



7th Sunday after Pentecost
July 11, 2010
Questions, questions, questions
Luke 10:25-37

Prayer: Lead me in your truth, and teach me, O Lord, for you are the God of my salvation. – Psalm 25:5

Shortly after beginning ministry here at Mt. Eden, I wrote a newsletter article about questions. Questions are a way of gathering information, a way of learning more about each other. In the few short months we have been together, you have had questions of me, and I have had questions of you. In the article, I commented how there is no such thing as a question that is dumb, stupid, or foolish. Some of you have commented to me, “Pastor, are you sure? Because I have heard some pretty ridiculous questions in my time!”

While I still contend the only dumb, foolish, or stupid question is the question that is not asked, I will admit there are times, when a question is asked in which the answer to the question seems incredibly obvious. Wonderment may follow as to the reasoning behind asking the question. Or, wonderment may precede the question of curiosity. No specific example comes to mind in what I am referring to here, but I know there have been times even in talking with Vaughn where I realize the answer before asking the question. As the question is formulating in my brain, the words, ‘never mind’ are on my lips.

Our texts today are filled with questions, and seemingly obvious answers. In the 1960’s television show “Bat Man”, one of the characters was “The Riddler”. His catch phrase when he was about to pose a riddle to someone was “Riddle me this. Riddle me that.”

So here we go.

In our first reading from Deuteronomy, we hear of the Lord providing instruction to the Israelites. In these instructions, the Lord promises abundance if they obey the commands of the Lord and if they turn to the Lord with all their heart and soul. With a bit of a gentle reprimand, and a little bit of humor, the Lord continues. The Israelites are about to enter the promised land. After forty years of wandering in the wilderness, the generation that had been taken out of Egypt had died off. A new generation had been born in the wilderness. A generation, that even though they had been taught the commands and the promises of the Lord, they had forgotten the promises their ancestors had made.

When they forgot, and when the call of repentance, of turning toward the Lord sounded again, the Israelites questioned where they could find the commands of the Lord. This time, the Lord continues with humor by reminding the Israelites that the Lord's commands, the Lord's law, the Lord's promises are not too far for the Israelites. They do not have to ask 'who will go for us up to heaven?', or 'who will go over to the sea and bring it to us?' The Lord reminds the Israelites that the Lord's commands and promises are very close. So close, in fact, the Israelites do not have to look far. "The word is very near to you", the Lord says, in your mouth and in your heart.

Every now and then, the Revised Common Lectionary adds an alternate reading. Today's alternate first lesson is from the prophet of Amos. This time, it is the Lord who asks the obvious question. The Lord shows Amos a plumb line. As I understand its use, a plumb line is used in masonry, carpentry, even hanging wallpaper to indicate how straight a wall is. In showing Amos the plumb line, the Lord asks Amos what he sees: "Amos, what do you see?"

Amos provides the obvious answer, "A plumb line. Final answer for \$1,000." Amos probably did not say "Final answer for \$1,000". But I suspect Amos might have had a bit of wonderment in his voice, why the Lord was showing – and asking what the plumb line was. The Lord ignores Amos's wonderment and continues by telling Amos how a plumb line will be established in the midst of Israel. How the Lord will not pass by Israel, nor will the Lord forsake Israel, but rather, will establish a straight line of the Lord's promise and presence in the midst of Israel.

The question in our reading from Psalm 25 is not as obvious as our first lessons. Instead, a subtle question exists within the psalm. The subtle question is what it means to prosper in God. By prospering in God, in these economic times, I am not referring to wealth, to riches, or material possessions. What I am referring to, is acknowledging our dependence on God, and actively trusting in God.

While not part of our reading for today, a question does exist in Psalm 25. The question comes in verse 12, 'who is the person that fears the Lord?' The answer, also in the verse, is those who walk in the way of the Lord, those who are friends with the Lord, those whom the Lord makes his covenant known. It is a matter of keeping the commands of the Lord on our lips and in our hearts.

Our reading from Colossians answers, rather than raises a question. The answered question is what do we pray for. The answer can be found in verse 9: 'asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will, to lead a life worthy of the Lord, bearing fruit in every good work, that you may be strengthened with all power, giving thanks to the Father.' Colossians reminds us that our well intentioned saying of "I will pray for you" goes beyond lip service and quickly forgetting to follow through. Rather, Colossians reminds us of the need to be intentional in following through with our sentiments.

It is in this way that Colossians ties in with Luke. In Luke's Gospel today, it is the main, almost obvious question that the lawyer, or in the German, the *scholar of the Scriptures* asks of Jesus, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' Perhaps it goes back to my own student days, but I am intrigued by the translation of *scholar of the Scriptures*. To me, it tells me that someone who thought they knew all there was to know about the scriptures did not. It tells me that the scholar of the Scriptures was wanting to know more about what needed to be done in order to have eternal life.

And so, the *scholar of the Scriptures* asks of Jesus, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ Jesus responds back with a question of his own, ‘what is written in the law?’ The scholar of the Scriptures answers, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.’ Jesus commends the scholar of the Scriptures for a wise answer.

But the scholar of the Scriptures is not happy with Jesus’ answer, and asks another question, ‘who is my neighbor?’ This time, Jesus answers by telling a story of a man, who travelled, only to be ambushed, attacked, and left for dead. Help comes from an enemy, an unexpected hero, in an unexpected way. After finishing the story, Jesus asks the scholar which of the people was a neighbor. The scholar responds – but even in answering, he is not able to name the Samaritan. The scholar says “the one who showed him mercy.”

Jesus commends the scholar again for his answer, and tells him, ‘go and do likewise.’ Interestingly, Luke does not report what happened to the scholar of the Scriptures after hearing Jesus’ response. We are told Jesus commends the student to ‘go and do likewise,’ to be a neighbor. We do not hear or read whether or not the student actually went and did likewise. I know I should not, but I want to assume that is what the student did. Yet I cannot help but wonder what the student’s reaction really was; whether he went away helping all he came across, happy with this new insight of what it means to be part of humanity, or, if he went away humbled, sad, angry at the realization of what Jesus was asking him to do.

The reality is, today’s lessons challenge us. They challenge us in our understanding of how we walk with the Lord, how we share this walk with others. Even how we keep the promises of the Lord on our hearts, and in our mouths. Luke also challenges us in our understanding of who our neighbor is. In that understanding of who our neighbor is, we are challenged in who and what we pray for. For loving our neighbor, showing mercy to our neighbor, means to love and show mercy to the people in our lives who are unnameable. Those who are unnameable are those we might not necessarily consider to be neighbors. They might be people who perhaps have wronged us, who may even be our enemies. Loving our neighbor means inviting into our lives, not only those who might think, act, pray like us, but those who are also different from us.

During a video segment of “The Lutheran Course”, one of the presenters shared a story. The story was how a member of the congregation used to pray for Jesus to come into their hearts. The problem was, the member realized, in inviting Jesus to come into their heart, Jesus brought Jesus’ friends with him. Jesus’ friends being the poor, the outcast, the abused, the suffering, the lonely: all the people we too need to pray for, care for, show mercy to.

In 1994, singer Alanis Morissette wrote a song entitled “One of Us”. The premise of the song was what if God were one of us? We know Jesus was born, and lived on earth as a human being. I wonder though, how much better the world would be if we took seriously the reality that God is present in each and every one of us, including our neighbor. Seeing God in the face of our neighbor would be humbling. We would love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Violence against one another would be replaced with care; hatred would be replaced with love. In the wideness of God’s mercy, we would find ourselves extending charity and love, to our neighbors near and far.

May God’s strength and mercy grant us the courage to love our neighbor now and always. Amen.