

“Questing and Questioning Hearts” — based on Luke 11:1-13
Preached by Rev. Jonathan New
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My favorite spiritual question came from a child during a children’s sermon some years ago: I asked if any of the kids had a question about their faith. “What color is God?” a little girl called out. Like any good teacher, I asked in reply, “What color do you think God is?” Considering, she finally said, “I think... she’s ...blue.” Very wise, don’t you think?

The search for wisdom is, no doubt, a virtuous pursuit. Yet so much depend on our starting point. When she was dying of cancer, Gertrude Stein turned to Alice B. Toklas and whispered, "What is the answer?" Her companion didn't respond. But Stein nodded, as if in agreement, and continued, "In that case, what is the question?" Here’s the insight that, where wisdom is concerned, we must start by getting the question right.

The Grail legend concurs. Medievals thought the knight who searched for the Holy Grail — the hidden chalice Jesus used at the Last Supper — had no set path to follow. He could only abandon himself to the quest and hope he’d arrive at the proper place, said to be a castle set in a vast wasteland where a wounded king endlessly awaited the arrival of one who would release him from his suffering by asking the right question — perhaps as simple as, “What ails you?” Then the king would be healed and allowed to die naturally. Renewing waters would flow and the wasteland would blossom. The Grail would be revealed and give the questing knight a direct experience of Truth, enlightening him with the secret of eternal life. You can see why so many sought such a prize.

Questions and the quest for renewal are at the heart of our faith tradition. Several years ago, the German Protestant church hired an ad agency to develop a slogan to attract new members. After \$1.5 million in billings and head-scratching of biblical proportions the new slogan was finally announced: “Protestants ask questions.” Here’s the positive spin on the fact that Protestants don’t generally dwell on dogma, a set of religious answers. This isn’t to say there aren’t plenty of questioning Catholics! Moreover, not all Protestants do question that much in our faith lives. In fact, most of us prefer to stay home, far from the wasteland, in a landscape cut and trimmed, where only well-worn paths are found.

Curiosity may have killed the cat, but more of us become spiritually dead for lack of curiosity than because of it. Our growth — intellectual, moral, or spiritual— depends on our questioning. These days, many blame the eclipse of religion on science, secularism, relativism. Jewish theologian, Abraham Heschel suggested it "would be more honest to blame religion for its own defeats." Religion has declined, said Heschel, "because it became dull, oppressive, insipid. When faith is replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain... its message becomes meaningless." Religion becomes irrelevant whenever we "become oblivious to ultimate questions."

It's easy for us to get caught up with questions that matter so much to us today but will be forgotten this time tomorrow — all the immediate wheres, hows, and whens of daily life. How often do we take time for the questions that really stir our hearts — the ones that most deeply touch our spirits and which may draw us closer to God?

Those questions are at the core of our faith. The Bible's often touted as the answer place. But many of its most poignant verses are questions: Am I my brother's keeper? How long, O Lord, will you hide yourself? What does a man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? What is truth? What shall I do to inherit eternal life? Who is my neighbor? What is a man profited if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul? My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? If God is for us, who can be against us? I've come to believe that the deep power of our scriptures is only revealed when we hear the question within them that is our question — because that's when actually do have ears to hear.

I have my own questions: Marvelling at the world I wonder, "Who made all this and for what purpose?" With the philosophers, I burn to know: "Who am I? Where am I going? What shall I become?" Desperate for some hope I ask, "What would it take to end to poverty, hunger, and violence?" Having had cancer, I want to know, "Why must we all suffer?"

A look at the Bible alone tells us that no question is out of bounds when it comes to our faith. It's not unfaithful to ask them of ourselves, of others, or of God. Even our doubts are an expression of our faithful desire to be in relationship with God. Indeed, the spiritual purpose of our questioning and our healthy doubt is to turn us homeward. "The soul is a pilgrim," says Ruysbroeck, "for it seeks its country." But until it seeks, we are not so much pilgrims as tourists. No one really likes being a tourist. Nothing is ever quite right: the food, the beds, the furniture, the customs. We shake our heads and utter the universal tourist mantra: "Well, back home..." That refrain, the mystics tell us, goes on constantly in every heart, calling us to return to our home in God.

So, we're creatures made to roam in the deep waters of the spirit, yet caught in the shallows of a narrow vision of who we are. Or, better, as Marcel Proust said, much of life is like walking down a deserted, nighttime street, trying this door and that, finding all of them locked. But we keep trying until we come upon a door that opens to us, of its own accord, and we enter. Jesus said, "Seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you." The secret, he tells us, is persistence, and it's through our questions — and, especially, bringing our questions before God in prayer — that we keep knocking.

So, what questions burn within you and that you dare to bring before God? That may be a difficult enough question for you to ask. After all, the danger in asking questions is that we may not like the answers! But, at the least, we can do no better than beginning with the question, "Who is this God who remains, on the whole, unknown to me?" From a faith perspective, there's no more ultimate a question than that.

It's not easy to be a questing, questioning people. Seeking and knocking can be a tiresome business. And it's easy to want to fall back on those things that can provide certainty, especially when it comes to our faith. Yet the Bible, though it can help guide us, isn't a blueprint. And Jesus, though he pointed us in some directions, didn't give us a roadmap. No. He called us to a quest, telling us what the Way would look like, but urging us to discover it ourselves. A quest, the greatest prize of which is in the journey itself, not the destination, because it's a journey with God.

The most important questions are not ones for which we're likely to receive answers. Yet, confident that we were made by our Creator to seek God — and that, by knocking the door to our spiritual home might be opened — may we bravely ask our most ultimate questions. And,

as Rainer Maria Rilke wrote, may we "try to love the questions," having "patience with everything unresolved in [our] hearts" as if the questions "were locked rooms or books written in a foreign language." And let us join with the poet in the promise that in living the questions now, by God's grace, we may "someday far in the future, gradually, without even noticing it, live [our] way into the answer." May God so reward us in our faithful, searching, questioning.