

“Living with Questions” / Mark 9:30-37 / 23 September 2012

Ah, the summer can only last so long! Even the brightest day begins to wane eventually. Jesus started off so strong, but with time, the good religious folks began to find him...irritating. And here, in Mark nine, his golden days of fame and influence in Galilee begin the long downward trek toward a shorter, darker time in Jerusalem. And Jesus starts to get a little gloomy. He says that he must eventually die. And the disciples don't understand it, but they're afraid to ask him what he means. I honestly believe that Jesus would have welcomed their questions. Most people do welcome a few concerned questions when they're feeling dispirited. But Jesus' friends were afraid to ask.

I admit that I'm sometimes afraid to ask pertinent questions. Have you ever taken your car to the mechanic and listened, glassy-eyed, as he explained to you what was wrong with it? Have you ever bobbed your head knowingly, pretending to understand the mechanic's words because you have a feeling that—especially if you're a man—you're expected to know about this kind of thing? I used to think I was the only adult male who did that. But I read recently that most men under 40 in America today never really learned how to fix cars. They'll pretend they know things they don't. But you can't really fake a car repair; believe me, I've tried.

So a guy swallows his pride and takes the car to the mechanic, just a little bit embarrassed, because he's supposed to know this stuff. And the guy throws as many technical automotive terms at the mechanic as he can. You know, just to save face, just to make it look like he knows something. He might even say something completely untrue like, “Man, I'm just too busy to take care of this problem. See, it makes a kind of a knocking noise whenever it's idling at stoplights.” Or whatever. And then the mechanic lifts the hood and points to some greasy little engine part, and he says, “Now see, here's your problem. Your watsabajiggle is all worn out.” And the modern American man stands there nodding, as if he understands. And he manages to say something like, “I thought that was the problem!” Or else the mechanic opens the hood, then looks at the guy in shock and asks, “When was the last time you changed your lug-wash-winkles?” And the poor guy gets a knowing look on his face, and he says, “Wow. It's been a while. I just don't have the time.” I'm sure mechanics have learned to play along with the posing and posturing on the part of their embarrassed customers. “Yeah, the lug-wash-winkles. I meant to change those before Christmas, but I got so busy.” Of course, there's also the fear that that a dishonest mechanic might exploit an ignorant customer, so we're tempted to try to hide our ignorance. I wonder what I might learn from my mechanic if I actually worked up the nerve to ask him what he's talking about. Once I asked my father why he never taught me how to flush a radiator or put on new brake pads, and he told me it was because I never asked. The fact is, he didn't know how to do those things either.

There's a lot we don't know because we never ask. And there's a lot we don't ask because we think we're supposed to know already. And sometimes we don't ask because we don't care. And sometimes we don't ask because the moment isn't right. And there are many other reasons that we keep our questions to ourselves. But the life of faith is forever dealing with questions, big questions. Church is one of the few places in modern life where you can hear people pondering over the great, usually unspoken riddles of life. Some people want a faith that supplies nothing but strong, solid answers. And for that reason, they dare not ask the hard questions. They, like those disciples, are afraid to ask.

A real key to the life of faith is asking the questions that need to be asked, then having the maturity—sometimes—to live with an absence of answers.

It's a strange time in the life of Jesus. He's gone from complete obscurity to a life of fame among the folks out there in the back of beyond. People are flocking to him from all quarters, so much so that he has taken to sneaking around the countryside, keeping off the main roads, avoiding the villages and towns. Jesus and his disciples are off-roading it, cutting through fields and hills. And yet, the Jesus movement just keeps growing and growing. He's made powerful people angry, but that's okay because he's not primarily interested in the powerful. His heart goes out to the downtrodden, trying to scratch a living off the land, or upon the sea: the bent, and the broken, the dispossessed and the marginal. Jesus doesn't need to go into the cities to find a lonely old woman stooped with age, an angry man forced off his ancestral land, a little girl or boy caught in poverty's dehumanizing cycle of neglect and child labor. And to boot, his offensive message has always been, "You, you the outcasts of our world, you are more precious than all the sparrows that the priests tell you to sacrifice on their altars."

In all of it, Jesus feels the hatred of powerful enemies closing in on him. And as he and his fugitive band are breaking camp to move off into the hills, Jesus tells his disciples something they really ought to understand. "You know," Jesus says, "we're hiding out for now. But the time is coming when there will be no place left for me to hide. Eventually they'll get me, but I promise, that won't be the end of the story." This is new information for those idealistic disciples. You would expect them to have a few questions on the subject. In fact, I think I might have a number of questions for anyone who claimed that he was going to die and rise again, questions like, "Are you alright? Do you think you ought to lie down? Do you need some water?" Mental illness is no laughing matter, and someone might well have slipped Jesus a brochure with 1-800 number for people who are experiencing symptoms. A persecution complex. Delusions of grandeur. With the advantage of retrospect, you and I know that Jesus was not going crazy. And yet, you would think that his friends might have plenty of questions for him at this point, but they do not. They remain silent in the face of his mounting stress.

Well, sometimes we're just afraid to ask the questions. Perhaps you know what it is to have a strong person, a constant person in your life, a person whose strength you depend upon, your "rock." We get so many personal needs met by that person's strength that we can't really afford to see him or her in a state of crisis. That person's weakness frightens us. And so, it's easier to pretend that everything is okay, easier by far not to ask any questions. We've also got constant places in our lives, and their changelessness makes us feel safe. It scares us if they fall into disrepair. It's the sad lot of human beings to build our attachments to the concrete nouns in our lives, persons, places, things. We've got people and places that make us feel safe, but most of all we've got principles. Each of us cherishes beliefs that give our life meaning and direction. We can't challenge those beliefs because they give us a handle on life. We're afraid to ask questions about those beliefs, lest they fail the test of scrutiny. And so it can be scary when life throws us a curveball and we end up asking questions...of our faith.

When was the last time you found yourself asking scary questions of your faith? When was the last time you asked a question whose answer you knew you weren't going to like? Have you ever poked around in the dark corners of your faith and asked the difficult questions about life, and death, and suffering, and guilt? What about injustice?

What about the future? What about an afterlife? Maybe you've never asked those hard questions. Maybe you've been asking them for a while now, and receiving no answers. But people of faith almost always approach those questions with fear, thinking that it's better not to tug at some threads, fearing that their faith—which they love—might just come tumbling down like a house of cards. But a big part of faith is having the courage to ask the questions. Another big part is having the courage to live with those questions in the absence of answers. But either way, we can't ignore the questions.

If you could ask God any question at all and be guaranteed an answer, what would your question be? Personally, I'd have a hard time limiting it to just one question. And though I hate to be predictable, I think many of us might ask, "So, God, if you've got it all under control, why does it sometimes seem like we're on our own down here?" Many would ask, "Could you just let me see the person behind the curtain, just once, then I'll never ask for anything more? No, let me see the guy behind the curtain, then I'll turn away contented, assured of the fact that it's all under control, and come what will, it's all going to be okay in the end." Do you think God would be offended by that question? Do you think it would hurt God's feelings, that it would make the asker an infidel? I think not. I think that question has been around so long, and God has heard it so many times that it's okay to ask it again. But most our real life questions don't come from a place of lofty thinking. They come instead from our own experiences of life. Some would ask, "What could life have been if I hadn't passed up that golden opportunity years ago? Why did my loved one have to die so young? How can you ever forgive me when I can't forgive myself?" What would your question be, really? There comes a point in life—perhaps after the death of a much-loved person, or the death of a dream, or perhaps the end of an important relationship; there comes a point perhaps on an unexpected occasion when the evening news brings unaccustomed tears to your eyes—there comes a point when the questions gang up on you. If it hasn't happened yet, then it will someday. When that time comes, you can muster the courage to stand and face those questions, or you can do like those disciples and follow your fear, hiding from the questions.

A zealous Irish priest walked into a pub in County Cork, and he announced, "Everyone who wants to go to heaven, leave your drink and go line up by the door!" While everyone else rushed to get in line, Ian O'Donnell stayed at the bar and downed another shot of whisky. The priest approached him and said, "Now, Ian, I'm aware that your father was a drunkard, and his father before him, but do you really mean to tell me that you don't want to go to heaven when you die?" Ian was surprised. "Oh, when I die! Of course I want to go to heaven when I die, father. But from the way you talked, it sounded like you were getting a group together to go right now." I don't think it serves the world well when churches talk with too much certainty about things that nobody knows for sure. People often assume that the church doesn't respect or even understand their questions, their doubts, their uncertainties. But, oh the beauty of a faith that honors people's questions and refuses to hide from them! Oh the beauty of a faith that finds God as much in the great questions of life as in the several answers. Small indeed is the God I can fully understand. There is wonder, and awe, and majesty in a God who is both Friend and Mystery.

One of my nephews has the middle name "Finley." It's a historic name in this region, going back to colonial times, and to a certain wily Presbyterian pastor/politician who helped to settle Western Pennsylvania. John Huston Finley—great grandson of that

frontier pastor—once said, “Maturity is the capacity to endure uncertainty.” It’s true. When we’re very young, we need to see the world in the simplest terms possible: the good and the bad, the wrong and the right, black and white. It’s only as we gain some experience in the world that we come to realize that most things aren’t quite that simple. Sometimes “heroes” have mixed motives. Sometimes a villain stops to hold the door for a person in a wheelchair. Sometimes the cold, hard truths that got us through our early years prove inadequate to our declining years. And age teaches us these things not only because others disappoint us, but also because we end up disappointing ourselves. We sense our own divided loyalties, our own half-truths, our own participation in the sufferings of this world. And so, maturity teaches us a hard truth that youth could never, never accept. It teaches us that sometimes “I don’t know” is the appropriate answer to life’s hard questions. “Maturity is the capacity to endure uncertainty.”

Faith is always beset with questions; we do not need to fear them. We need to embrace them, and to ask them boldly. You may not get the answer you want. You may not get any answer at all. But faith, by definition, is not certainty. It’s faith. I believe that a day is coming for all of us when, if our questions are not finally answered, at least they will cease to matter. The end of our story is joy. It’s the fulfillment of all our unreached potential; it’s the redemption of all our many losses; it’s the realization of all our best dreams for ourselves and for our world. I believe that the Mystery that enfolds us from cradle to grave never abandons us to our uncertainties, but that we ourselves are a part of that great Mystery, and that it is infinitely good. If God is Mystery, and God is good, then our questions can only deepen our connection to all that is true, all that is beautiful, all that is God. But until that day, your faith was built to endure, to adapt, to grow; it was made to bear you through a lifetime of joys and sorrows, gains and losses, hopes and fears. Until that day, don’t be afraid to ask your questions. Amen.