

If the church were Christian, inviting questions would be more important than supplying answers.

My travels wound to an end this past week. I'm very grateful to have survived them. It was touch and go for awhile. When you fly into a city, a driver is assigned to take you around to the places you have to go. That's a real convenience, because then you don't end up lost and late for your appearance. So I was somewhere last week, and the man driving me around was very friendly, but also excitable. The more excited he became, the faster he drove. While he was driving, he was telling me about having three heart attacks, how they happened very suddenly, at unexpected times, causing him to pass out and collapse. He was telling me all these things as we were rocketing down an interstate with semi trucks hurtling past us, inches away, then he said, "You're awfully quiet."

I had been praying with a passion I hadn't felt in years.

Fortunately, his heart held up, we made our rounds, and returned to the airport safely.

But before we did that, we shared a meal together, and I discovered he was a retired pastor. So we were talking pastor stuff, trading war stories. Each of us, I'm sure, exaggerating our exploits, as old soldiers are prone to do. I asked him if he missed it, being retired. "What I miss," he said, "is sitting down with people and talking about important things."

I've been thinking about that ever since. When I first became a pastor, I thought it would be my job to be the company man, to convey the party line and make sure tradition and orthodoxy were upheld, sort of the residential propagandist. My early sermons consisted mostly of telling people what they had to believe. The curious thing about this, and what I eventually realized, is that Jesus seldom did this. Oh, I imagine there were occasions when his disciples seemed especially dense and he had to spell things out for them, but it seems to me that most of the time Jesus trusted people to sort things out for themselves. So he told stories and parables and let them draw their own conclusions.

Stories like the Prodigal Son, a beautiful, little tale about forgiveness and reconciliation and the nature of God, and he left the story unfinished, so that folks could discern for themselves what was better—to love like the father, or envy like the older son.

Remember when you were a kid and in school, how there were two kinds of teachers? The first kind just puked out the information they wanted you to know. You'd spend all hour writing down what they said, word for word, regurgitate it back up for the test, and get an A. But the material never stayed with you. That's a lazy way to teach. The people who became teachers so they could have their summers off taught that way. Incidentally, a lot of churches teach that way. Here's what it means to be Christian. Memorize these verses. Repeat these creeds. Say this prayer. If you want to know the answer, go see the pastor, who knows all about this stuff.

Then you had another kind of teacher. Those were the teachers who taught you how to think, who taught you what kind of questions to ask, who saw learning not as some drudgeries task, but as an adventure, an opportunity. They made you want to learn. I bet if you were to think for a moment who your favorite teacher was, it was someone like that. For me, it was Rosemary Helton. She made me want to learn algebra.

I bet people followed Jesus because he taught like that. Think about it. Did Jesus sit people down and say, "Okay, today's lecture is about blood atonement. Turn in your Bibles to the book of Leviticus."

No, of course not. Instead, he told stories. Usually with the same goal in mind—to help people think. Who do you want to be like? What vision of God do you want to affirm? How do you want to live?

So he would engage people. He didn't just spit out answers. He invited questions. Think how many times Jesus' best teachings began with someone asking a question.

"Who is my neighbor?" a lawyer asked. And the lesson of the Good Samaritan came to be.

"What must I do to inherit eternal life?" a rich, young ruler asked, then came to understand how his wealth had blinded him to human need.

"Who will feed these people?" a disciple asked, and Jesus blessed their modest provisions, a large crowd ate until all were full, and we all learned that little is much when God is in it.

You know what Jesus was really teaching, don't you? The lesson behind every lesson? He was teaching us that when we gather with one another, we need to make sure folks feel free to ask questions about their struggles. I was talking with a man last week, he was going through a hard time in his life, his child had recently died, and he said to me, "I know I shouldn't question God, but I do sometimes. My friends at church get upset with me, because I ask all these questions."

I said, “Any of them ever lost a child?”

He thought for a moment, then said, “No.”

I told him to ask all the questions he wanted.

God doesn’t mind our questions.

No where in the Bible did Jesus ever say, “That’s a dumb question. What kind of question is that? Where’s your faith?”

We mind the questions, because they make us work. They make us rethink our understanding of God. That’s hard work, so we avoid it. But it’s important work, because it determines our outlook on life.

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Here’s the problem: When we think we have all the answers, all the Truth, we grab hold of it, won’t let go, and we stop growing. It’s a bit like something I read about not long ago in the book Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance. In southern India, they have what are called monkey traps. They cut a round hole in a coconut, hollow it out, fill the coconut with rice, then chain it to a stake. The hole is just large enough for the monkey to reach its hand inside, but too small for his fist with rice in it to come out. So in order to escape from the monkey trap, the monkey has to let go of the rice in order to be free.

And here's the thing, once the monkey has all that rice in its hand, it doesn't want to let go of it. It's then a very simple matter to capture the monkey—you walk up to it and pick it up. That monkey is ensnared by what it first perceived to be a blessing.

So it is with us. We find what we believe is a great truth. We grab hold of it and don't want to let go of it. Next thing you know, we're trapped by the very thing we thought would bless us. But maybe to have our freedom we have to let it go.

I remember when I was a kid, first seeing all those pictures of Jesus. He was always standing with his arms extended in front, his hands open. Never could figure why his hands were always open. Now I think I know why. He was dropping that rice. Letting go.

What are we holding onto that keeps us trapped? Maybe at one time we thought it was the Truth, the Answer to Everything, but now it just has us trapped. Maybe it's time we opened our hands and let it go, time we worried less about having the answer, and opened our lives to some questions that might just set us free.

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