

“Encouraging Questions”

Luke 15:1-10

sermon

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Like me, I'm sure many of you were taught long ago, “There's no such thing as a stupid question.” That saying arose due to the recognition that much learning takes place when people ask questions. With that in mind, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), along with other churches embrace a Children's Worship approach known as Worship and Wonder.

Lindenwood Christian Church in Memphis, Tn. sums up the goal of this approach to children's worship by saying it is a means of encouraging children **“to dive deeper into the meaning of a biblical story and to listen for God's still voice that is there.** So, if you overheard a session of Worship and Wonder you might hear the Bible Story teller say, “I wonder what it was like to be in the ark for 40 days?” “I wonder if Noah knew God was with him?” “I wonder if the Good Shepherd's sheep have names?” “I wonder if the Hebrews ever got tired of being in the wilderness?” You get the idea.

One of our children at *Faith Fellowship* asked me 2 very delightful questions one day. First, I was asked, “*Why are you wearing a robe?*” After giving a response that I thought was clear and succinct without rambling, “I replied. Because today is a special day, we're baptizing someone today and the robe is a way of saying that this is a special day.” The follow-up response made to my answer was even better. *I thought whenever we worshipped God it was special.* Well, as you can plainly see, I'm wearing a robe today, as I often do when I preach.

It's not just children that bring questions. A SS teacher in a church I once served one day invited me to his home. We had a good visit together and as part of our time together he shared a story with me. Woman had asked, now, “Who was first, Jesus or the Church?” Well, at least she was seeking truth, right? At least, she gave her teacher an opportunity to help, right?

I've begun this message talking about questions because I'm deeply concerned by some trends going on in our time and I think our response to questions and use of questions is critical in dealing with such trends. Allow me to explain my concern.

We live in a time where institutional religion no longer has the respect it once did in many circles. According to Diana Butler-Bass, a regular commentator on religion, politics, and culture for outlets as diverse as *USA Today*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *The Washington Post*, *CNN*, *Fox*, *PBS*, and *NPR*, 25-30 % of the population of our country who are under 30 years of age neither attend religious services nor have any religious preference, although about half of the unaffiliated group still say they believe in God or understand themselves to be spiritual. They are a people who are profoundly disappointed in religion and religious ideologies and organizations as those things currently exist. (Butler-Bass, *Christianity After Religion...*, p. 86).

Butler-Bass further addresses this topic by citing a 2004 survey by The Barna Group that found the young adults who are outside of church hold intensely negative views of Christianity. Among their findings were that 87 percent said Christians are “judgmental,” 85 percent accuse churchgoers of being “hypocritical” and 72 percent say Christianity is “out of touch with reality.” Conversely, only 41 percent think that Christianity seems “genuine or real” or “makes sense,” while only 30 percent think that it's “relevant to your life.”

How sobering! I'm not sharing these things to discourage you but to say that since the future of Christianity will be at least somewhat dependent on the attitudes that young adults have about our faith in the days to come, the church has some serious work ahead of it.

It's not just young people who are disillusioned with the church. Even those who have been deeply committed to the church across the years can become dissatisfied with it, growing weary of efforts at trying to make it once more what they know it ought to be. They tire of the focus being on matters organizational and institutional to the exclusion of matters of a more spiritual ilk.

They want to know that the church is as welcoming as the God who is represented in this morning as actively seeking the lost, the broken, the outcasts, the alienated, the excluded, a church willing to roll up its sleeves and get its hands dirty involving itself in work that shows it cares about physical, emotional, & intellectual needs as well as, of course, spiritual needs. They want one where the energies and efforts of those who comprise it is spent in worthwhile matters not merely "business as usual," routine, organizational pursuits (not bad in and of themselves, but they are when they forget about the essence of Christ's call for us to seek and save the lost, proclaiming good news, teaching about spiritual disciplines that make for growth, and living out the message of forgiveness and love..."(Bass, p. 87).

They want a church home where their questions can be asked without a judgmental response, something you allow here in a very real way, where differences in theology can be affirmed and seen as enriching, where they have a voice and a place (inclusion).

They don't want to have the experience of the pastor who had never met Bass but sent her a poignant email. He'd served in the parish ministry over 20 years but resigned from discontent. Regarding the church, he wrote:

I am leaving it. My wife, who has been a faithful companion in this journey, is also leaving the church. I have resigned from all my denominational roles, and no one has said a word...Yet, we are sad to leave, because of what it means. It means to us the church has become irrelevant to us. We care about spiritual disciplines of study, worship, confession and forgiveness, discernment, fellowship, and mission." Then, he added, "In the church, *I spent more time discussing the replacement of the church roof than on discerning our purpose as a church. **We miss the liturgy and the relationships, but I do not miss the constant bickering over meaningless garbage, evening meetings and working every weekend.***"

How powerful!

How will we respond to these challenging times? Hopefully, we will allow the criticisms of the church to make us better. One way I think we can show the world we care and are relevant is by "Encouraging Questions."

Quaker Philip Gulley shares a story that helps illustrate why our approach to questions is so important. He knew a man in his community who, along with his wife, was a faithful attender in church for many years. Apparently, one teaching of this church that was regularly stressed was that God could cure illness. Consequently, he and his wife spent many hours in prayer since his wife's diagnosis asking God to cure her.

Gulley ran into the man at a store several weeks after his wife's funeral and found him very bitter and angry. He declared the funeral calling was terrible. All those people from church came through the line, telling me this was God's will, that God needed an angel, that God needed her more than I did, that she was better off. He went on to say in strong terms, he disagreed and that he was done with church.

After Gully assured him, he was sorry about his wife's death and he admitted that he had sometimes said insensitive things to grieving people. He, then, made plans to share a meal with this

man in a few weeks. When they came together again, the man's anger had faded some and they could more openly deal with his loss, now.

Gulley asked him why he'd been so angry at his fellow churchgoers. He replied, "I guess *I'm mostly angry at myself*. I used to say those same things. I'm angry that I never gave these things much thought and mad the church never asked me to. They gave me easy answers, which I accepted without thinking. Now that I need to make sense of God and suffering, I don't know where to start. I guess I'm mad because the church didn't teach me any better, and I'm upset with myself for not insisting it should." Gulley uses this story and other experiences and scripture as well to suggest the church must learn to be more interested in valuing questions than simply supplying answers.

People witnessing suffering don't necessarily want simplistic answers just sensitive, caring listeners. I'm convinced we can learn much from Jesus who asked many questions to help people learn deep truth and responded to questions as if they mattered and as if those who asked them mattered.

Jesus empathized with the sheep who strayed and was alone and helpless. (Explain what can happen to sheep here on their backs as a clarifying example). Jesus goes after that sheep and sweeps the floor with the woman looking for the drachma (day wage). He knows her need for that and cares. *Highlight here the beautiful bulletin cover and quote."

Extending welcome, hospitality today means listening. I'm reading a book on how to share effectively what your church is doing with others. It encourages the church pay attention to others perceptions of it and to be become attuned to those perceptions and respond accordingly. Name church appropriately (you spent significant time on that and did well!). Pay attention to your curb appeal, have a website that entices others by highlighting your key foci; think about what your worship and ministry style convey. You're intentional. My church has some work to do on this one. Pay attention to your ministry focus and remain focused...These things may seem trivial, but they're part of conveying you're interested in helping others who pay attention to such things, hear the good news that transforms and brings joy!

Jesus extends welcome and hospitality, by asking questions and by receiving others' questions. Along with the questions Jesus uses in today's text, allow me to highlight some that he was asked. Jesus didn't run from tough questions and he was asked them repeatedly. Why are you and your disciples not fasting? Which is the greatest commandment? Who is my neighbor? Why do you heal on the Sabbath? Are you the King of the Jews?

I believe as the world learns the church is more concerned about people than dogma they will see the church is authentic and will grow in appreciating its worth and value and even more importantly that it will honor the spirit of Christ.

Further, we need to strive to use questions that invite participation in learning so that answers aren't just handed down but are discovered. Jesus asked his disciples, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" "Who do you say that I am?" "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

People need to be able to ask, "Why do good people suffer? Why do evil people prosper? Why doesn't God protect innocent children from terrorist having bombings? Why are people born blind? Why are people crippled with MS?

These are not easy questions but questions people have and the question is not whether people will raise them, but will they be comfortable raising them at church? In a compassionate church the answer is yes and we will not be afraid to ask questions of ourselves

either. Am I using my talents and gifts to help others as I should? My resources? Am I source of encouragement to others, or more of a dark cloud that others don't really like being around? Can I listen as well as I express my own ideas?

Jesus asks two questions in today's text and both are rhetorical. *"Which one of you having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the 99 in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? And, "What woman having 10 silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and carefully search until she finds it?"*

The questions are meant to teach of God's great joy in recovering persons who once were lost, wandering around without hope and a relationship with Him, living for themselves but not caring about others. He asked those questions after he himself had been asked, why he sat at the table with tax collectors and sinners? How could he value such people? He was contaminating himself with impurity by associating with such folks. He was throwing religious tradition long practiced right out the window. He understood their question and viewed it as an opportunity to set the record straight about what matters most. His response concerned God's joy over restoration of the broken. It too could be phrased as a question, **"Don't you know God's kingdom is more about welcoming than excluding, and more about joy than judgment?"** AMEN.