

This We Believe: Ask
John 6.56-69
August 23, 2015
Pentecost +13
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church
Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott

Week 2 of a 5 week series considering our identity statement: At St. Charles, we aspire to serve God by asking questions, loving neighbors, seeking justice, and welcoming all.

I've shared the story of 8-yr-old me many times before and find something new in each telling. Much like my 6- and 9-year-old children, I was listening carefully to the Bible story being told in Sunday School and interrupting the teacher with my questions. I don't remember the story. I don't remember the teacher's name. But I remember where I was sitting in the front of the class, and I remember the look of exasperation on her face as she said, "Sunday School is a time to listen to stories. It is not a time to ask questions."

For years, I remembered this story as an example of my personality. I've never been quiet. And I've never been satisfied with someone telling me how my faith should take shape. I want to know more, I want to question, I want to poke at it and pull it apart before deciding how to put it back together again.

As an adult, and particularly as a mother of inquisitive children, I get it. She didn't sign up for teaching theology. She imagined gluing some popsicle sticks together, placing some felt Old Testament characters onto a board, reading the handout for that particular Sunday School lesson. Then she'd release us to our parents and make her way to the church kitchen for a cup of coffee before worship. Good deed done with a little effort. I get it.

And yet...that moment is seared in my mind because of her exasperation. The way she sighed. The way she placed her hands firmly on the book in her lap. The way she paused, certain she was teaching me a real lesson about staying quiet and sticking with the script. There's something about that body language and fatigue that didn't sit right with me even as a child. She thought I was doing something wrong and was going to set a standard in front of all of the listening children. Sit there, be quiet, and we'll all get on with our day in just a few minutes. None of this is really important enough for questions anyway.

It was years later that I found Frederick Buechner paraphrasing Paul Tillich and assuring me “doubt is not the opposite of faith, it is an element of faith.” I had known that in my body even when the teacher told me not to ask questions. I had known it in my heart even when the sweet Revival preacher told me “doubt your doubts and believe your faith” when questions dared loom in my mind. I had known it when my freshman dorm-mate learned there were two, somewhat conflicting creation stories in Genesis and complained of her Old Testament professor who challenged her to consider how that could be, “I don’t want to ask questions. I just want to believe the Bible!”

What if that Sunday School teacher decades ago had said, “Let’s listen to the story now and then ask some questions when we’re done.” What if she had said, “That’s a great question. I don’t know the answer to it, but I’d like to think about that for a while.” Surely there is no better place for asking questions of things that matter than in the sacred space of a faith community gathered for discipleship and worship!

And so, how do we respond to each other now when we need to press pause on the story and hold our questions out for each other? What kind of space are we holding here together for the youngest ones in our midst? For the newcomers who aren’t so sure about church let alone BAPTIST church? For the friends at the edge of the room who are checking us out and wondering what we are about? Do we not just make room for questions but fiercely guard that space and hold it open for all who need it?

I’m a firm believer in the power of questions. My own decades of questioning have led me to believe in the goodness of refining questions—asking good questions that lead to better questions. It’s a lifelong process, and I even think it is a sacred one. I use a lot of questions in my sermons, and I look to Jesus the teacher who often responded to a fair question with a great question.

Our Gospel text this morning has a number of great questions within it and then practically demands we add a few of our own. If you were here when we read the Gospel lesson last week, were you paying attention? Did you notice the language? Did you squirm? All that talk of eating Christ’s flesh and drinking Christ’s blood! I

leaned over to Tim and whispered something about being glad to skip that one for the day's sermon, and he whispered back something about my not liking "cannibal Jesus." It's not the Jesus we seek out, it's the Jesus we ignore and overlook. We acknowledge this from time to time. We like peace and justice Jesus a bit more than suffering and judgment and end times Jesus. We all do this. We pick. We choose.

And yet, the practice of asking questions requires that we look straight into the story. And when we do, we find familiar responses in the larger body of disciples following Jesus. I take great comfort in hearing the disciples (not just the 12 but now the crowd of disciples) challenge Jesus. I think they heard him teaching and then shifted their weight in their seats, made quite uncomfortable by what he was saying to them. Eating flesh and drinking blood. You MUST do this, he kept saying. Politely, they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?"

And Jesus doesn't become anxious. He simply notices their question. He hears what they are saying, he senses how uncomfortable they are, and he talks about things from a slightly different angle. "Does this throw you completely?" he asks. And for some, it does. Some have questions he does not satisfactorily answer, and they leave. They walk away, and he does not chase them. He doesn't shout. He doesn't argue the validity of his point and their inability to comprehend it. Instead, the scene turns to the original twelve, and Jesus asks them a question: "Do you also want to leave?"

I don't think it's a challenge. I think it's an invitation. What are you going to do when all of this gets to be harder than you signed on for? What are you going to do with your questions? What are you going to do with the things you can't fathom and don't want to affirm? What are you going to do when the Way I teach and the way you want to live are diametrically opposed? Which Way will you follow? Do you also want to leave?

And Peter answers his question with a question, "Lord, to whom would we go?"

We are so far onto this Way, and we have encountered so much Truth on our journey. Where else do we go with our questions? Who else can handle them? How could we possibly walk away now?

It's for this reason that David Lose writes, "[I]t is as easier for me to identify with the crowds who misunderstand and question Jesus than with Jesus himself. Because what Jesus has been saying...is indeed hard to listen to and hard to understand. That Jesus is the bread of life? That he provides the only food which truly nourishes? That he gives us his own self, even his own flesh and blood, to sustain us on our journey? These are hard words, hard to hear, hard to comprehend, hard to believe...But note that St. John calls these folks not simply 'the crowds,' as in earlier passages, but rather 'disciples.'"¹

In their following and in their questioning, they are disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. Asking is about discipleship. Asking is also about a general curiosity and openness to life. That includes an openness to being wrong, to telling the truth, to digging deeper. These ways are wrapped up in THE Way of Jesus.

However, we must be aware of the intention beneath our questions. Asking questions isn't a green light on cynicism. Asking questions is not the same as jaded sarcasm. We are not Statler and Waldorf, the grumpy muppet men who sit in the balcony and make jokes from their box seats as the show goes on below. We might think that's the way of the smarter mind as though lobbing questions is a real challenge. As though we are the ones who really see things for what they are in a way no one else does, and we therefore simply MUST poke holes in orthodoxy or testimony to show our intelligence.

Snarky cynicism is not a thoughtful, questioning, seeking faith. It's just...snark. And goodness knows that the world has enough of that already.

In *Searching for Sunday*, Rachel Held Evans shares her struggle with feelings of anger toward the evangelical faith community as she realizes she is no longer at home within those circles. She also realizes she is carrying considerable pain from no longer being welcome in those circles. She writes, "Cynicism is a powerful anesthetic we use to numb ourselves to pain, but which, by its nature, numbs us to truth and joy...[N]umbing ourselves with cynicism in an effort to avoid feeling [grief and even anger] is not [healthy]."

¹ <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/08/pentecost-13-b/>

"I can't acknowledge my pain until I've kicked my dependence on cynicism... Cynicism may help us create simpler storylines with good guys and bad guys, but it doesn't make us any better at telling the truth."²

Something about the way we Ask as a spiritual practice should form us more fully as truth tellers. One of the things I tell people about St. Charles is that we don't market in certainty here. Certainty sells. It seems, in the snapshot surface of things, that churches who market in certainty are the ones with large congregations. And that's hard for questioning congregations like ours to admit. Yet I am convinced that, over time and over the course of lives, people are drawn to truth-telling. To honesty. To questions. With time, certainty matters less and less and confessing ambiguity, metaphor, beauty, grief, pain, struggle, Truth, and even a hunch that better days are ahead matters more.

Do you also want to leave? Lord, to whom would we go?

Right here, in this place, we are people who truthfully confess our pain, fear, and anger and give thanks for a safe, welcoming place to do so. The world needs more vulnerable believers.

Right here, in this place, we are people who challenge and nudge each other toward a well-considered faith with strong, refining questions. The world needs more thinking churches.

Right here, in this place, we are people who speak honestly and whole-heartedly about the elements of doubt within our faith and receive, without anxiety or judgment, all who wish to join us on this truth-telling Way. The world needs more truth-tellers.

This we believe.

² Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, p. 222