

The Unasked Questions  
September 20, 2015 – Pentecost 17B  
First Lutheran Church, St. Peter, MN  
Text: Mark 9:30-37

Grace and peace to you from God our Creator and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Amen.

A few weeks ago, when I called my parents to chat and check in, I was able to talk to my niece, Naomi, for a few minutes. She lives with my sister in Alaska, and I hadn't seen her in a while. Well, Naomi was full of questions for me.

“Are you going to come see us soon?”

“Probably not very soon, Naomi.”

“Why?”

“It's a really long trip.”

“Why?”

“Well, we live in Minnesota right now, and that's pretty far from Alaska.”

“Why?”

Perhaps I should mention that Naomi is three years old. As I'm sure many of you know, three year olds are full of questions, especially the “why?” one, so this back-and-forth continued for a few more rounds before her mom stepped back in. But it's good that she's so inquisitive – it's an important part of development. I imagine that we all went through this stage at that age. We ask questions to expand our horizons and learn more about the world around us.

Simple questions like “why” can inspire creativity, spark innovation, and deepen faith. Luther's Small Catechism, which we have used to learn about faith for nearly five centuries, is centered around simple questions. “Was ist das?” Luther continually asks, “What is this? – What does this mean?” Albert Einstein credited asking questions for the inspiration for much of his

work. He said, “I have no special talents. I am only passionately curious,” and “The important thing is not to stop questioning.”

But at some point, many of us do lose this impulse to ask “why?” In a society that can sometimes use knowledge as a benchmark for worth or success, perhaps we want to act like we already know the answers – to not look dumb in front of our peers.

In my first semester of seminary, I was taking a class on the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. Our professor kept mentioning “exegesis” for probably the whole semester. I’m pretty sure I had no idea what he was talking about, but assumed everyone else did and didn’t ever raise my hand to ask. Well, when the midterm rolled around, we were all given the test and, sure enough, the first essay prompt said, “Provide an exegesis of the biblical passage.”

Well, great. What was I going to do? I couldn’t ask *now*, it’s been half a semester – and this is the midterm!

Luckily for me, one of my classmates went up and asked our professor if he could explain what an exegesis was. He looked surprised, but said to the class, “I guess I assumed you all knew what exegesis was. It’s just providing a critical analysis of a text – pulling out the meaning – give an explanation.”

There was an audible sigh of relief from throughout the room. We had apparently all been too afraid to ask the meaning of this (as it turns out) pretty simple word. None of us wanted to admit we had no clue what it meant.

Today’s Gospel reading shows the disciples pass up the opportunity to ask Jesus some huge questions – because they were afraid. As they were walking on the road, Jesus said to them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” Wow. That’s pretty intense. I’d imagine all of the

disciples were pretty confused at what Jesus was saying. They had to be full of questions. But the disciples “did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.”

Ok, confession time. I’m not sure I understand what Jesus is saying here either. There’s a lot going on in this short sentence – things that theologians have been grappling with for almost two thousand years. Why did Jesus have to die? What does this resurrection really mean anyway?

But strangely, the fact that the disciples, Jesus’ inner circle, didn’t understand what he was saying – that’s oddly comforting to me. This is really difficult stuff to comprehend. This is something we can and should struggle with; something that the earliest followers of Jesus struggled with. This is where they are realizing that this Messiah may not be the one that they were expecting – the victorious warrior who would liberate Israel from Rome. This is where we may be realizing that this Messiah may not be the one that we are expecting either. He’s going to allow himself to suffer and die? What does this mean?

But they were afraid to ask. I wonder why. I sure wish they had asked. That would have made things a lot easier or at least a lot clearer. Here they had the greatest teacher the world has ever known and they were afraid to ask what this all meant. Maybe they each thought the other disciples understood. Maybe they thought they should understand by now; this is the second time in Mark that Jesus has predicted his death and resurrection after all. Maybe they didn’t want to look dumb in front of their friends either.

This reading made me wonder: what questions do we leave unasked? What questions exist in this space that people may be afraid to ask? Maybe you’ve been a Lutheran your entire life but don’t really understand what we mean when we talk about grace. Perhaps you still don’t quite get the idea of Christ’s “real presence” in, with, and under the bread and wine, but you’ve

been communing so long, you're afraid to ask. Maybe you're new to the Church or new to Lutheranism and don't understand why I'm wearing this white robe or why Pastor Alan has that green scarf around his neck. You may be ashamed to ask questions at church – but these are good questions! It's good to ask them.

I think sometimes people assume that church is where we go to find all the answers, but if that's the case, I've clearly missed them in my 28 years in church. To me, church is a space to engage with each other in deep and challenging questions of faith, doubt, and the mysteries of life. I think questions are what define us as people of faith.

And that's the great thing about faith – it's not dependent on one's knowledge of doctrine or scripture, but the realization and exploration of what you don't know. You don't have to explain the Nicene Creed or recite the books of the Bible to be a faithful Christian. There's no level of knowledge that will gain you God's favor. Faith is a journey into a deeper understanding of the knowledge that God loves you – that God has called you into this faith journey.

Siblings in Christ, I don't know all the answers to your questions of faith, or mine for that matter. But what I do know is that God has called us to a life-long journey of faith and questioning that we get to travel together. We have the opportunity to explore huge questions together. And I know that no matter how deep our questions, God's love for us will always be deeper. No matter how gigantic our questions, God's compassion will always be greater. May God inspire us and give us the courage to keep asking questions. And may the peace of God that surpasses all of our human understandings keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.