

THE QUESTIONS OF JESUS:

“What are you looking for?”

Why did Jesus ask so many questions?

Why did he ask more questions than he answered?

What was he hoping to achieve by doing that?

What does it mean to have a savior who asks so many questions?

What does it do to our understanding of God if we see Jesus, not as the answer man, but more as the question man?

Does Jesus expect us to answer all of his questions or is there value in just pondering them?

And is this sermon just going to be a series of questions?

Jesus asks a lot of questions in the gospels—307 different questions. No, I did not count them myself, but someone did. I am told that Jesus only directly answers 3 questions of the 183 questions that he is asked in the four gospels. Instead of answering a lot questions, Jesus responds in other ways. In some instances Jesus simply keeps silent, as when Pilate questioned him after his arrest. Or, Jesus responds to a question with another question. When asked, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” Jesus responds, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?” And then, pointing to a coin, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” (It reminds me of the old Jewish joke, “Why does a Jew always answer a question with a question?” “Why shouldn’t a Jew always answer a question with a question?”) Or, sometimes Jesus responds to questions indirectly. For example, when Jesus is asked, “Who is my neighbor?” he responds by telling the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Obviously, Jesus prefers to ask questions rather than to provide answers. Does that surprise you?

Catholic author Richard Rohr writes, “In general, we can see that Jesus’ style is almost exactly the opposite of modern televangelism or even the mainline church approach of ‘Dear Abby’ bits of inspiring advice and workable solutions for daily living. Jesus is too much the Jewish prophet to merely stabilize the status quo with platitudes.”

Jesus is not a giver of advice. He doesn't give us a neat list of ten ways we can be closer to God. He doesn't offer spiritual tips. He does not provide easy answers. Instead he asks hard questions. In that he is more like the Zen master who asks questions to take us beyond the obvious to something deeper. He is like Socrates who taught the people simply by asking probing questions. He is like the prophets, who railed against the ruling authorities and sought justice by asking challenging questions.

So why have we paid so little attention to the Jesus who asks questions and instead have focused on his seeming answers? Here is Richard Rohr's response to that question: "[Answers] give us more of a feeling of success and closure... Easy answers instead of hard questions allow us to try to change others instead of allowing God to change us."

During this Lenten season we are going to spend some time with the questioning Jesus. At each worship service we will be focusing on a different question that Jesus asks. And then, I look forward to meeting with a variety of groups throughout Lent—meeting with you—for a conversation about the range of questions Jesus asks. More about that during the announcement time.

In the gospels Jesus asks so many different kinds of questions. Some are rhetorical questions. They are not meant to be answered. They are meant to hang in the air unanswered:

"Can any of you by worrying add a single moment to your life span?"

"Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?"

"Which one of you would hand his son a stone when he asks for a loaf of bread, or a snake when he asks for a fish?"

"O faithless generation, how long will I be with you? How long will I endure you?"

Other questions Jesus asks are simple and straightforward:

"What is your name?"

"How many loaves do you have?"

"Have you anything here to eat?"

"Who do people say that I am?"

Other questions Jesus asks are more probing and worth pondering:

"But who do you say that I am?"

"Why do you not understand what I am saying?"

"If I tell you about earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?"

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Still other questions Jesus asks are challenging:

“Have I been with you for so long a time and you still do not know me?”

“Why do you not understand what I am saying?”

“Why do you call me “Lord, Lord,” but not do what I command?”

“Where is your faith?”

Some of the questions Jesus asks might be called silly questions. When Peter tries walking on water and eventually begins to sink, Jesus asks:

“O you of little faith, why did you doubt?”

That sounds like a silly question to me. Why did Peter doubt? Because he was trying to walk on water, that’s why. Or how about the time when the disciples wake up Jesus because it seems like the boat they are in is about to sink in a terrible storm. After Jesus quiets the storm he asks them:

“Why are you terrified?”

Silly question. When Jesus comes upon a man who has been ill and unable to get out of bed for 38 years, he asks:

“Do you want to be well?”

See what I mean? That’s a silly question. I could do almost a whole sermon series on the silly questions of Jesus. But, instead, we are going to look at the range of questions Jesus asks.

And then there are the questions Jesus repeats. The question he asks most frequently appears in all four gospels: “What do you want me to do for you?” That’s telling, isn’t it? “What do you want me to do for you?” What does it mean, what can it mean, for us to have a God who doesn’t demand to be waited on, but instead a God who is eager to serve?

Another question Jesus asks Peter three times in quick succession (perhaps to match the three times Peter denied him). The resurrected Jesus is enjoying a seaside breakfast of bread and fish his disciples, when he turns to Peter and asks:

“Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?”

Peter says, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” And Jesus responds, “Feed my sheep.”

Again Jesus asks:

“Simon, son of John, do you love me?”

Peter answers, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” And Jesus says, “Tend my sheep.”

And then a third time Jesus asks:

“Do you love me?”

Peter is dumbfounded that he has to ask, and ask three times, no less. He responds, “You know everything. You know that I love you.” And Jesus says again, “Feed my sheep.”

The other question that is repeated, at critical points in John’s Gospel, is this:

“What are you looking for?”

Jesus asks this question at the beginning of his ministry when people begin to follow him:

“What are you looking for?”

Jesus asks a variation of that same question when Judas comes with a detachment soldiers to arrest him: “Whom are you looking for?”

Jesus asks the same questions of the women who gather at the empty tomb:

“Whom are you looking for?”

That’s quite a question, isn’t it? There’s a lot in that question. It is one of the probing questions that deserves some pondering. Whom are we looking for? If we are looking for an Answer Man Jesus, we will likely be disappointed. But we will be rewarded if we can take the famous advice offered by poet Rainer Maria Rilke: “Be patient with regard to all that in your heart is still unresolved and try to love the questions themselves... Live the questions now. Perhaps you will live thereafter and gradually without realizing it, one day, live your way into the answer.”

In this Lenten season we are going to live the questions, the questions of Jesus. He asks so many questions:

“Why do you call me good?”

“Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?”

“Why are you looking for me?”

“Do you see this woman?”

“What are you thinking in your hearts?”

“Why are you anxious about clothes?”

“Do you think that I have come to establish peace on the earth?”

“Why are you testing me?”

“Do you not yet have faith?”

“If I am telling the truth, why do you not believe me?”

“Will you lay down your life for me?”

“Could you not keep watch with me for one hour?”

“Are you still sleeping and taking your rest?”

“Why are you trying to kill me?”

“What do you want me to do for you?”

“What do you want me to do for you?”

“What do you want me to do for you?”

“Do you love me more than these?”

“Do you love me?”

“Do you love me?”

“What are you looking for?”

“Whom are you looking for?”

“Whom are you looking for?”

So many questions. Why does Jesus ask so many questions? Well, why shouldn't Jesus ask so many questions?