

“I HEARD AN OLD, OLD STORY: II – IT’S ALWAYS PETER!”

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Matthew 18: 15-22

Back in the mid-1970’s there was a crazy television show called “Welcome Back Kotter.” Anybody remember it? It was about a teacher named Mr. Kotter who returned to his hometown of Brooklyn to teach, and his classroom was filled with a bunch of crazy characters. John Travolta played one of the students – his name was Vinnie Barbarino. Some of the other students were Freddie Washington and Juan Epstein. And then there was a guy named Arnold Horschack.

If you’ve never seen the show, I’m not quite sure how to describe Arnold Horschack except to say he was kind of a nerd. And his trademark characteristic was that every time Mr. Kotter would ask the class a question, Arnold’s arm would fly up immediately and he’d shout out, “Ooh, ooh, ooh.” Like, “I know, I know, I know and I’m dying for everybody to know that I know first. Ooh, ooh, ooh.”

Well, you know what? In some ways, in some places in the Gospels, I think Peter is a little bit like that. It’s always Peter who seems to be the first to want to say something when Jesus makes a statement. It’s always Peter who comes up with the crazy questions that maybe others are thinking, but no one wants to voice. It’s always Peter with his heart on his sleeve. It’s always Peter.

Today, I want to suggest to you that what Peter does – particularly asking questions – is a good thing. A very good thing. Especially when it comes to faith and growing in faith.

I read a lot this week about education and asking questions, and I found some interesting observations, especially from teachers. I would suspect that all teachers at one time or another have had that student who is constantly raising his or her hand, interrupting the flow of the lesson, to ask question after question. And I suspect those teachers have found that more than irritating at times.

But as one educator put it, “Asking questions works because it makes you an active learner instead of a passive recipient of information.” (On-line, “Asking Questions Improves Your Learning If You Ask the Right Questions,” Louise Rasmussen)

And another one said, “A questioning student is one who is learning. Learning that happens without any questions being asked is not learning, but rather information simply being absorbed.” (On-line, “The Teacher’s Digest,” Parma, 9/22/14)

That’s why I loved the children’s book we read this morning and chose to use it even though it was long. Because it really encourages children to think deeply, not just on the surface, and to ask questions to make wonderful discoveries.

Well, there is no doubt from all the evidence available to us in the scriptures, that the apostle Peter was a learner, because he was inquisitive, always wanting to know more, to delve deeper, to more fully understand whatever was going on. He was the one who said what he thought while others remained silent, who uttered the questions others were afraid to ask. It was always Peter.

Sometimes it was good, and sometimes not so good. In a wonderful essay about Peter, the great writer Frederick Buechner talked about some of those times in Peter's life – the times he spoke out. Like the time Jesus asked all of the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" and for a while there was uncomfortable silence, until Peter spoke up and said, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God." Good.

But then, there was the time when Jesus told them he was going to suffer, and Peter spoke up and said "God forbid that this happen." On that day, Jesus snapped back, "Get behind me, Satan." Bad.

Or the time Peter screwed up his courage and tried to walk on water, and he was doing okay until he took his eyes off of Jesus, almost going under until Jesus rescued him. Good in the end.

Or the time Jesus was talking about heaven, and as Buechner put it, "Peter wanted to know what sort of special deal people like himself got, people who'd left home and given everything up the way he'd given everything up to follow Jesus." Bad.

And then, the time in today's Gospel lesson where Jesus was teaching about forgiveness, and Peter asked the question that was probably rolling around in everyone else's head – "well, how many times must we forgive?"

Questions. Asking questions. When it comes to faith, asking questions is important – vitally important. Now, I know that some people might disagree with that. Some would say that you just take everything at face value, and that's that. But I think Jesus might even disagree with that, because look at the conversations he had, and look at the way he spoke and taught – his techniques almost begged his listeners to question, or think more fully about things for themselves.

Think about how many times Jesus was asked questions or confronted about something, and rather than give a direct answer, he might tell a story or a parable. Why? So that the listener could figure things out for themselves, could figure out what it meant for their life.

That's what happens when you ask questions. And I want to suggest to you this morning, that, when it comes to growing in faith, there are two different kinds of questions – informational and formational.

Informational questions are those that help you understand scriptures or situations more fully. For example, let's say you are studying the parable of the Good Samaritan. You read about this guy that was on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho and got beat up by some bad guys. He was left in a heap by the side of the road. Pretty soon a priest comes by,

takes a look at him and passes by on the other side. Next a Levite comes by, sees him as well, and he too passes by on the other side. Finally, a Samaritan comes by, sees his struggle, reaches down and tends to his wounds and then takes him to be cared for by others, even covering the costs of that care.

Nice story, huh, and that's all it would be until you ask some questions. Like, "what were the religious reasons the priest and Levite didn't take care of the wounded man?" And, most importantly of all, why was it shocking, when Jesus told this story, that the Samaritan was the hero of the story? If you ask that question, you discover that Samaritans were mortal enemies of the people to whom Jesus was telling the story. They hated the Samaritans for intermarrying and other reasons, so indeed, they were shocked when Jesus said the Samaritan was the good guy. If you didn't know that, it would be just a nice story of a man being helped. Knowing it, you know that Jesus was telling his audience something deeper that day - to not label people. You never know through whom God will work.

So do you see what I mean? Asking informational questions of scripture, helps you understand the real meaning of what it says, the meaning of what it said when it was written. That's why Bible study is so important. If you don't study and don't ask questions of the scripture, you rarely reach the depth of meaning God intends through it.

That's why, on this Promotion Sunday for our Sunday School, I remind you how important it is for you to continually grow in your faith, and invite you to do that in a small group here in the church. We have wonderful Sunday School classes in which you can ask your questions and hear the questions of others, as together you work to discern the meaning of God's Word for your lives. We have other groups as well - small groups of all kinds - whether they're short-term studies, Disciple Bible study, UMW circles, Emmaus groups - why, I suspect that even the Chancel Choir looks more closely at the words of scripture at times when they're singing them. It's important to know what they mean.

I'm going to be a little pushy this morning and say that there is no one that is beyond Bible study - no matter how old you are, no matter what degrees you possess - everyone needs to continually be immersed in God's Word. And I say that invitationally, because it is not drudgery, but joy. Especially when you have one of those aha! moments and understand something in a new way that you may have read hundreds of times before. And being in a group with others only enhances the experience!

Having said all that about informational questions, let me turn now to the other kinds of questions that come after those - and they are formational questions. Informational questions help you know the facts, the contexts, the true intent of the words. Formational questions take you to the heart of faith - they turn the focus on you.

Let's go back to the parable of the Good Samaritan again. Informational questions cause us to discover why the Samaritan is an unlikely hero. Formational questions cause us to ask - "Who am I in the story? What would I do in the situation? Who is God calling me to be?"

The renowned theologian Karl Barth once said this: “The Bible becomes the word of God for us, not when we get hold of it, but when it gets hold of us.”

So, as one author put it, “When Jesus says, ‘Come unto me’ or ‘Woe unto you,’ he is not just talking to people long ago and far away; he is speaking directly and personally to us, right here and right now. When we read something like the story of Zaccheus, we need to ask the academic questions” (or what I’ve been calling the informational questions), like:

“Who was Zaccheus? Why was he despised? What was going on in Jericho then? Who were these tax collectors? Why did Jesus go to Zaccheus? Why is this story found only in Luke? What did this mean back then?”

“But (he says) we can’t stop there. We also have to ask ourselves, ‘Now what does this story mean to me?’ It’s then (he concludes) that we see that we are Zaccheus, we are up a tree, we need Christ to come into our lives and turn us around like that, and he can do it!” (James W. Moore, *There’s a Hole in Your Soul Only God Can Fill*, “Finding God in the Bible,” p. 79)

That, my friends, says it all. Christ can come into our lives and turn us around, and he waits to do that for each of us. As scripture says, “Behold, he stands at the door and knocks” and waits to be invited in. One way to open the door of your heart is through spending time in the word and asking questions – informational and formational.

Questions. Questions are good. Questions lead to understanding. And when it comes to faith, asking questions can lead you to Christ. So I encourage you to be a good learner, a good questioner. As Karl Barth said, “Get hold of the Word of God, so that it can get hold of you!” May it be so.

Amen.

Before we sing the hymn, I have a question for you. The hymn is called “Balm in Gilead.” Do you know what that means? Well, I asked the question, and here’s what it means: “A balm is an aromatic medicinal substance derived from plants. Gilead was an area east of the Jordan River, well known for its spices and ointments. The balm of Gilead was a high-quality ointment with healing properties. The Bible uses the term “balm of Gilead” metaphorically as an example of something with healing or soothing powers. So this hymn, an African-American spiritual, compares the healing balm to the saving power of Jesus – the one true treatment that never fails to heal our spiritual wounds. Now, let us sing it together, knowing the truth of its words – that Jesus is our balm in Gilead, and newly dedicate ourselves, day by day, to grow closer to him.