

## All You Gotta Do is Ask!

Message for August 16, 2009

It starts innocently enough – around the age of two, (besides using the words “NO” and “MINE!”), a child will find the magic in asking questions and the power of the word, “Why?” and apply it to everything.

“Here, Sammy. Eat this peach.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s good for you.”

“Why?”

“Because you get vitamins and energy from it.”

“Why?”

“Because I said so, that’s why!”

Or how about this scenario?

Sammy is sitting in a tub full of bubbles. Suddenly, he yells from the bathroom, “Mommy, why do we have belly-buttons?”

Years down the road, Sammy is sixteen years old. He’s just asked to use the family car, to which you reply, “Not until you finish helping with the dishes.”

Sammy’s response comes in the form of rolled eyes, and with a huge sigh he asks, “Why?”

Why? How? When? Where? Who? Our lives are full of questions involving the use of these words on our paths to learning and understanding.

Questions find us early in life, and follow us through all the stages of our development. Questions sneak into dinner conversations and liven up first dates. Questions flesh out arguments and demand honest answers. Questions conjure up doubt, insecurity and worry; questions open doors we’d rather keep closed. Questions force decisions, encourage creativity, seek hope. Questions probably show up in half the conversation any one person makes on any day – they are key components in human communication and necessary if we are to gain wisdom and understanding about why the world works the way it does. Questions have been part of the human experience since the dawn of man, when eye contact between two Neanderthals intimated sharing a fur blanket or a piece of meat.

The art of asking questions deserves a little time in this discussion, because it is so central to communication in all parts of our lives. Master teachers know that, while it’s easy to just stand before a class full of students and do “the talking head” routine - lecture on a topic and tell all – the more effective method to help students learn involves asking really great, open-ended questions. These are the kinds of questions that could have many layers to a response, or several possible answers.

Posing well-developed questions can produce deep thinking in students and help them develop problem-solving skills they'll need out in the world when they finish school. Not only will students learn to think more creatively after being challenged with a good question, their minds will be more fully engaged - and even discipline within the class can become less of a problem if a teacher randomly calls on students to puzzle through a question for the class. Here, asking questions takes a starring role.

Some schools value the art of asking questions so much; they even encourage their teachers to use the classic form of Socratic Questioning as part of their class discussions. According to Wikipedia, "The term **Socratic Questioning** is used to describe a kind of questioning in which an original question is responded to as though it were an answer. This in turn forces the first questioner to reformulate a new question in light of the progress of the discourse."

Socratic Questioning not only sought answers to problems, it's also possible that Socrates' intent was to recognize what wasn't known and encourage deeper understanding of the question. According to [W. K. C. Guthrie's](#) *The Greek Philosophers*, "[Socrates] was accustomed to saying that he did not himself know anything, and that the only way in which he was wiser than other men was that he was conscious of his own ignorance, while they were not. The essence of the Socratic method is to convince the interlocutor (or participant in the discussion) that whereas he thought he knew something, in fact he does not."

It seems the path to wisdom included recognizing your ignorance: for Socrates, it was all about posing the questions and learning together.

Asking good questions didn't stop with Socrates. That other great teacher and philosopher, Jesus of Nazareth, did a pretty good job of incorporating questions in his discourse as well. Perhaps Jesus was a student of the Greek thinkers himself. Read any of the Gospels and you will see many questions attributed to Jesus which were put out there to force listeners to think about what the true answer – God's answer - could be. Jesus didn't do the "talking head" – Jesus asked questions, then told stories or offered simple thoughts to explain. He wanted the people to think...

Consider some of these familiar questions: Jesus, with the disciples in the book of Matthew – "Who do they say the Son of Man is? Who do you say I am?" Or, "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? What can a man give in exchange for his soul?"

Jesus, in Chapter 5 of Matthew, speaking about loving one's enemies: "If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?"

Or in Luke, Chapter 6: "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?"

Good question. Like Socrates, Jesus was a wise, master educator; we're still learning from him today.

So when it comes to present day living and our quest for wisdom, have you ever noticed how much we don't like asking - and being asked - questions, especially when it comes to expressing our faith and what we believe?

If we're confronted by someone who worships in a more traditional denomination, and that person challenges us about our theology by asking something like, "Just what do you mean, no matter who you are you are welcome here?" we squirm inside because we aren't sure how to respond. In polite society, we're advised to avoid speaking about religion and politics - too volatile, too emotional. These days, it takes a brave soul to say out loud what we profess in the United Church of Christ, because to some people, the UCC is the wild-eyed cousin to other mainline religions, full of bleeding hearts and do-gooders. Often, we play it safe and sit back without offering much explanation.

And when it comes to allowing *ourselves* the luxury of asking questions about our own down-in-the-gut faith, we squirm here too, because if we're "good Christians," we're supposed to just accept what we're told and what we read, and NOT ask WHY or HOW COME anything, right? We're not supposed to wonder or doubt about anything the Bible says, right?

Well, all I can tell you is that you might want to speak with those folks in our congregation who have been going through the "Living the Questions" program for an answer to this one. They will likely tell you that it's a very healthy thing for a Christian to ask doubtful questions - to dig deeper into knowing how the Bible was gathered, edited and disseminated. I'd imagine they would encourage you to take a walk down the path of questioning what you believe, because as you travel that path, you'll grow stronger in your conviction that God is the Truth, Jesus is the Light, the Spirit shines through all of it - and it does set you free.

I have the feeling, though, that we as Christians seem to have the most trouble with asking questions when we find ourselves asking God for things - just what is OK to ask for, and what is off-limits? How dare we even think that we can stand before God with our hands out, looking for more than we already have? How do we know what's worthy of the asking? What will God do if we even try?

I find it interesting that in our Scripture passage from 1 Kings for today, Solomon found himself in the curious position of posing some pretty deep questions himself, and (like Socrates), admitting his own ignorance about the business of being a king. Suddenly, as a very young man of 20 or so, he's leader of all of Israel and he's at a loss as to what he should do next. After all, he has some giant shoes to fill. On his death-bed, Solomon's father David passed the crown and all of its complications on to him.

David also passed along a shadowy path to the throne which involved more murder and questionable relationships with lots of women. Solomon is king, all right, but the glory - and demise - of his work is yet to come. Instinctively, Solomon knows he's lacking in some key characteristics required of an effective leader.

So God comes to Solomon in a dream one night, and God says, "Go ahead – ask me - what do you want?" And Solomon says, "You've blessed my life, God, and now I'm a King who wants to serve you. I want and need to be wise for the good of my people. **Can you make me wise?**" God liked the sound of this very specific question...God mulled it over...and then decided to give Solomon what he wanted.

And God said, "Because you asked for wisdom to lead and you didn't ask for material goods or long life for yourself, and you didn't ask me to kill your enemies either, I'm going to give you the wisdom you've asked for – and in fact, I'm giving you more than that. You'll get riches and honor – and there will never be another like you. But this means that now you need to change your ways and walk in my path like your father did. If you do, I'll honor my promises to your people forever."

Now that's some response to a really great question!

We know that after this, Solomon-the-Wise becomes another respected and honored king of Israel in many ways– though staying on that path proved to be a challenge for him.

Solomon built an amazing temple for all to worship God, but his greed and strong-willed independence led him to gathering inappropriate wealth and marrying women of other beliefs who brought their religions with them.

Solomon spent a lifetime disobeying God's way. His faith didn't return to focus on the One who honored him with his wisdom, and as a result, Israel became a divided nation again. Solomon had asked a great question all right – but he didn't hold up his end of God's request. From Solomon's experience, we find that asking for something we want – for the good of humankind, in the name of God – can be a proper thing to do, as long as we follow through.

And while our actions may not cause the splitting of a nation, we can all identify with Solomon's struggle to stay on the right path. His story is our story – sometimes we're wise, and sometimes we aren't – and there are consequences.

Lately, I've been giving a lot of thought to what we should be doing in our church for God through the Spirit, now that we've found our center again. I've been thinking about the power of asking questions and wondering what we're about, and considering the many choices of answers we seem to have in our own quest for wisdom, and I find I have a few of my own. Here's my list – I'd like to share them with you...

**How have we been blessed by God?**

**How can we thank God and honor God's love for us?**

**What does God want and need from us?**

**How is Jesus reflected in who we are and what we do?**

**How does God's Spirit live in what we do?**

**How do others see that Spirit in this congregation?**

**Are there limits to what we can do to bring God, Jesus and the Spirit to our world?**

The time has come for us to give some thought to these, and perhaps other questions that you have, in the coming weeks as we begin to reconsider who we are and what we should be doing in our call to God's service. Don't be surprised to find that this list pops up here and there around our church, in the bulletin or in the Caller...it's time to ask these questions...and to start thinking about what our answers to them might be. The world outside is waiting, and we're ready to get to work!

Dear friends, I believe God wants to give us what we want, especially if we truly follow God's way...all we gotta do is ask.

Amen.