

Ask the Next Question

A Sermon for Every Sunday, Proper 20B

Mark 9:30-37

The Austrian writer Rainer Maria Rilke is best known for his intense poetry and his volumes of correspondence, including *Letters to a Young Poet*. But years ago, I came across a book of children's stories by Rilke titled, *Stories of God*. The first story begins when the narrator runs into a neighbor and inquires after her two daughters.

"You know," the neighbor responds, "they have both reached the age, those children, when they ask all day long. 'What – 'all day long, and right straight through the night."

"Yes," [the narrator murmurs], "there is a time..."

But [the neighbor] takes no notice.

"And not just questions such as: Where does this horse-car go? How many stars are there? And is ten thousand more than many? Quite different things as well! For example: Does God speak Chinese too? And: What does God look like? Always everything about God! But that's something we ourselves don't know about—"

"No, of course –" [the narrator] agrees, "though we can have our guesses..."¹

Asking questions is one of the ways we learn about the world and the people around us. And while children are notorious for asking questions, something tends to happen to many of us, if not all of us, as we grow and learn. We become hesitant to ask our questions. We've all probably had a teacher at some point say, "the only stupid question is the one you don't ask," but the truth is, sometimes asking a question – especially in front of a group of people – makes us feel uncomfortable and insecure.

In today's passage we hear the second of three so-called passion predications that Jesus makes in Mark's gospel. Each time, Jesus tells the disciples exactly what's going to happen to him when they go to Jerusalem: he will be betrayed, he will be killed and then he will rise again.

Now clearly, the disciples didn't understand what he was talking about. How could they? They were just starting to grasp that Jesus might be more than a brilliant teacher and miracle worker. In chapter eight, Peter correctly identifies Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah. At the beginning of chapter nine, just before today's story, three of the disciples went up on a mountain and saw Jesus transfigured. So they are beginning to grasp that Jesus is unique, that he might even be the Messiah that God's people have anxiously awaited to set them free from their Roman oppressors. But that's the kind of Messiah they expected – a warrior, a liberator – not someone who gets betrayed and killed. And rise again? What could that possible mean?

The disciples must have been filled with questions. But they were confused, and afraid. And so in their fear, and anxiety, and uncertainty, they kept quiet. They **didn't** ask Jesus what his prediction really meant.

¹ Rilke, Rainer Maria, *Stories of God*, trans. M.D. Herter Norton, W.W. Norton and Co., 1963, 17-18.

The science fiction writer Theodor Sturgeon was a fierce believer in the power of questions. In an article titled, “Ask the Next Question,” Sturgeon writes:

“Every advance this species has ever made is the result of someone, somewhere, looking at his world, his neighborhood, his neighbor, his cave, or himself, and asking that next question. Every deadly error this species has committed, every sin against itself and its high destiny, is the result of not asking the next question, or of not listening to those who do ask it.”²

Although at first they may not seem directly related, the disciples’ fear of asking the next question is directly correlated to their argument over petty issues of rank and status. As one commentator puts it, “When the disciples avoid asking hard questions, they focus on posturing about who is right.”

Fortunately, Jesus shows us throughout his life that greatness does not come from proving that we are superior to others, but from willingly choosing the path of descent, from associating – just as Jesus did, again and again – with the least and the lost and the last.

This is the point Jesus makes when he says, ‘Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.’ To illustrate this point, he puts a child in front of them and continues: ‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.’

In the ancient world, children weren’t just vulnerable because they depended on adults for survival. Children had no legal protection, no status, no rights. They were, physically and culturally, the lowest of all people, with nothing to offer anyone in terms of honor and status – which meant as much if not more in that culture than in ours. So for Jesus to tell his disciples – who had just been arguing amongst themselves about which one of them was the greatest – that to welcome him, they must welcome a lowly child – this turns all their ideas about greatness upside-down.

We know what it’s like when our human obsession with power and privilege engulfs our childlike curiosity to keep asking the next question. We have seen it, again and again, in our partisan politics, which feature seemingly endless posturing over the solutions to a problem, while those in need suffer and wait. We see it in the way our fear leads us to demonize those with whom we disagree, so that instead of asking the next question – which might just be, “can you tell me more about why you see it that way?” – we end up more frustrated than we began.

Several years ago, the Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston, pastor of FAPC in NYC, gave a series of talks at Austin Presbyterian Seminary. He titled them “Good News for the Great Awakening”. Johnston compares the current cultural moment to historic periods of cultural awakening in this country. He describes this moment as the great “awakening” which differs from earlier

² <http://www.sfcenter.ku.edu/Sturgeon-Q.htm>

awakenings because those were rooted in spiritual and theological convictions, whereas today, the big, ethical conversations begin not in the church, but in a cultural conversation that is fixated on the idea of “wokeness.”

In the third lecture, Johnston offers thoughts on how the church can be a meaningful part of advancing moral and ethical conversation in a culture that seems hopelessly divided. He considers the centrality of confession and repentance in our tradition as one of the most important practices we can offer, saying,

"The core teachings of Christianity encourage us to engage others, to expand the tent, to broaden the conversation. Every week, in facing our own brokenness and complicity in the world's moral failings, the faithful lean into a paradigm modeled by Jesus and his disciples. It goes like this: difficult ethical conversations are more than a zero-sum game, a tooth and nail battle fought by enemy tribes. Difficult ethical conversations are a vital crucible in which understandings can dawn, opinions can be changed, souls can be saved, reconciliation forged, and surprising relationships grow."³

The vital crucible of difficult conversations depends on our willingness to push past our fear and insecurity and be willing to keep asking questions. Because questions are what keep the conversation going. Yes, asking questions requires us to humble ourselves, to admit that we don't have it all figured out, to expose our ignorance and reveal gaps in our understanding. But to ask the next question...and the next...and the next is how we open ourselves to someone different from us – it is, in Jesus's words, how we welcome one another, how we seek to better understand another human being, who is struggling, just like we are.

The author Kelly Corrigan once attended a work dinner and sat next to a small older man in an ill-fitting blazer. The evening started off brutally boring. The conversation just could not get traction. But then, someone mentioned Cambodia, and Kelly's husband asked the man if he'd ever been there. Yes, the man said, he'd been there after spending several years as a political prisoner in Madagascar for thirty-two months, one cell, rats everywhere. Suddenly, everyone had questions for the man, and those at the table discovered he was an undefeated boxing and judo champion, filed forty patents, and was suing the Dallas Cowboys for using his retractable roof design without permission. George Clooney had just optioned the rights to the man's life story.

Later that evening, Kelly's husband said, “Makes you wonder what else people might tell you if you just keep asking questions.”⁴

Amen.

—Amy Starr Redwine © 2024

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gcty7e39Rk4&t=1434s>

⁴ Kelly Corrigan, *Tell Me More*, Random House, 2018, 42-43.

