2-23/24-19 The Questioning Crowd Rev. Amy Haines

Luke 6: 27-38

How many questions do you ask in a day? And what kind of questions do you ask?

I think my current top three questions are “where did I put that”, “what did I come in here for”, and “who needs to be where today”?

Young children are well known for asking questions, as they explore and learn about the world around them. One study found that 4 year-old girls ask the most questions, at almost 400 per day!

Yet as children get into school, they learn to answer more questions than they ask. A 9-year-old boy seems to ask the least amount of questions, content with what he knows at that time about the world around him.

- www.kindynews.com/blog/kids-ask-how-many-questions-per-day

Isidor I. Rabi, a Nobel prize winner in science, was once asked how he became a scientist.

Rabi replied that every day after school his mother would talk to him about his school day.

She wasn't so much interested in what he had learned that day, but she always inquired, "Did you ask a good question today?""Asking good questions," Rabi said, "made me become a scientist."

-Source Unknown sermonillustrations.com: questions

Mondovo marketing compiled the 1000 most asked questions of Google. Good questions, crazy questions, practical questions, inappropriate questions—they are all asked online. The #1 question asked on Google, however, was “what is my ip address?” Also in the 10 was “what time is it”, “what song is this”, “how to tie a tie”, and “how many ounces are in a cup”.

-www.mondovo.com/keywords/most-asked-questions-on-google

Consider the popularity of TED talks. Their tag line is “Ideas Worth Spreading” and each TED talk is an 18 minutes or less video on a specific topic, and the topics are as wide ranging as our personalities. Currently there are over 3000 TED talks online, plus conferences and books and speakers and blogs. I think TED talks satisfy the questions of adults.

As human beings, we are wired to ask questions. We are wired to discover the world around us, figure out how it works, and find our place in it. Often, we cannot do so without asking questions.

Yet think of a time when your questions were discouraged. Maybe your parents got tired of your questions. Maybe you had that one professor who refused to engage in any dialogue.

Maybe you grew up in a faith tradition that told you what to believe and how to act and frowned upon any doubt or questioning in your faith.

As United Methodist Christians, we are not to check our brain at the door. While Scripture is foundational for us, we are also to approach our faith with a combination of tradition, experience and reason. We are encouraged to ask questions, and understand the context of scripture, and wrestle with how to live out what we believe as followers of Jesus in practical ways. Answers to our faith questions may not come easily. And there will always be the unanswerable questions of faith, especially in the face of tragedy, cancer, and struggle.

In the Wednesday night study I am currently teaching, the author said this past week that as believers it is ok for us to say at the same time “I believe” and “I don’t understand.” We follow many biblical ancestors who asked many questions, yet often stepped out in faith before their questions were answered. Think of the questions and faithfulness of Noah and Abraham, Job and David, Mary and Thomas and Peter.

Sometimes we allow our questions to pull us away from faith. Yet honest questions can lead us to deeper understanding. Honest questions can also lead us to deeper trust in Almighty God when we don’t quite understand.

It is with this understanding that questions can deepen our faith that I approach today’s Scripture passage in the Gospel of Luke. And no, I did not choose this passage because of our denomination’s General Conference that is meeting this weekend.

This Gospel passage for the 7th Sunday of Epiphany in the church year C was set for this date in this year by the Revised Common Lectionary in 1994.

I did choose, however, to ponder these lectionary passages this month as we reflect on the crowds that surrounded Jesus. What were the makeup and emotions of those first century crowds, and where do we find ourselves in those crowds? What can we learn from Jesus and his interactions with the crowds to reach out to the crowds that we encounter on a daily basis?

Two weeks ago we encountered Jesus preaching to the crowd from Simon Peter’s boat on the edge of the lakeshore, as the crowd was pressing in on Jesus. They were amazed at the way he taught, and wanted to hear more. We were then invited to press in ourselves, to listen and respond to Jesus’ call on our lives to follow him.

Last week we encountered Jesus in the midst of the crowd on a level plain, beginning to teach his recently named disciples. The crowd was now much more diverse, Jews and Gentiles, rural and city and seaside folk, and came not only to hear Jesus teach but also to be healed by Jesus.

We learned from that crowd to be expectant, eager for who Jesus is and what Jesus teaches us, even if God’s ways are not always our ways.

Today’s crowd surrounding Jesus is the same crowd as last week, composed of disciples and seekers, those eager and skeptical and yearning and hopeful. And Jesus continues today to teach his disciples about God’s kingdom ways, with the crowd listening in.

As Jesus continued to teach about God’s kingdom ways, which are definitely not the world’s ways, I wonder how many in the crowd that day turned from expectant to questioning. I also wonder how many of us today when we listen to Jesus’ words about God’s kingdom ways also question the practicality of living by such faith. Is such faith possible? Is such faith realistic? How can we possibly live by God’s kingdom ways in the midst of our divided world today?

For what does our text call us to see? It calls us to encounter God’s kingdom ways of countercultural love, compassion, mercy, forgiveness, and grace. It calls us to encounter God’s kingdom ways that value all people, and call us to live by that value in all our interactions with one another.

To those who will listen, Jesus says, “love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who mistreat you.” His examples include… if struck on the cheek, offer the other. If commanded to give your coat, give your shirt as well. Give to beggars. Forgive and don’t condemn.

These are definitely countercultural ways of living. Be kind to those who have wronged us?

Love those who work against us? Pray for those who have harmed us? Our natural tendency is to want revenge, to hurt others as they have hurt us.

Imagine being part of the crowd on the plain that day. How would you have questioned Jesus’ message? In Leviticus 19:18 the Lord declares: “You must love your neighbor as yourself.”

Yet the unwritten rule then and now was that a person was allowed to hate one’s enemy.

The Jews who knew well the letter of the law knew where they must be charitable to friend or enemy and where they could draw the line.

Yet, Jesus says, love your enemies.

“Anybody can love their friends,” Jesus says, “because that’s natural. The real measure of the loving, grace-filled, gospel heart is its ability to drum up some compassion even for the folks with whom you won’t spend relaxing evenings around a dining table, even for the people who won’t have you over for tea because they’re too busy sneering at you behind your back. Loving them is the real challenge!”

-- Scott Hoezee 2-17-14 cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/epiphany-7a

Jesus looks at us and says,

I see the animosity and fear that divides you. I see the anger and bitterness in your hearts and on your Facebook pages. I see the refusal to listen to the stories and to validate the experiences of those you deem different than you. Those are the ways of the world. Those are not God’s kingdom ways of living.

..Writer and surgeon Bernie Siegel tells the story of Wild Bill, an inmate of a concentration camp, who after six years of serving the enemy as an interpreter, was still full of energy and physical health and a gentle positive spirit.

To the other prisoners, he was a beacon of hope, an agent of reconciliation, one who was constantly urging them to forgive each other and the enemy.

This man’s positive spirit was all the more amazing because of the horror which he himself had experienced at the beginning of the war — watching his own family: his wife, his two daughters, his three little boys, shot before his very eyes by Nazi soldiers in Warsaw.

When asked to explain his lack of bitterness, Wild Bill responded, “I had to decide right then whether to let myself hate the soldiers who had done this. It was an easy decision, really.

I was a lawyer. In my practice I had seen too often what hate could do to people’s minds and bodies. Hate had just killed the six people who matter most to me in the world. I decided then that I would spend the rest of my life — whether it was a few days or many years — loving every person I came in contact with.”

--“The Offense of Grace” 1-20-17 ministrymatters.com

Jesus calls for a stop to the cycle of violence. He demands that his followers not sink to the level of meanness of those who are out to hurt them, demean them or challenge them to return evil with evil, whether physical or emotional.

Jesus then gives examples for his hearers to respond in nonviolent ways. Since most of his hearers were poor, he gives them ways to redeem the indignity of their situation.

“If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also.”

In Jewish society, a strike on the right cheek would not be a punch, for to punch with the left hand was considered unclean. Rather this strike would be a backhand to the right cheek, done as an insult rather than an injury. This backhanded strike would be leveled by a person in a position of power or superiority with the intention to humiliate the one struck. To turn the other cheek, then, was a way of showing that the one struck was not defeated or demeaned.

“If someone wants to take your coat, do not withhold your shirt.”

It was common in Jewish society for a debtor to take the outer garment, the coat, as collateral for a loan during the day, even though it was to be returned at night to sleep in. When a person was going to be taken to court over their debts and knew they cannot win, to give their cloak as well was to give their undergarment, thus standing naked in front of the debtor and causing that person shame for looking upon their nakedness. Such an incredible act would humiliate the creditor more than the debtor.

--adapted from Walter Wink “The Third Way” csec.org 11-14-93

These surprising examples of non-violent resistance were ways that allowed Jesus’ hearers to live with dignity in an undignified situation.

Consider the situations where you have felt demeaned, degraded or dismissed by someone else and wanted to lash out in anger or even violence. Jesus reminds us to not give in to the cycle of violence.

We can take a step back, pause, take a deep breath and remember who and whose we are.

We can remember our blessedness that is never taken away from us by another person. Then, in remembering who we are, we do not give others control to define us.

This passage is not calling on Christians to become passive doormats, to be silent when abused, or to not stand up for themselves in self-defense. There will be times when a love for enemies will be at a distance, behind healthy boundaries. There is still a need for appropriate justice in this world for those who persecute and harass others.

Rather, this passage is calling Christians to a counter-cultural choice of living by love, by grace, by forgiveness, in all of our relationships with others. To love one’s enemy negates their power in our lives. To pray for those who harass us is to desire the best in them rather than the worst to happen to them, praying for God’s transforming grace to be present not only in our own lives, but in their lives as well.

.. In a sermon written in a Georgia jail and preached just after the bus protest in Montgomery, Alabama, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said this about loving your enemies:

"Of course this is not practical; life is a matter of getting even, of hitting back, of dog eat dog...

My friends, we have followed the so-called practical way for too long a time now, and it has led inexorably to deeper confusion and chaos. Time is cluttered with the wreckage of communities which surrendered to hatred and violence. For the salvation of our nation and the salvation of mankind, we must follow another way.

--Martin Luther King, Jr., A Testament of Hope: the Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin

Luther King, Jr., page 596, quoted by Chuck Queen, Love Your Enemies on Sermons.com

Verse 31 is well known as the Golden Rule.

“Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

“Treat people in the same way that you want them to treat you.”

This is a great statement of Jesus in and of itself. Yet putting it in context for the Gospel of Luke, in the middle of a crowd, on a level plain, reminds us this Golden Rule is not just for those who like us, or those like us, but for our enemies, for those we struggle with on a daily basis, those who are out to diminish or demean us. Treat others—including your enemies—as you would have them treat you! That is the ongoing challenge of this passage that we question and we struggle to make so.

Yet there is hope. There is a way to make a difference in our lives and in our world, to make practical God’s kingdom ways. What makes that difference is God’s own agape love.

We don’t live in relationship with one another merely on our own power. We cannot love our enemies, we cannot even love our own family and friends, out of our own desire.

For too often our love is selfish, our love expects reciprocity, our love is superficial rather than sacrificial.

But God’s agape love is sacrificial and unconditional. It is God’s agape love that calls us to be generous and loving, compassionate and kind, expecting nothing in return. It is God’s agape love that is described in this passage.

Anyone, including sinners looked down upon by the religious rulers, even they are loving and kind to those who are loving and kind to them. We are called to allow God’s agape love to move in and through us in such a way that even those with whom we do not get along experience God’s love. God’s agape love will also give final judgment, not us. We are called to forgive, to have compassion, to continue to love others, and leave any judgment to God when there is no more time to repent and to love.

These are God’s kingdom ways. Loving our enemies. Doing good. Lending without expecting anything in return. Offering grace instead of judgment. We are called to pay attention to the ways in which we treat others because of the way God has and continues to treat us. We are called to live by love because that is how God loves us.

God, who makes the sun rise on the evil and the good… God, who sends the nourishing rain on the righteous and the unrighteous… God, who gives grace and goodness to everyone, regardless of whether or not they will accept such grace… God loves us all. God cares for us all.

The way of the Most High, God Almighty, our Heavenly Father is to be kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. He is generous and gracious toward us, even when we are at our worst.

So we are called to care for all around us based not on whether they are deserving, but based on how God cares for us, we who are also undeserving of such mighty love and grace.

We live in a world that longs for answers to the deepest questions of faith. We live in a world that longs to know that they matter to someone, that yearns to believe that the Most High cares for them.

I am full of many questions right now, questions that threaten to overwhelm me. Questions about the future of our country and the divisions of our society. Questions about the denomination that has shaped and formed me and what it may look like come next week.

Questions about how to be a better mom, a better wife, a better pastor. Questions about how to live as a faithful Christian in the midst of a world that scorns men and women of faith.

Yet in the midst of my questions, in the midst of my uncertainty, I once again hear Jesus say to me: I love you. Follow me. Trust that God’s ways are higher than anything you can imagine. Live by love, live by compassion, live by kindness, live by faith.

We may question all day long *how* we are to love one another. But Jesus reminds us here of the *why* we are to love one another. We are to love because God first loves us.

For me, this day, simply being in Jesus’ presence, embraced by God’s love, is enough for all my questions. And tomorrow, then I am called to go forth, with my questions and my faith, to respond to God’s love with my love, to God’s forgiveness with my forgiveness, to God’s compassion with my compassion.

Will you journey with me? With your questions and your faith, your doubts and your hope, your willingness and your faithfulness? Will you seek to love and live by God’s kingdom ways in the midst of the crowds you interact with on a daily basis?

May God guide us on our journey of faith, of life, of love.

Let us pray.