

The Questions of Holy Week
Matthew 26:17-46
April 1, 2010 (Maundy Thursday)
The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights
Pastor Dave Carver

What is a question? Not what is “the” question – Shakespeare has given us the best answer to that query in *Hamlet*, act III scene i: “To be, or not to be, that is the question...”

That may be *the* question. But what is a question? According to linguists, “a question is an illocutionary act that has a directive illocutionary point of attempting to get the addressee to supply information.”¹ Well, golly, Dave, that ought to clarify things. “Illocutionary”? Really? twice in the same sentence?

To simplify, can we agree that a question is a device designed to provide the asker with some information? You might say that a question is a phrase that is set apart by the special punctuation mark that follows it, but you know that’s not the truth. After all, when your mother says, “You are not going to wear that in public, are you?”, we all know that it’s not a request for additional information. That’s not a question. And when your girlfriend’s dad says, “Please sit down and tell me about yourself and your plans for this evening,” well, you know, that *is* a request for information – an illocutionary act if ever I’ve heard one!

Some questions are simple and direct: “You want fries with that?”, while other questions are simply a tactic to delay or prolong the conversation to avoid something else (“I know it’s close to bedtime, daddy, but I was wondering, how does the water from the river get into our pipes at home?”).

Even though we define a question as an attempt to get information, we all know that there are some questions that are best left unanswered. When someone glares at you and says, “Well, well, well, just who do you think you are?”, it’s not usually a request to see your passport. And when someone says, “How stupid do you think I am?”, it’s not prudent to give a reply. People really hate it when you answer that question.

I love questions. I love to sit with someone and ask about - and learn about the really important things in their lives. In fact, as I was preparing this message, I remembered when Leslie Fisher, Jessica Simcox, and I were leaving for a "scouting trip" for a mission trip in the mid '90s. As the 3 of us headed to my purple Saturn for the trip to New York, Leslie offered to take the back seat. Jessica insisted that she'd be more comfortable there, and asked Leslie to ride up front. Leslie said, "Are you sure?" and Jess said something to the effect of, "No, really, I'd prefer it. I never know how to answer all those questions Dave asks."

¹ <http://www.sil.org>

While some questions are just perfunctory, and others are a pain in the neck, the best questions help you to think about what really matters in life. Not long ago I heard an interview with Irish poet John O'Donohue. He asked,

... when is the last time that you had a great conversation, a conversation which wasn't just two intersecting monologues, which is what passes for conversation a lot in this culture. But when had you last a great conversation, in which you over heard yourself saying things that you never knew you knew? That you heard yourself receiving from somebody words that absolutely found places within you that you thought you had lost and a sense of an event of a conversation that brought the two of you onto a different plane? ... a conversation that continued to sing in your mind for weeks afterwards, you know? And I've — I've had some of them recently, and it's just absolutely amazing, like, as we would say at home, they are food and drink for the soul...²

Beloved, the best questions do that for us. They put us in places that allow us to wander and to wonder into places that are close to the edges, that are close to the most important things in our lives. We don't get to have these too often, of course – we'd be emotionally exhausted. But we ought to have them once in a while.

All of these thoughts were swirling in my head as I encountered the texts for Holy Week this year. As I scanned the pages and read of the events of the last week in the life of Jesus, I was drawn to the many, many questions that are found in these climactic days of Jesus' ministry on earth. The other day I counted at least 27 different questions that are posed between the Last Supper and the end of the gospels – and that doesn't count the ones that are in more than one gospel. Surely, some of these questions were perfunctory – they were mere conversational contrivances. But just as surely, some of them open doors of understanding that might help us to understand Jesus – and ourselves – a little bit better. Tonight, I'd like to consider two questions from Maundy Thursday that reveal the heart of the asker.

In Matthew 26, as they are sharing the Passover supper, Jesus mentions to his disciples that he knows that one of them will betray him. When he predicts this betrayal, Matthew says that each of the disciples responded to him, one after another, by asking a question: "Is it I, Lord?" In the Greek, *μητι εγω ειμι, κυριε?* Eleven disciples each ask Jesus this question...and each of the eleven calls him. "Lord". That's the word, according to Matthew, that the reverent faithful always call Jesus. It is an acknowledgement of who he is in their lives. He is their Lord. He has authority over them. But then, says Matthew, Judas spoke up. And instead of asking, *μητι εγω ειμι, κυριε?*, Judas asks *μητι εγω ειμι, ραββι?* He calls Jesus "Rabbi". As we mentioned on Sunday, "Rabbi" is a perfectly good word that means "teacher". Yet in Matthew's gospel, the people who call Jesus "Rabbi" are almost always non-believers.

² http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/2009/john_odonohue/transcript.shtml

Do you see what is happening here? In hearing the questions, we are seeing into the heart of the questioners. Who is Jesus, really? Who is he to you, Peter, James, and John? Who is he to you, Andrew, Philip, Bartholemew, Thomas, Matthew, James, Thaddeus, and Simon? Oh, I see. He is Κύριε. He is Lord. He is the Son of God, the Messiah, the One who has come to redeem the world. The question you ask reveals the way that you think about the One to whom it is directed.

And you, Judas, Who is he to you? He is a rabbi. A teacher. Judas doesn't even call Jesus "rabbouni", a more personal form that means "my teacher". Jesus is a wise man. A smart cookie. A nice guy.

Beloved, as the worship continues tonight, Jesus passes you the bowl, and he tells you that someone will betray him. And as he does so, it begs the question, "Who is Jesus to you?" You're not in the Upper Room - you are safely removed by thousands of miles and thousands of years. Yet your ability to observe this sacrament depends in large part on the way that you ask that question: Is it I, Lord? Or Is it I, Rabbi? Do you count yourself as one who submits to Jesus's lordship? Or do you see him as a good and wise man?

While you think about that, let me get to the other question I'd like for us to consider tonight. This one is also found in Matthew 26, and it shows up in two slightly different forms. Jesus has taken his friends with him to the Garden of Gethsemane, where he will pray the most agonizing prayer of his life. He knows that he can't count on all of them, but he pulls Peter, James, and John aside and says, "Please, fellas, stick with me on this. I need you." And he prays. And twice, he comes back to where they were and finds them asleep. Verse 40 tells us that Jesus asked Peter, "Could you not watch with me one hour?" And then in verse 45, when he finds them sleeping again, he says, "Are you still sleeping, and taking your rest?"

Friends, did you hear the way that Jesus asked those questions? Did you sense the agony in his voice as he spoke, not only to the disciples, but to his Father in prayer? This Maundy Thursday, Jesus is frustrated. He is afraid. He is lonely. As much as the disciples believe him to be Divine, the Jesus who prays in Gethsemane is very much a man.

When you hear about a friend who is going in for some surgery, or who is grieving the death of a spouse, what is one of the first things that you say? You say, "who will be there with you?" When we go under the knife or walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we want to know that we won't be alone. It's scary business. And Jesus, here in Gethsemane, shows that he wants that as much as any of us. This is not some stoic, unflinching, "damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead" kind of Savior. This is a man who wants his companions with him. Even though he knows full well the kind of fickle disciples they can be.

As we come to the sacrament, we are often a little nervous. We wonder if we'll do it right. We are convinced, at least a bit, that maybe God is slightly

irritated with us, or that Jesus hasn't forgotten that great sin we committed last week. We wonder if we are serious enough. Well, I don't want to tell you not to be nervous, or that your sin doesn't matter, or that maybe you don't have some business to do with him...but here's what I do want you to remember as you come to the table tonight: Jesus is glad you are here! Jesus invited you! Jesus wants to have you close to him! Jesus loves you! Why on earth would he feel that way, given the many ways that you and I have betrayed or abandoned him? I have no clue. But I know that it is true.

In *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, Brennan Manning puts it this way:

If Jesus appeared at your dining room table tonight with knowledge of everything you are and are not, total comprehension of your life story and every skeleton hidden in your closet; if He laid out the real state of your present discipleship with the hidden agenda, the mixed motives, and the dark desires buried in your psyche, you would feel His acceptance and forgiveness...it is unimaginable to picture a wooden faced, stoic, joyless, and judgmental Jesus as He reclined...Such timidity robs Jesus of His humanity, encases Him in plaster of paris, and concludes that He neither laughed, cried, smiled, nor got hurt but simply passed through our world without emotional engagement.³

I want to make sure that you get that. When Jesus saw you come into the room tonight – knowing everything that there is to know about you, his first thought was, “Oh good! He's here! She's here! This is wonderful.”

“Could you not stay awake with me for an hour?” is a cry of pain – pain brought on because Jesus was reluctant to be alone and abandoned. Pain brought on because Jesus enjoyed the company of his disciples.

Friends, the Good News that these questions bring to us tonight is this: Jesus is Lord. Jesus is the Holy Son of God, sent for you. And Jesus calls to you, embraces you, and delights in you.

Remember that. Take him your questions. Wander and wonder with him. But begin by remembering who he is and how he feels about you. Amen.

³ *The Ragamuffin Gospel* (Multnomah paperback 1999) p. 63.