

St. Mark's Episcopal Church  
Albuquerque, New Mexico  
Sunday September 23, 2018 Proper 20B  
Text: Mark 9:30-37  
Preacher: Rev. Christopher McLaren  
Theme: Asking Jesus the hard questions

The professor had just finished his lecture and then came the fateful query, ““Are there any questions?”

The lecture had been almost totally incomprehensible, dull and obscure. Now everyone sat silently in their seats.

*Questions? Where on earth do we begin?* I thought to myself. There were no questions, I assume because nobody understood enough of the professor's lecture to even ask a question about it!

In order to ask a question, one needs to have modicum of understanding, but it also requires courage. No one wants to look dumb in front of the whole class. Have you ever been in a situation where you ventured a question only to have everyone else in the class laugh at your silly, stupid question—to which everybody else, it appears, already knew the obvious answer?

It takes a great deal of security to ask for help in understanding. To ask a question is to admit that we do not get it, that there is some sort of gap between what we are attempting to understand and our actual understanding.

Children seem to arrive among us with questions. Where did I come from? Where do butterflies go in the winter? How long before Christmas?

Sadly, as children grow older, their questions get smaller. Eventually children learn to be careful in asking questions. They don't want to look stupid.

“Why do we keep going over the same material Sunday after Sunday?”

That is a good question I said. Well, this is America. Being a Christian doesn't come naturally. No one is born knowing any of these Jesus stories. All of us are dependent on having someone to tell us the truth, to share with us the stories. Since there are

so many counter stories in the world, on the web, on TV, that try to tell you who you are and what you are supposed to be doing in the world, stories that are the opposite of the truth of Jesus, we have to keep hammering these stories into you, week after week, reiterating, repeating. This truth is so strange and so different, it requires weekly repetition.

“Does that help?” I asked.

“Not much,” he responded.

In our Gospel reading from Mark today, Jesus turns to his disciples and asks a fateful question, “Who do you say that I am?” When you think about it, that’s the most important question. Perhaps that’s the question you ask when you come to church, or the question Jesus asks you. “Who is Jesus?” What does he mean for us? What does Jesus mean for you?

Once again, Jesus attempts to teach his disciples that the “Son of Man” or the “Human One” (that’s the designation that Jesus takes from the Old Testament and applies to himself) must be betrayed, and suffer, and die. The Son of Man was a sort of divine-human figure who would initiate a new age, bring in God’s reign, and establish God’s rule in the world.

In order to do all of that, the Son of Man would need to be a cosmic, powerful person. Thus, when Jesus begins to teach his disciples that the Son of Man must be betrayed, and suffer, and die, well it’s quite a shock.

From the beginning of Mark’s gospel, he tells us that Jesus is the Messiah, God’s own Son. Having a savior is a powerful idea and we thought we knew what that savior would look like. We want a Messiah that will fix what is wrong with the world. We want a Jesus who is the answer to all of our problems. We long for a savior who meets our heart’s desire.

However, this is not exactly the kind of Messiah we get in Jesus of Nazareth. Even to us insiders, Jesus’ description of his necessary life is a jolt to our expectations. We don’t like being told that in order to be the, chosen one of God, Jesus, this Human One, must undergo something terrible – betrayal, suffering and ultimately death at

the hands of human beings. A suffering Son of Man? We want a powerful, put them in their place Messiah, not someone who lets a sinful humanity win. It is hard to accept Jesus' description of himself and it is distasteful to us if we can be honest about it. We want a Messiah who is a winner.

Mark's Gospel describes the disciples' response in this way, *"But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him."*

Why do you think they were afraid to ask? Perhaps they were afraid because last time in Mark's Gospel, when Peter tried to answer Jesus's question, "Who do you say that I am?" Jesus rebuked Peter for his response.

I'm not really sure why at this point in their journey with Jesus they are afraid to ask. But maybe they don't want to know more about suffering, maybe they are starting to get it and they don't like what they are hearing, maybe they are just too confused to formulate a meaningful question. I'm not sure...

So, they did not ask him anything because they were afraid. Fear is a posture that paralyzes us. In Mark's gospel fear is actually the opposite of faith. Jesus says, "Do not fear only believe over and over again in Mark's gospel. I hope that you won't be afraid to ask Jesus your real and earnest questions, "Who are you? Who are you for the salvation of the world? Who are you for me?" "Why do you seem to allow such terrible things to happen in this world?"

In Mark's gospel, the disciples seem to be a bit clueless. They are always getting it wrong and becoming confused. They often come across as uncomprehending and dense and never really getting the message Jesus is trying to offer them.

And yet, if you are a person full of questions, then this is the Gospel for you! The disciples in Mark are not there as examples for the rest of us, role models for us to emulate. They are there (I believe) to encourage us. It's encouraging to know that, from the beginning, the people who were closest to Jesus had questions. They had difficulty getting the point, figuring out who Jesus was and what he expected of them.

When I was a young person growing up at Bethel Assembly of God in Medford, Oregon, I got the distinct impression that my church had all the answers and that

others didn't. It was comforting this notion of us and them as a child. But as I grew older and began to have questions and to be troubled by things in the Bible I realized that there is a real value in doubt, in questioning, in struggling to shape one's understanding of Jesus and the faith of the church. I think that my childhood church was much more concerned about having all the answers than it was about the questions. It is, I think one of the reasons that I made a journey into the Episcopal church. I needed a place that was comfortable with my questions. I wanted a place that didn't have to have all the answers or understood that some questions have to be lived over a lifetime.

\*In the novel, *Jayber Crow*, Jayber a pre-ministerial student realizes that he has so many questions that he is unsure about whether he can actually preach. His professor, Dr. Ardmire, says, "You have been given questions to which you cannot be given answers, You will need to live them out – perhaps a little at a time." (p.54 *Jayber Crow*).

If you are here this morning and you feel like, "I know who I am. I'm committed to the way of Christ. I'm knowledgeable about the scriptures and I really believe in the saving way of Jesus. The Christian story is my story and I'm trying live it the best that I can, or I'm trying to allow it to be lived in me," that is wonderful and I'm grateful. This kind of faith is beautiful and desirable in so many ways.

But I also think that this story about Jesus and his disciples being afraid to ask their questions is also encouraging to those of us who have questions. This passage of scripture is meant to encourage those for whom:

*This is all very confusing. If Jesus Christ is the Son of God, who is the God that he is? What has being a disciple of Jesus Christ gotten me into? I can't believe that I've been following Jesus most of my life and there are still great gaps in my understanding.*

One of the things we've tried to practice at St. Mark's from the very beginning of our rebuilding of this faith community is that it is ok to have questions. It is ok to have doubts. It is ok to be "in recovery" from one form or another of spiritual abuse or negative church experience. It is ok to come here for healing and hope and let belief and faith take their time. You can belong here at St. Mark's before you believe. We are not going to tell you that you have to believe just this way or you are unwelcome. We are not going to insist that you understand Jesus a particular way in order to participate. We believe that God is seeking each one of us to be in a life-

giving relationship. We believe that this relationship is transformative over time and that by grace and our unfolding openness, we become more and more like Christ, more compassionate, more forgiving, more loving, more open to surprises of mercy in our lives.

Frederick Buechner famously said that honest doubt is essential for growth in faith, not the enemy or the opposite of faith.

Here is the quote from *Wishful Thinking A theological ABC*:

“Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don’t have any doubts you are kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith—they keep faith alive and moving.” ~ Buechner.

I don’t think Mark’s Gospel wants to tell us, “Try to be like Jesus’s first disciples,” but rather, “Try to be better than Jesus’s first disciples. Don’t fear your questions, and don’t fear asking for answers from Jesus.”

We worship the living God, who made heaven and earth and loves all of creation like a mother. The God who loved us so much that he dared to come among us as a vulnerable child. A God who will stop and nothing to woo creation back into relationship. The God that desires to save all that has been made, who way is salvation and mercy. This God can handle your questions. There is nothing you cannot ask.

So, go ahead. Don’t be afraid to ask your deepest questions. Jesus will not reject you for your questions any more than Jesus rejected his first disciples for their fear to ask questions. Go ahead. Bring your doubts and your questions to church. Lay your heart open to Jesus. Ask. He will not forsake you because of your questions.

You have nothing to fear from the one who loves you and has called you to be his disciple. Go ahead. Don’t be afraid to ask.