

John 14:25-31

"Frequently Asked Questions"

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A Nobel prize winner named Isidor Isaac Rabi, was once asked how he became a great 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 asked, "Did you ask good questions today?"

"Asking good questions," Rabi said, "made me a good scientist."

I want to suggest that asking good questions doesn't just make good scientists, but good Christians as well. This morning I'd like for us to think about the relationship between questions and faith.

Now your initial thought might be that the two are incompatible. Maybe you have an image in your mind of what a faithful person is, and it's not a person who asks questions. Maybe your mental model of faith is someone who just seems to know everything - about God, about Jesus, about the Bible... everything! I'm reminded of the main character in Barbara Kingsolver's novel, *The Poisonwood Bible*. His name is Nathan Price. He's a Southern Baptist missionary who takes his family to the Congo in order to fulfill a personal calling to convert all of the Godless heathen there.

He's cocky and extremely self-confident. He also knows the Bible extremely well, but he assumes that he has everything in scripture figured out. He goes to the Congo because he's got something that those other people don't: Truth. Answers.

The first time I read *The Poisonwood Bible* I found myself thinking that I've known people like Mister Price before, people that confuse faith with certainty. When I was a hospital chaplain I remember vividly my visits with a woman who was dying of cancer. She had been a Christian all her life, but in those days when the chemo treatments left her weak and sick, when the gravity of her diagnosis weighed down on her and robbed her of any hope or joy, she admitted to having a crisis of faith. "I have so many questions," she said. "I want to know where God is right now, and I want to know why this is happening to me." For her, having those kinds of questions meant that her faith had left her. She equated faith with certainty, and assumed that if she really had faith in God, she wouldn't have been asking those things. Eventually as her disease progressed, I think she understood something about faith that she'd never really understood before: Faith, simply put, is trusting in God. Faith is trusting in the God who creates you and sustains you

and redeems you, even when you have more questions than answers, even when you're wondering where God is in your life. It's in our moments of uncertainty that our faith gives us strength and connects us with the God who loves us. Author Doris Betts once said that faith is "not synonymous with certainty... but is a decision to keep your eyes open."¹

I think that we forget how to do that. Honestly, it's only been since I became a father that I've realized how much I tend to close my eyes to the world around me and to God's work within it. Before I became a father, I never realized how many questions there were out there. But sure enough, along came these little things that live in my house and come with me to church, these wonderful, inquisitive blessings that we named A.J. and Alex. A.J. in particular, currently doubles as a little question generator. He asks questions while we're driving. He asks questions while we're eating dinner. He asks questions while we're playing in the backyard, or walking through the neighborhood, or getting ready for bed. He asks, and asks, and asks... how? And where? And why? And he'll keep asking, and asking, and asking until I give a certain answer.

¹ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*.

It just so happens that the particular answer he's looking for is the hardest one for me to say. But eventually, I'll say it. I'll admit it. "A.J.," I'll say... "I don't know." That's the one he was waiting for. I never knew there were so many questions out there, and I never knew how much there was that I just don't know. After an afternoon with A.J., I end up having a few questions myself.

I've learned, both by being a father and by being a pastor, that it's not very faithful to assume that you have all the answers. It's not very faithful to close your eyes to the world and the way God is at work within it. It's not very faithful to set God in stone, or assume that the way you have answered the questions of faith are right, and others who have answered the questions of faith differently are wrong. Faith always declares, "I might be wrong about this... but you know what? I trust God anyway."

As we walk our own roads of Christian faith, we are led by those who went before us, those whom God called in spite of their uncertainty. We follow people like Jonah, who told God, "God, you don't know what you're talking about, so I'm going the other way!" God set him straight, of course. We follow Moses, who thought God was surely mistaken in calling *him* to liberate the Israelites from

slavery in Egypt. But you know what? He went anyway. We follow Jeremiah, who in our Old Testament reading for this morning said, "Lord God, truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy!" God, of course, put the right words in his mouth for him. We follow Jesus, who fell down in the garden of Gethsemane and cried out, "Father, remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want." If you're looking for a model of faith, look to Jesus, who uttered the most faithful words in all of scripture: *Not what I want, but what you want*. Faith is not synonymous with certainty. It's a decision to keep your eyes open.

French author Albert Camus, after devoting his life's work to a philosophy that denied God and placed humanity at the center of everything, suddenly started coming to church. After several weeks, the pastor of the church asked Camus why he had suddenly started showing up for worship. Camus replied, "The reason I have been coming to church is because I am seeking. I'm almost on a pilgrimage—seeking something to fill the void I am experiencing . . . I am searching for something the world is not giving me." That's a pretty good summary of the reason all of us are here. We aren't here because we have all the answers, or because we have

something that other people don't. We're here because there's something we don't have... and it's something that only God can give us. Our part is simply to trust that he will.

In her book, *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott describes her conversion and coming to faith. She remembers being at the absolute bottom, with nothing working in her life—disastrous relationships, drugs, alcohol—and finally going to talk to an Episcopal priest. She was prepared for him to criticize and condemn her just like every other Christian she'd ever met who had all the answers. She was shocked when he didn't do that at all, but instead actually listened to her. She writes: "He was about the first Christian I ever met whom I could stand to be in the same room with. Most Christians seemed almost hostile in their belief..."

As a result, she said 'yes' to her life. She said 'yes' to God and God's love for her. It didn't happen overnight, but slowly she came back to life. The next step involved going to church, very tentatively at first. Her search was slow, deliberate, tentative, skeptical, characterized by honest doubts, asking a lot of questions, being patient about not always having the answers, and finally resulting in her new awareness of God and God's unconditional love for her.

It was a love that she didn't fully understand. But that was okay. She didn't have to understand it. She just had to trust it.²

Over the course of the summer I'm going to be preaching sermon series on questions. The questions I have in mind are the ones that our children ask us, those questions that show us how much there is that we don't know, questions that leave us groping around for answers. As the weeks go by, and as we talk about both the questions and the possible answers, we might discover that we've arrived at different conclusions. You know what? That's okay, too. In this morning's gospel reading Jesus is preparing his disciples for that time when he will no longer be with them physically. They will be the ones carrying out his mission and his ministry. Understandably, the disciples start to freak out about that a little bit. If you read the entirety of John 14, you'll see that they have plenty of questions for Jesus, and they feel pretty inadequate to pick up where he leaves off. Jesus' response is one that we all should hear: "The Holy Spirit, whom the father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you." Jesus reminds them that they don't have to

² Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies*, pp. 42-44.

know it all or understand it all - they will be taught and led by the Spirit! Then he blesses them with words of peace and assurance for uncertain times, before calling them to follow him, simply saying, "Rise, let us be on our way."

As is the case with so many others in the Bible, for the disciples, faith goes before understanding. Trust goes before knowledge. That's true for us as well. It is especially in our moments of uncertainty that our faith strengthens us for the journey. Being a faithful person doesn't mean having all the answers - it means trusting in God to guide you and love you when no one else will. Maybe you're struggling with illness, asking questions like, "Where is God right now?" Maybe you're having a crisis of faith in which you've discovered that you don't have all the answers, and don't know as much as you thought you did. Maybe you're a high school or college graduate, finishing one chapter of your life before turning the page on another, wondering what happens next.

Brothers and sisters, it is in these moments that our Lord comes to us, promises to be with us, and gives us peace.

So... rise! And let's be on our way. Thanks be to God. Amen.