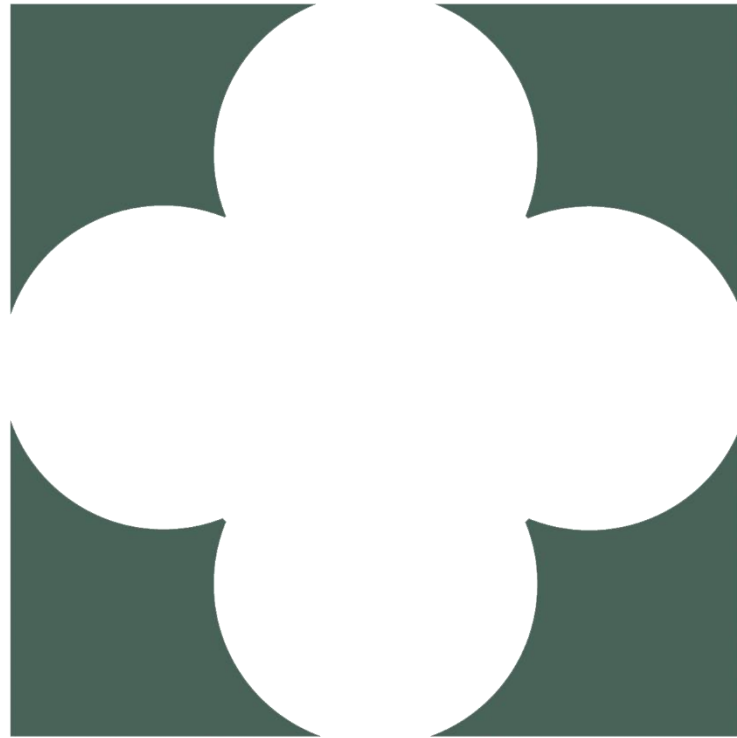


Daring to Ask Questions

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Mark 12:28-34

28One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" 29Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 30you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' 31The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." 32Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; 33and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,' —this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." 34When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that no one dared to ask him any question.

Anthem: "Jesu, Jesu, teach us how to love."

Thank you, Choir. "Jesu, Jesu, teach us how to love the neighbors we have from you." Our African family is right, beloved ones, because I think we believe that loving is something we instinctively know how to do – that simply telling people to love each other means they will know how to do it.

Is that how it works for you?

I am almost 65 and it's clear to me that I still have a lot to learn in the love department. So, I'll go with the Choir this morning and say: "teach us how to love the neighbors we have from you."

Well, here we are. It's Halloween. Dia de los Muertos is on Tuesday. We will celebrate All Saints or All Souls next Sunday. And

it's a season with a lot of questions: What frightens us? What about the afterlife? How do the departed remain with us? Who are you behind that mask or what does wearing that particular mask reveal about you?

I've never been a fan of Halloween costumes for myself. I fear they reveal too much. If the costume is really good, people will ask: "Who are you?" Or if it is too obscure: "Who are you supposed to be?"

Those are big questions: Who are you? And who are you supposed to be? And they can be uncomfortable in a setting where people are planning to be silly and just have a good time.

But what if the point of Halloween costumes is to get us to ask serious questions we don't normally like to ask each other?

And that's perfect for today because the end of Mark 11 and the beginning of Mark 12 are all about questions. If they aren't exactly silly, they are at least cynical. The religious leaders question Jesus' authority and Jesus asks them what is likely to happen if a vineyard owner sends a slave to collect from his workers and they beat him up, and then the vineyard owner sends his own son and they kill him. What is likely to happen next? And that question hits a little close to home.

The leaders who have a vested interest in tax policy ask Jesus: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor?” Not because they really care but because both the leaders and Jesus know that his answer could damage his popularity by alienating some part of his following.

Then the religious elite come to visit with a complicated question about resurrection and a hypothetical woman who has been widowed 7 times. They ask even though they don’t believe in the resurrection.

They are asking Jesus to imagine a horrible situation not because they care about what would happen in such a case but because they want to make a point that would put Jesus on the spot. Their question has nothing to do with caring about that situation. And, perhaps out of some empathy for the possibility of such a woman, Jesus deflects their obviously ingenuine question and makes his own point about what it means to live truly in God.

In all these cases, the question is a set up. They are questions asked to elicit some answer that will ultimately silence people. They are not meant to be the opening of a conversation but the ending of one.

I bet you know those questions – the ones people ask because they want to put you in your place or accuse you of something or is an attempt to confuse you by spinning some complex scenario.

Frankly, I don't need any help being confused. I can do that all by myself. What I need are some clarifying questions. Thank God for those who can help me ask them.

So, by the time we get to verse 28 and another religious person shows up with a question, Jesus might be suspicious. But we are told, this person has been watching these interactions and is impressed with Jesus' ability to maneuver his way out of the traps set for him and to invite people into a larger conversation with deeper questions.

And so, seeing the opportunity, this person asks a big serious question: "Which commandment is the first of all?" Which commandment is, in other words, primary. Or, for you Star Trek fans, the question is: What is the "prime directive?"

This, I think, is a genuine question. What really matters to you?

Please note here that Jesus doesn't just answer the question with the usual love God and love your neighbor routine that we so easily run to. Jesus gives some context. He begins by referencing his own tradition. He calls on one of the pillars of his Jewish faith: "Sh'ma Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad" – "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." And we know the religious leader gets it because he says back to Jesus: "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'God is one, and besides God there is no other.'"

This is important for those of us who are Christians. This loving God and loving neighbor thing we want to claim for ourselves is grounded in his Jewish faith. And we cannot genuinely “explore what it means to follow the way of Jesus” and dismiss, denigrate, or superimpose our own religious experience on to the Jewish faith of Jesus.

That doesn't mean there aren't questions about how we understand ourselves and how we relate to Jewish faith. In fact, that's the underlying context for the entire second half of the Bible.

But I think we also have to recognize that it is exactly at this point that there is a consensus. After all the baiting and debating – the interrogating and trick questions – Jesus and the religious scholar agree that the primary commandment to love God and love neighbor flows from a testimony about Oneness – not the Oneness of uniformity but the Oneness of diversity, the Oneness of “the neighbors we have from you,” the Oneness of the wild and wonderful differences in creation itself.

Fundamental to learning what it means to love God and love neighbor is to recognize, honor, and to find ways to experience the Oneness in all creation.

As the 13th century Christian mystic, Julian of Norwich, says:

The love of God creates in us such a oneness that when it is truly seen, no person can separate themselves from another person ...

and “In the sight of God all humans are oned, and one person is all people and all people are one person.

Okay. Nice. How does that work exactly?

And that’s my point. Coming to consensus about loving God and loving neighbor isn’t the end of the conversation because it begins with a testimony about Oneness. And that Oneing brings up a lot more questions than it answers. That’s why we call it “Mystery.”

So, at the end of this story when Mark says, “After that, no one dared to ask him any question,” I find myself saying “NO!” This is your chance! Ask more questions. Teach us how to love the neighbors we have from you!

Some of the commentators say that people didn’t dare ask Jesus any more questions because he was so good at outmaneuvering them - which seems to imply that Jesus “won” because he silenced them. And that doesn’t sound very Jesus-y to me.

It seems to me more like a failure of nerve on the part of the crowd - being afraid to risk asking questions because they might not like the answers or because they might be forced to ask even deeper ones.

It makes me wonder:

- What questions am I afraid to ask?

- Do I shy away from people who ask difficult and disturbing questions?
- Where have I settled for answers when I should keep asking questions?
- What does it mean today to love God when the people who are the most outspoken about their love for God – and have so many answers – seem not to care one wit about how their actions impact the lives of other people?
- What does it mean today to love other people?
- And does my constant striving to ask just the right question about the situation of other people end up being an excuse for me to do nothing? If only I could ask the right question to get at the root of homelessness, then I would do something. But, until then ...

This story about Jesus makes me start questioning my questions!

Today we will celebrate the life of someone who always seemed daring when it came to questions. In fact, he pretty much dared other people to ask their most challenging ones. And he made it ok to do so.

The Rev. Dr. William Malcomson - pastor, professor, academic dean, observer of the world's religions, and our first Theologian-in-Residence – might have had reason to be enamored of his answers. But he was a questions guy. He loved questions. He loved asking them and being asked. He dared questions that got under

people's skin and yet sometimes also found their way into people's hearts.

To start with, Bill was committed to the diversity in Oneness – the diversity of religions, of experiences, of humanity itself. So how to love God and love neighbor was always an open question. It wasn't that he didn't have some answers about justice and equity and community. But no answer was complete forever. Justice had to take into account the deeper questions yet to be asked about injustice. Equity had to constantly ask questions about power. Community kept expanding the range of questions that needed to be asked in order for it to be authentic and real.

Oneness led necessarily to questions about how to love God and neighbor today.

His book on preaching published in 1968 is built around a series of questions like: "Isn't it selfish to love yourself?"

You will find it very difficult, Bill says, to love other people if you do not love yourself. Instead, you will be wanting them to give you something that only you can give yourself. You will be wanting them to tell you, to prove to you, that you are of worth. This is too much to demand of another person. It isn't fair. And, anyway, even if another person did tell you that you are worth something, this would not satisfy you. You have to believe that you are of worth. You have to love yourself. Otherwise, you will use other people. When you believe with all your heart, when you love yourself with

all your heart, then you are free to truly love other people and not use them.

And what about loving God? “Aren’t you supposed to love God more than anyone?” Bill says:

I am not sure that I love God. I think “grateful” might be a better term. I am grateful to God – grateful that God loves me, that God forgives me, that God accepts me. Somehow this helps me to love myself. It is like saying “Amen” to myself or saying “Amen” to God’s estimate of me ... It takes a great deal of self-love to believe this ... [and] What you have to give is unique to yourself ... Through you, because of you, often in spite of or over against you [God is giving God’s self through your uniqueness]. There has never been a time in history like this time. There will never be again. Something can happen at this time and in this place that can never happen again in all eternity. You can give yourself to these people in your unique way. You can be open to God’s giving through you in this place, at this time, in [this] unique moment.

That was written 53 years ago and it remained true in the kinds of time-sensitive questions Bill asked for the rest of his life.

Beloved ones, this is not the time for us to rely on easy answers. This is not the time to play yourself small.

In the sweep of history, this moment will not happen again. And what matters now are the questions you dare to ask about who

you are, who you are supposed to be, and what are the unique gifts you have to contribute to the world you hope for.

Bill says:

Jesus, in spite of all that happened to him ... celebrated the fact that this world, this world, was the one in which love could happen. Healing could happen. People could be made whole. Is this possible? Can a human being so love another, that the other can feel the surge of wholeness, the power of life coursing through her until it spills out in joy?"

That's the question ... if you dare to ask it.

"Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is One. So, love God in the oneness of your own being - with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength ... and love your neighbor in the same way."

And if there is a voice at the back of your head that asks: How on earth am I supposed to do that? Well, today, if you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts.