

“Questions”
John 14:1-14, Acts 7:55-60
May 14, 2017
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A few years ago we had a class for Adult Sunday School that we called “20 Questions.” For that class we solicited questions from all of you—any question that you wanted answered, questions about God, about the Bible, about the church—and then we tried to answer one of your questions each week. “Who wrote the Bible? Is the Christmas story true? Is there any proof God exists? Explain the Trinity. What happens when we die? Why are there so many religions? Why do some prayers get answered while others don’t?” And on and on. Maybe you asked one of those questions. Maybe you still have a question. Do you? Not for me, but if you had a question that you could ask God, what would it be? If you got only one question, what would you ask him? What would your question be?

The Gospel of John is famous for its questions. We have heard many of them this spring. The very first disciples, Andrew and John, ask the rabbi to whom they've been directed, “Teacher, where are you staying?” and they begin to follow him. A later reluctant disciple, whose also a bit of cynic asks, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” and then he meets Jesus. You remember when the Pharisee Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night and asks him “How can anyone be born after having grown old?” and they talk about spiritual birth. And in the next chapter Jesus sits out by the well in Samaria and begins to talk about water and eternal life and she asks him, “Where do you get that living water?” Then later Jesus himself asks the man in Jerusalem who had been paralyzed, “Do you want to be made well?” Later when they see a man born blind, the disciples ask Jesus, “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” and they are part of a miraculous healing. And then right before the passage we read, Peter asks Jesus, “Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.” And Jesus breaks his heart by telling him, “Very truly I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times.”

Lots of questions. But did you hear yours in the midst of all of these? What's the question you would

ask? In the passage we read, Jesus is with his disciples in the upper room. It is the night before his arrest and he has been talking with them about what is going to happen, trying to prepare them for what things will be like when he is gone. It is beginning to dawn on them that this is the last night they will have with him, the last chance they have to talk with him. What will they ask? What will they say to him?

Jesus has just told them, "Don't let your hearts be troubled." Really. They're nothing but troubled, that's why they are hiding out in this upper room. And now you've told us that you're going to die. How could we not be upset? I'm sure you've had moments like that when your heart was troubled, your soul was upset, you were filled with anxiety and upset. Yet Jesus asks his disciples not just to believe in him but to trust him, to commit their futures to him.

Then, before you know it, he moves on, talking about going away, preparing places, and coming back. As if to add insult to injury, he implies that they should know what's he talking about; he actually says that they know the way to follow. To which Thomas -- brave, realistic Thomas -- asks another of those questions, "But, Jesus, actually, we don't even know where you're going, how then can we know the way?" And when Jesus says he is the way, and asks again that they trust him, Philip can stand it no longer and asks the one question no faithful Jew should ever ask. Actually, it's a statement, a request, a plea, maybe even a demand, but underneath it all is a question: "Show us the Father," Philip says, "and we will be satisfied." Or, to put it more directly, "Show us what God is like." Or even more directly, "What does God look like?"

David Lose, president of the Lutheran Seminary in Philadelphia notices about this passage, "John doesn't record this, but I suspect there's a bit of a collective gasp on the part of the other disciples when Philip asks this hard question. In ancient Israel, you see, it was simply understood that no one can see God and live. Moses, the model of heroic faith in the Old Testament, once made a similar request, and God put him face-forward in the cleft of a mountain and passed by and all Moses could see was the

glory of the Lord shimmering around him. He was finally allowed to turn around and look only after God has passed by, so that Moses ultimately saw only the trail of the Lord's glory or, more literally in the Hebrew, Moses could only see God's backside.

God is too much, you see, for us to bear -- too holy, too powerful, too infinite, too full of potential and life and the future for any mere mortal to behold and live. And yet Philip asks to see God anyway. "If you want us to trust you, Jesus, just show us the Father." That is, "What does God look like?"

It's an audacious, even inappropriate question, but again I suspect we can understand where it came from. Because each of us has been there, too: at our wits end, desperate for some hope that things will get better, for some reason to believe that this tragedy is not all there is. Maybe it was when the doctor told you that the cancer had returned. Or when a loved one died unexpectedly. Or when the stewardship appeal went sour. Or when you discovered your beloved has left. Or after one more miscarriage, or when the Twin Towers fell, or the flood waters rose, or...or....

Each of us, you see, has also had moments where we wanted some reassurance, some glimmer of hope, that all that we had heard and learned about God is not just some false story but true. "Just show us the Father," we plea, "and we will be satisfied."

To which Jesus responds, not in frustration but in love, both to Philip and to us, "Have I been with you all this time and yet still you don't know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the father!" Which takes us back to the very beginning of John's gospel actually, when John, after singing his hymn about the Word that was from the beginning, the Word that is with God and is God, the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us that we might have life.... After all this, John closes his hymn to the Word by saying, "No one has seen God. But the only begotten Son, who rests in the very bosom of the Father, he has made him known." You want to know what God is like? You already know, because you know Jesus. That's why he came to make God known. To make God known to all of us.¹

¹ Lose, David. *The Hardest Question: Working Preacher*. May 15, 2011.

It is in Jesus that we see God. In his voice, we hear the teaching of God. In his miracles, we feel the touch of God's care. In his sacrifice, we know the depth of God's love. That's how I know God. But is that true for everyone?

And maybe that brings up the last question, one that we looked at in our 20 questions and one that is right here in the middle of our passage today, one that sometimes we don't really want to deal with because it's one of those "clobber" verses. You know, verses that you use to clobber someone over the head with to say, "I'm right and you're wrong!" One of the 20 questions was "Does everyone get saved, does everyone go to heaven in the end? What about people of other religions? What about people who aren't Christian?" And many of us are fond of quoting John 14:6 "Jesus said, I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me." There. Done. Only Christians get into heaven. Except that's not what it really says. Were you reading along? Thomas says to him, Lord we do not know where you are going, how can we know the way?" Good question. Maybe your question. Maybe the best question all day. Maybe the only question. How can we know the way? How do we live our lives? What are our lives all about? Show us the way to follow. Show us the way to heaven, the way to life. And what's the answer? Jesus said to him, I am the way. Did you catch the difference. Jesus said *to him*. This is a question from a Christian to Christ. Jesus said to him. Thomas, for you, I am the way and the truth and the life. None of you comes to the Father except by me. This doesn't say anything at all about those other sheep that Jesus mentioned back in chapter 10. It has to do with those of us who are following Jesus. For us he is the way.

Carl Gregg, a pastor in Frederick, Maryland has commented about this passage:

As I have continued to wrestle with the reality of religious pluralism, I have found the following two short sayings helpful. First, theologian Huston Smith says that God is "defined by Jesus, not confined to Jesus." Second, Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong has said, "I walk the Christ-path into the mystery of God, but I do not believe that God is a Christian." The common core to both of these slogans is that one can affirm the validity of other religious traditions without abandoning Christianity.

What haunts me now is not whether faithful Hindus, Muslims, and Jews are saved. Even if this were a concern, there's too much wonderful, beautiful, and challenging involved with being a Christian to

worry too much about everyone else's religion.²

It is in Jesus that I know God. That's the way God has revealed himself to me, in the person of Jesus Christ. For me Jesus is the answer. And the way. And who brings me life. And that takes care of my questions. Well, at least most of them.

² Gregg, Carl. *A Progressive Reading of John 14:6. Patheos Newsletter; May 22, 2011.*