

“Why do you raise such questions ...?”

United Congregational Church, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

Sunday, March 8, 2020 ~~ Lent 2

Text: Mark 2:1-12

Questions, questions, questions. In many respects they are the building blocks of our lives. The questions we ask reveal a lot about us to the person we are speaking with. What are we curious about? What is important to us? Why is it important? How do we see ourselves in relation to the world and to other people? Even the types of questions we ask folks we are just getting to know says a lot about who we are. For example, asking closed questions – a question that requires a yes or no answer – gives the impression that we have definite answers we are hoping to hear. It also gives the person being asked little chance to reveal much about themselves. For example, if you ask someone – do you like chocolate ice cream – you will get very limited information in return. Either the person does or does not like chocolate ice cream. That’s all you will learn. But, if you ask a more open question, like “what’s your favorite flavor of ice cream?” you might just receive a torrent of information, perhaps even more than you ever wanted to know! The person could respond by everything from “I love vanilla” to “I don’t eat ice cream because I’m lactose intolerant but I do love lactose free frozen yogurt and there’s only one place around here I can buy it but they never have any flavors I like...” Yikes!

Questions are indeed essential building blocks of information we rely on each day, more than we realize. Right now, at this moment, many of us have questions about how this Covid-19 health situation will be resolved. Will the schools close? Will my work close? If it does, how could I possibly do my job from home? And so on, and so on, and so on. What's so difficult about this particular situation is that everyone – including government leaders and the medical professionals – have more questions than answers and that is distressing to everyone. It seems like someone should be able to give us reliable answers to our questions but, so far, that's not happening. Then what? All we are left with is our questions and the hope that at some point, the answers we seek will become clear.

That is certainly the case with faith. At least it is with the practice of the Christian faith as I know it and with many of the world's major religions too. Both Hinduism and Buddhism, at the most elemental level, are religions which developed around a core question – what must I do to achieve moksha (freedom from the reincarnation cycle of life and death in Hinduism) or nirvana (the goal of Buddhist practice to achieve complete absorption into the universe to the extent that self-awareness ceases to exist). The Jewish faith is grounded in the question of how one achieves and remains in right relationship with the great “I Am,” the God who acts in history. Then there is our own Christian faith with its great

questions, who is Jesus to me and how does my life make clear to others that I know and love Jesus? Questions are the foundation of faith and this is because asking questions is just what we humans do.

That this is the universal human experience – this dependence on questions – is revealed in how many quotes pop up if you google “quotes about questions” which is what I did as I was researching this sermon. One site has 716 such quotes!

Here’s a sample:

“Judge a man by his questions rather by his answers” – Voltaire.

“He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how.”

– Friedrich Nietzsche

“Most misunderstandings in the world could be avoided if people would simply take the time to ask, “What else could this mean?”

– Shannon L. Alder

“The scientist is not a person who gives the right answers, he's one who asks the right questions.”

– Claude Levi-Strauss

<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/questions>

So is it any wonder that questions became a key means by which Jesus chose to teach and preach and confront his critics. Such is the case in the story we read today from the Gospel of Mark. Also known as the “story of the four friends,” it is both a story about Jesus healing someone and a story about Jesus

confronting his critics. The healing sets the stage for the confrontation and the confrontation is the part of the story I'd like us to ponder together today. Most of us don't like confrontation or conflict so it's no surprise that usually when this story is the focus scripture for a sermon or a Bible lesson, it always centers on the four friends who so wanted their friend to be healed by Jesus that they found a way to get him to Jesus that was ingenious and unique. The house where Jesus was stopping was crammed with people trying to talk to him, trying to get him to help them, heal them in some way. People were so curious and had so many questions they wanted to ask Jesus that even the Scribes, officials from the local synagogue, were there. When the four friends arrived carrying their friend who was paralyzed on a mat, they saw they would not be able to get him in front of Jesus to be healed by any conventional approach. So, they decided to cut a hole in the roof above Jesus' head and lower their friend down through the hole right in front of Jesus. Now that is creative problem solving!

Whenever I think about this part of the story, I always wonder how it was that no one noticed that someone was attempting to do something with the roof over Jesus' head. Did they notice and they just didn't care because it wasn't their house? Or were they so engrossed in what Jesus had to say that they really didn't notice as little bits of the ceiling fell to the ground in

their midst? I'm guessing Jesus noticed but was too busy to react until the man was right there in front of him. And do you remember what happened then? "When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.'" Two important things to note there. First, he is responding to the faith of the four friends that he can heal this man, not the condition or the faith of the man himself. Second, he does not say to the man, "you are healed!" Nope, he says, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Now why would he do that? Because in Jesus' time illness was believed to be punishment for some sin committed by the one who was ill, either a sin they were aware of or even one they weren't.

This is when the Scribes come into the action. They are not upset about the healing. They are outraged that Jesus has dared to forgive sins. "Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Apparently, they were not voicing these questions loudly but were sort of mumbling among themselves which is why the text says that "Jesus perceived in his spirit" that they were discussing what he had done and naming it as sinful. Not one to back away from a disagreement, Jesus answers their questions with his own: "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'stand up and take your mat and walk.'" Interesting that Jesus asks both an open question – why – and a closed question – which – to

confront his accusers. His “which is easier” question gets to the core of their objection to what he has done – he has taken on the role of God in forgiving sins. And by doing so, he demonstrates that one can receive forgiveness without going through all the required and expensive rituals at the Temple. But it’s the “why” question that really zings the Scribes. Why are you questioning that I can do this, he is asking. Why are you not happy that this man has been healed, however it happened? Why is it more important for you to judge me for what you think I have done wrong than it is for the man to be healed?

But he doesn’t stop there. He in fact says what they expected him to say to the man in the first place: “I say to you, stand up, take up your mat and go to your home.” And the man does. Why did Jesus do this? Was he reversing course to satisfy the demands of the Scribes? No, just the opposite. He was telling them, if you want me to say the words a simple healer would say, fine, I’ll say them. But, I am still saying them with my authority as the Son of Man, as this unique person God has created me to be. Your questions of me, he is saying, don’t matter because I know who I am and all of these people know who I am even if you don’t. That’s where this story ends.

I wanted us to think about this story in some detail this morning because of the first question Jesus poses to the Scribes. He asks them, “Why do you raise such questions in your hearts?”

I want us to think about that question and the circumstances in which Jesus asked it because we need to understand how this question does, and more importantly does not, relate to us. Jesus is asking the Scribes this question in this particular situation for a very specific reason – they were questioning what he was doing and by what authority he was doing it. Valid questions to the Scribes I am sure since part of their role as leaders of the local faith community would be to ensure that the appropriate rules and rituals were conducted correctly thereby maintaining the traditional relationship between the people and God. But Jesus took exception to their question vehemently. Why? Not because it was a question and that's something we need to really understand. Jesus was not saying they shouldn't be asking any questions. Jesus was saying they should not be asking those specific questions, accusing him of blasphemy when he knew he was doing what God wanted him to do.

This is what I wanted us to grapple with this morning on this second Sunday of Lent – that Jesus is okay with people asking questions about their faith, about their relationship with God, their relationship with him as the person showing them, teaching them that a new way, a revolutionary way of being in a relationship with God was now possible. This Son of Man was showing all sons and daughters of men and women that God cared about what happened to them, that God was prepared to

forgive their sins if that's what it took for them to be healed, that the old ways of practicing faith were not the only way to approach God. Those old ways weren't wrong but they also were no longer offering the relationship with the living God that was always their intent. Jesus knew the new way and he wanted and needed to share it with all the people, no matter how he upset along the way.

So, dear friends, as you continue on your journey through Lent, please don't leave your questions behind. Jesus does not want you to do that. Bring them here to hold them in God's presence. Talk them over with me and with your friends here. Jesus loves questions! That's why he used them so much to accomplish his own mission from God. That's why questions are the life blood of faith as long as their intent, their reason for being asked, is to open your heart and not close it up tight, shutting out God completely if the answer is not what you want to hear. Dear ones, God loves our questions when they open the door to our hearts, when they reveal our brokenness and pain, when they convey our true curiosity about the how and why of God in our lives. The simple truth is that God is big enough, loving enough, strong enough, to hold any question you can ask, if you ask it with your whole heart and then trust God to hold it with you. So, I guess the question for you then becomes, can you do that? Amen.