

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on September 19, 2021 (Proper 20, Year B)

“Stop asking so many questions.” A friend of mine was once told this by a priest and it pretty much turned him off to organized religion. It wasn’t the Episcopal Church, although it doesn’t really matter. It was at a time in his life when he was seeking deeper truths about life and faith. And the response effectively shut down his spiritual curiosity. He had tentatively entered the church, vulnerable and open to the moving of the Spirit. And he left disappointed and disillusioned.

“Stop asking so many questions.” Now this advice isn’t *all* bad. At times we do need to stop asking questions, and simply revel in the wonder of God’s presence. But asking someone to blindly accept the faith is never helpful. And to me, the response sounds more like someone who was simply annoyed and had better things to do than answer a bunch of questions from a stranger.

In this morning’s gospel reading, we hear a parallel story about questions. But instead of asking too many questions, the disciples fail to ask *any* questions. For the second week in a row we hear Jesus share a Passion prediction. He tells the disciples that he will be betrayed and killed and in three days rise again. But, we hear, the disciples “did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.”

In the first instance, my friend couldn’t *stop* asking questions. In the second, the disciples couldn’t *start* asking them. Because they were afraid. Now, to be honest, I don’t really believe this. My sense of Jesus as a teacher is that he was always willing to engage the hard questions. That he was open to having conversations on a wide variety of topics.

Of course, he often answers a question with a question, which is a sometimes frustrating but effective pedagogical technique. In fact, in the four gospels combined, Jesus asks 307 questions. Now, in full disclosure, I know this not because I counted them, but because I Googled it. But through these often provocative and probing questions, Jesus invites us to think deeply about ourselves, our world, and our God. “Who do you say that I am?” “Why are you afraid?” “Do you love me?”

So I don’t think the disciples were afraid to *ask* questions, as much as they were afraid of the answers they might receive. Because when you ask tough questions, you may get tough answers. Answers that befuddle or disrupt, answers that unsettle or dismay.

Maybe they figured if they ignored the questions raised by Jesus talking about betrayal and being killed, it would all just go away. Because the reality is that one of their own number would do the betraying. And they certainly didn’t want to hear about Jesus being killed. Because if Jesus was in danger, the disciples also were in danger. Guilt by association and all that. So maybe it’s best to ignore the questions you don’t want answers to. The problem is, like it or not, the answers will eventually be revealed. In this case, the Passion prediction will come to pass. Jesus will be betrayed into the hands of sinners and be killed and on the third day rise again.

But I think the elephant in the room, the burning question the disciples didn’t want to ask, was why? Why does Jesus have to die? Why would the Messiah have to suffer and be put to death, when this didn’t fit in *at all* with the disciples’ expectation of the conquering Messiah? The one who would undo the yoke of oppression and usher in a new era of freedom for the Jewish people. And it’s one of the questions that hangs over us as well. Why couldn’t God have chosen a less violent way to enact the redemption of the world? Why did Jesus have to be betrayed and rejected? Why did Jesus have to suffer the humiliation and pain of being strung up on a cross to die?

I actually wish the disciples had asked the ‘why’ question. Because I’d love to hear Jesus’ answer. He never actually addresses it, at least not verbally. But, throughout his life, he answers the question through his actions. We see how he associates with the least and the lost and the lonely; we see how he heals the sick and gives sight to the blind and makes the lame walk; we see how he challenges the status quo; we see how he calls out hypocrisy among the religious elite; we see how he encourages his followers to show mercy and forgiveness to others, just as they are shown mercy and forgiveness by God.

And for all of this, the authorities want him silenced. They want to smash the mirror he holds up to their faces. And they determine to wipe him off the face of the earth. But, of course, they don’t anticipate the resurrection; they don’t anticipate that his actions would unleash a movement that would never and could never be silenced; they don’t anticipate that you cannot kill that which is born of God.

This year we are introducing a new Sunday School curriculum called Godly Play. I’m grateful to Jack and our Sunday School Leadership Team and our teachers for having the courage to try something bold during a season when so much has been uprooted in our lives and in the church. One of the hallmarks of Godly Play are called wondering questions.

After telling a parable or a Bible story, the storyteller invites children to reflect upon what they have seen and heard. The open-ended wondering questions allow children to wonder and connect with the story. So a teacher may ask “I wonder what you liked best about this story?” Or “I wonder where you see yourself in this story?”

These wondering questions invite...wonder at the way God moves among us, while celebrating the presence of God that already resides deep within each child. They allow children to connect with the story, and with God, in personal ways. They invite mystery and reverence and awe.

What I love about the Godly Play wondering questions is the recognition that, when it comes to our faith lives, there are no wrong answers. There always remains room for questions, even if we don't have answers in the conventional sense. Mystery. Wonder. Reverence. Awe. These are what form the gentle invitation into fruitful and life-giving and life-long relationship with the divine.

These are all lessons adults can learn as well. Frankly, I wish I'd had Godly Play when I was a kid. Because I think those of us of a certain age end up trying to unlearn many of the things we learned about God in Sunday School. Or at least allow our faith to evolve past the notion of God we held onto as children. Faith is not about rote memorization or learning proper formulas. Rather it's about relationship. When it comes to faith, never be afraid to ask questions. Never cease to wonder. We may not have all the answers — nobody does. But we can always engage the questions.