

Sermon
Twenty-Second Sunday After Pentecost
Sunday, October 20th, 2024
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa
The Reverend Victoria Scott
Readings: JOB 38:1-7 (34-41); PSALM 104:1-9, 25, 37B; HEBREWS 5:1-10; MARK
10:35-45

Questions. Life is full of them, isn't it?
Poet Rainer Maria Rilke said: "Be patient towards all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves..."

What might it mean to love the questions in this life? How might this shape our questioning? Where do our questions come from – do they come from a place of love? Of curiosity? Or do they come from a place of fear, and a desire for control?

We're in an important section in Mark's Gospel. In chapters 8 through 10, Mark uses a storytelling technique to bring home a point. Three times in these chapters, Jesus speaks of his coming suffering and death. Three times the disciples misunderstand, and three times Jesus offers a corrective teaching. In the verses just before the ones we heard today, Jesus has spoken for a third time about his suffering and death, and Jesus is offering is the third corrective on what his suffering, death and resurrection really mean.

In the passage we've just heard, James and John ask Jesus to do something for them. Last week, and in my Thanksgiving message in the newsletter, I reflected on worry, and how it can get hold of us. Worry and fear can hold us back in life, they can hold us captive. James and John are afraid. Their question – their request that Jesus promise them that they will be at the right and left of him in his glory – comes not out of curiosity, not out of love, but out of a desire for control. It's a self-serving question – an attempt to ensure they'll be ok in what is to come next. They want an answer from Jesus that they can cling to for comfort, for reassurance. The other disciples' angry reaction comes out of this same desire for control. I can feel them thinking – asking – "What about me?"

Jesus says to them, and he says to us, that's not how it works. Jesus invites us – and shows us a way – to be free from the captivity of worry and our desire for control.

Much has been said about Jesus having come to serve, not to be served, having come to give his life as a ransom for many. It's important to consider what it is that a ransom does: it frees. It liberates from captivity. This is the way of Jesus: it's freedom. It's liberation.

That freedom and liberation aren't accessible to us through formula, though. It's not a matter of series of steps that can be repeated in any and all situations to ensure that we're always last instead of first. Service and serving aren't formulaic. This way that Jesus shows us is about questions. It's about loving the questions, as Rilke said.

Jesus shows us a way to find comfort and reassurance not by controlling, but by being willing to move with God's love and grace at work all around us in the world. In trusting that we are held by God, that God is with us in whatever life may bring, we are free to move the way that Jesus did in the world. That way involves questions, but not the kinds of question that James and John asked. Asking "What about me?" doesn't open our eyes and minds and hearts to how we can move with God in the world.

If we seek to serve others without asking questions, we end up serving ourselves. I've spoken before about the "Golden Rule" and the opportunities to live the "Platinum Rule" instead. The "Golden Rule" – "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" takes a sympathetic stance. It can be well meaning, but it makes some dangerous assumptions: that what is good for us is good for others. It also assumes superior knowledge of what is good or harmful for others. The "Platinum Rule" on the other hand, turns our stance from sympathy to empathy. It can be expressed as: "Do unto others as *they* would have you do unto them."

If we are to do unto others as they would have us do, we have to ask questions. We have to ask questions with love, and with an open heart and mind to receive the response – that response may not be our idea of how to best serve,

to be of service. The response may require more questions to get to the heart of things.

Questions. We also heard from Job this morning. This passage comes well into the saga of Job's life. Job has endured suffering, losing everything that had brought joy to his life – privilege, wealth, family, social standing, and even respect. He has experienced God's absence, and God has endured Job's rantings. Today, God speaks. Notice, God speaks of the grandeur of the cosmos, not with a series of definitive statements, but with a series of questions!

Questions. How often do the Gospels show us Jesus responding to a question with another question? How often does Jesus ask questions that turn things around? That make us wonder? That make us ask more questions?

There are many different kinds of questions. There are open questions that invite further conversation, and there are closed questions – questions that ask for a yes/no answer that fragments or halts the conversation. There are leading questions – questions that put the answer in the mouths of those being asked to respond. There are self-serving questions. James and John's question was a self-serving one – it was, as I've said, a "What about me?" kind of question.

What kinds of questions does Jesus invite us to ask? The freedom, the liberation that Jesus offers us is the freedom to be curious on this life's journey. Trusting that God is with us, holding us in all things, frees us to move deeper into life around us; it frees us to be curious about opportunities to move with God's love and grace. It frees us to be curious about our emotions and our motivations. It frees us to love the questions, holding the tension between what we need to know, and what is mysterious in this life rather than rushing to settle for easy answers.

Questions. May we be reminded this morning that God invites us to ask questions, and to stay curious, holding the tension in the asking, rather than settling for easy answers. May we learn to love the questions. May we learn to ask questions that have us move with God's love and grace today and every day, in Jesus name. Amen.