

## Lots and Lots of Questions January 6, 2007

Larry Dossey, in his book *Prayer is Good Medicine*, tells a story about one of his best friends—a little 5-year-old named Anne. He described her as coming from a family that was quite religious and one that took her to church a lot. As a result, he said, she had become a pro on the topic of prayer. Typical of a child, Anne candidly asked Dossey a simple, yet interesting, question. “Why,” she asked, “is prayer so noisy?” Apparently, she had been around adults enough at church, and realized that prayer seemed to have to do with a lot of talking! So she asked an innocent, but appropriate question! I don’t know that I have the answer to her question, but I do applaud her willingness to ask it.

Our Bible passage this morning is about another child who asked questions. The story is about Jesus staying behind at the Temple in Jerusalem when he was 12-years-old. We read: **Every year, Jesus’ parents traveled to Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up as they always did for the Feast. When it was over and they left for home, the child Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents didn’t know it. Thinking he was somewhere in the company of pilgrims, they journeyed for a whole day and then began looking for him among relatives and neighbors. When they didn’t find him, they went back to Jerusalem looking for him.**

**The next day they found him in the Temple seated among the teachers, listening to them and asking questions.**

Anne asked questions; Jesus asked questions. Children ask lots of question in order to learn and grow. But it seems to me that many of us lose that child-like quality as we grow into adults. Either we just decide to quit learning and growing, or we get the mistaken notion that as grown-ups, we’re not supposed to have questions. We begin thinking we should have all the answers!

However, it’s been my experience that it just doesn’t work that way. In fact, I find myself agreeing with something James Thurber once said: **“It is better to**

**ask some questions than to know all of the answers.”** I have no idea why he made that statement, but I can make some guesses. My hunch would be that people who are willing to ask questions are a lot more approachable, and frankly, I find questioners a lot more interesting to talk with than those who are what we affectionately refer to as “know-it-alls.” Don’t you?

At any rate, I guess I’ve always believed that it’s OK to say “I don’t know” when we don’t know the answer to a question that we’re asked. That’s something I learned when I became a parent, because children have that innate ability to know whether we really know the answer or not. We just can’t fake it with kids, so it seems to me that “I don’t know” is often the most honest answer we can give.

On the flip side of that, I have to believe it’s OK to have questions, and to ask them. Actually the theme for today came from an email one of you sent me about questions that were swirling around about faith, God, the Bible, and religion in general. While I couldn’t find the email itself, and can’t recall the exact nature of the questions, I recall reading it and thinking to myself that the questioner was someone who was taking his or her faith seriously. To me, asking the important questions is evidence that we are embarking and traveling along the road that we refer to as our spiritual journey. So, in my mind, questioning is not only good, it is healthy.

Dr. Rachel Remen said a similar thing in her *Kitchen Table Wisdom*. She noted that the most important questions don’t really seem to have ready answers. But, she said, **“The questions themselves have a healing power when they are shared. An answer is an invitation to stop thinking about something, to stop wondering.”** She concluded, **“An unanswered question is a fine traveling companion. It sharpens your eye for the road.”**

Some of you may recall a book that I’ve mentioned several times in the past, entitled *Letters to a Young Doubter*, by William Sloane Coffin. Actually he wrote that little book after rereading German poet Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Letters to a Young*

**Poet.** He was taken by Rilke's advice **"to be patient towards all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves."** Then Rilke suggested, **"You will live into the answers."**

So Coffin pictured in his mind a bright college student and an exchange of letters lasting over the nine months of an academic year. He trusted that he and his imagined friend would have a lot to talk about—the problems of faith, the difficulties of personal life, and the confusing and complex problems in today's world. Clearly, he used the term "doubter" deliberately, because he said in his introduction, **"In my experience, a religious faith despite doubts is far stronger than one without doubts. I suspect that no one so reveals an absence of faith as a dogmatist."** That's a strong statement typical of Coffin, but one I happen to agree with.

Often when it comes to our faith, people expect us to be unflinching, to have all the answers, always to be sure of ourselves. Writer Paula D'Arcy shares her personal struggle with the certainty that many expect her faith to have. In her book *A New Set of Eyes*, she writes, **"I have a million reasons why my life is infinitely safer not questioning what everyone around me accepts as correct."** Yes, it is seemingly safer, but playing it safe is not what faith is all about.

It certainly would be less complicated and much easier if we had the answers to every question, or if we could just blindly accept whatever anyone said was true. However, I have to be honest with you and say that doesn't work for me. I've never been very good at just accepting something as true because someone said so. As a result, I have lots of question. Certainly, I've had some moments of clarity, but they seem to be few and far between. I have a lot more questions than I have answers, and I lot more confusion that clarity. But I have to believe that's OK, and it very much a part of our faith journey.

Coffin suggests in his book that we might consider changing our doubts into questions. He's really echoing Tolstoy who once stated that certain questions are put to humanity not so much that we should answer them, but that we should spend a lifetime wrestling with them.

Maybe that, in fact, is the purpose of life—asking the ultimate questions, and being willing to wrestle with them as we make our way through life.

What are some of those ultimate questions? I suppose one of them would have to do with God. Is there a God? If so, what is God like? Some of us may think we have an answer to that one, while others of us haven't a clue.

I've appreciated what the theologian and scholar Marcus Borg wrote in his book *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*. He said that as a child, he struggled a bit with trying to figure out where God was—everywhere or "up in heaven?" In his mind, because he couldn't see God most of the time, he determined God was more distant and remote—real, but removed.

He said that as a teen, he began to have doubts about the existence of God, which led to anxiety, guilt and fear. He was afraid that he would go to hell, because of his doubts; he felt that they were wrong, but he couldn't stop them. As he reflected on that experience years later, he could understand that he was experiencing the conflict between the modern worldview and his childhood beliefs. He had entered the stage of critical thinking, and that made believing in God quite problematic for him.

Borg shares that when he was in his thirties, he had experiences of what he called "radical amazement." As the Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel defined those moments of "radical amazement" as those of transformed perspective in which the earth is seen as filled with the glory of God. Borg described them as moments of connectedness in which he felt his linkage to "what is."

Those experiences changed his understanding of what faith is all about. For years he thought believing was what the Christian life was all about. Now he understands differently. He says, **"The Christian life is about entering into a relationship with that to which the Christian tradition points, which may be spoken of as God..."** In other words, for Marcus Borg, his faith has moved beyond certain belief to relationship—a relationship that will inevitably have ebbs and flows.

That's where Borg has come down, but that's his experience. It may not be ours; it may not be the answer to our questions about God, but I believe his experiences are honestly shared and worthy of our consideration.

There may be all kinds of questions that we ask, and with which we wrestle. Coffin asks, "Who tells you who you are?" Some say the critical question is "Does life have purpose?" and if so, "What is my purpose?" Some ask, "How am I supposed to live my life?" Probably the most profound questions have to do with those of ultimate meaning, and that's often why we come together here: Not to answer those questions, but to struggle with them together as we move along life's journey. Questions—we have lots and lots of questions.

Closing:

AS we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that we can remember what Rilke said: "**Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves.**" In fact, I wonder if life isn't really all about living the question? Guess that's my question for today. What's yours?

Have a great Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.