suggests that the way to living into the answers is to begin by loving the questions.

I took the quote down from the bulletin board and gave it to him to read. I suggested that the questions he was raising were good questions, but he might think about being a little more patient with them. I told him that people in our church were struggling with the same sort of questions, but we have an advantage: we do so together as a community of faith. I suggested that if we are patient toward our unresolved questions, one day we just might discover not *the* answer but *our* answer.

The man informed me that he wanted the *real* answers, and that if I didn't have them, he would seek them elsewhere. He closed his notebook and walked out of the office. I never saw him again. However, I said a little prayer for the next pastor he was going to interview.

I thought about that little exchange this past week. Perhaps I should have given the man more answers. But I don't have the answers. I certainly don't have *the* answers, and it wouldn't

do any good to pretend I do. I have *my* answers, but I don't think my answers would help him or anyone else for that matter. We have to find our own answers. Rilke suggests that we do this by struggling with the questions. He also suggests that patience is an important part of this struggle. It sounds like he might be saying that, if we are patient, this struggle will shape our soul.

Our gospel lesson presents a possible response to the man's questions, a response I didn't have the sense to make at the time. The response, which may or may not have been helpful, was the response that Jesus gives to John's disciples.

As you remember, John is languishing in prison. The fiery preacher who called people to repent has been silenced. He sits alone awaiting his imminent death. John seems to have lost his faith. He who told Jesus that he was not worthy to baptize him now questions whether Jesus is the Messiah. He seems to have forgotten the opening of the heavens, the descending dove, and the voice from heaven that said, "This is my beloved son." John sends his disciples to Jesus, asking him if he is really the one who is to come or whether they would have to wait for another.

Jesus doesn't tell John's disciples that he is the one for whom the people of Israel longed. Instead, he tells them there is no need to wait, no reason to look past the present to the future for the coming of the kingdom of heaven on earth. He says,

Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.

Tell John what you hear and see. The answer to your question is right in front of you. Open your ears. Open your eyes. The answer is not in the future but the present!

This is what I would say today to the man who was struggling with these existential questions. Look around you. What do you see? It might not have worked, but it probably would have been better than shrugging my shoulders and confessing that I didn't have a clue.

We long for the state of affairs that is promised by the prophet Isaiah. However, it presently seems to be little more than an idealistic dream. Israel and the Palestinians seem to be constitutionally incapable of establishing a just and lasting peace. The genocide continues in Myanmar and parts of Africa. Foreign and homegrown extremists have turned to terror as the tool for social and political change. People around the world long for a fascist dictator who will "set things right." Even in our country, people go to bed hungry. Over 500,000 people in Massachusetts go to bed hungry every night.

In the gnostic Gospel of Thomas, Jesus tells us that the kingdom of heaven is already spread upon the earth; we just have to open our eyes to see it. The healing, reconciling power of Christ is already at work in the world. If we open our eyes, if we see with our hearts, we will see that his kingdom is already a reality both within and among us.

Look around you! Good things are happening! Medical miracles happen every day. People are working for peace and justice around the world. Organizations like Doctors Without Borders, and Church World Service distribute food and medicine to those who need it. Greta Thunberg, a 16-year-old Swedish girl, has mobilized her generation and shamed ours into addressing the crisis of climate change. A group of volunteers in Lowell are reaching out to homeless drug addicts, offering them food, medical care, friendship, and hope. Acts of caring and compassion take place in our own community, in our own little church. If we do our part as individuals and as a church, we will usher in the kingdom of God by incarnating it here and now. The answers to our questions lie not in the future but in the present.

The apostle James in his letter calls us to be patient. The patience of which James speaks is not to be confused with passivity. It is grounded in an active, anticipatory confidence that is possible because we trust that, while God may not micromanage the universe to eliminate suffering and injustice, it is still God's world and it is a beautiful world! Because we trust in God, we confront the problems, the unsolved questions of our lives from a stance of faith. Remember, the Greek word that is translated as "faith" in our Bible really means trust.

Like the man who came seeking answers, we all have questions. We all seek answers. Think about it. What are the questions that are unresolved in your heart? They may be questions about the world. They may be questions about someone you love. They may be questions that arise from your own struggles, your own suffering. These are the questions that brought you to church this morning. These are the questions we bring to God in prayer.

Isaiah tells us to carry these questions with hope, with faith in our hearts. It is God's will that the earth be filled with abundance, that people live together in peace. God is already working; God is always working to make this happen. If we open our ears and eyes, we will see that beautiful things are happening within us and all around us.

I am an incurable optimist! I believe that the worldwide threat of terrorism will fade away. If we can move past a militaristic, imperialistic way of thinking, it will happen even quicker. The pain that is caused by our prejudices against people of a different race, ethnic

background, gender identity, sexual orientation, or religion will fade away when we let Jesus help us move past our closed-minded response to those who are different, when, as Jesus taught us, we discover that we are all neighbors, that we are all children of God. When we take the risk of considering other alternatives to declaring war on countries that we designate as evil, the peaceable kingdom of which Isaiah speaks will be even more widely spread upon the earth.

Why do people have to become sick and die? Why do our loved ones betray or desert us? Why do good people suffer? Is it really unfair? Does this question even mean anything? Is it true that life is just what it is? What does it mean to trust in God in a time of trial? How do we find the strength we need to go on with our life, to live our life fully despite the burdens that weight us down?

As I tried to tell that man, I don't know the answer to these questions. If you are looking for simple answers, you will have to try another church or at least another pastor. Even if I did have the answer to these questions, they would be *my* answers, or they would be packaged, simplistic, and patently absurd answers. They would not be *your* answers. Ultimately, *only your answers will be helpful to you*. And these answers are shaped in the crucible of a refining fire.

If we listen to the comforting, guiding words of scripture, we do not find answers as much as we find a way to carry the questions that haunt us. Isaiah tells us we do have to wait, but that we need to wait with hope. James tells us we do need to wait, but we need to wait with patience. Jesus tells us to open our ears and our eyes that we might see the healing that is already going on in the world, in our relationships, and within us. I also believe that this trust, this faith is grounded in presence, in a sense of the presence of God, in a sense of the presence of Jesus, in a sense of the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives right here and now.

“Be patient with all that is unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves.” We need to be patient with our questions. We also need to remember that we do not have to struggle with them alone. We can do so in the context of our religious tradition, our religious faith. We can do so as members of a community of faith, a fellowship of those who are searching not so much for a *transcendental answer* to these questions, but a *transcendental presence*. That is what we seek to receive and share this morning in the Sacrament of Holy Communion: the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We need to open our hearts to this transcendental presence, the presence of our Lord in this sacrament, in our worship, and in our daily lives. Then we need to open our hands that we,

his disciples, might become a part of this healing process in the lives of those around us, in the lives of our brothers and sisters who are in tremendous need around the world.

Let us now bring the questions, the struggles of our lives to this communion table. Let us bring them not in search of answers, but in search of the presence that can help us to carry them in faith, that can help us to experience both healing and inner peace. Let us so partake.

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
August 4, 2019*