

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

Rev. Dr. Bart Roush

January 29, 2023

Matthew 7:7–12, Micah 6:8

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God’s Spirit.

Creative, imaginative God, gives us eyes to see, ears to hear, hearts that are open, hands that are willing. Give us the curiosity and wonder of children. Give us the ability to see the ordinary from a different point of view; to savor new insights; to welcome new perspectives. Startle and surprise us. Amen.

Micah 6:8

God has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?

Matthew 7:7-12

“Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him! “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

From the time we are babies, we are curious about the world around us. I imagine a barrage of questions going through an infant's mind even before they can articulate them. What are you? Do you like me? Why are you different? Whether it is inanimate objects or other human beings, we are exploring the world around us, inquisitive about what all of these external things are and what they mean.

When kids get a little older, all of those questions that were in their brains begin to be verbalized. Often in the form of why? Why is the sky blue? Why aren't there more dinosaurs? Why are there so many languages? Why does it rain? Why do I have to go to school? Why can't I run around without pants? Why do people get sick? Why do you sometimes cry when you are happy? Why do I have to invite them to my party? Why do I need to eat that?

I told you last summer that when I was growing up, I was not so much a "why" kid as I was a "what if?" kid. I was always wondering about possibilities.

What if you could live for 200 years?

What if you could be any animal you wanted?

What if we won a million dollars?

What if you never had to sleep?

What if cats could swim underwater?

What if you could time travel?

I was exhausting to live with...

A former CEO of Google, once said, “We run this company on questions, not answers.” Questions are the best way to gain deeper insights and develop more innovative solutions, imagine possibilities.

Children learn by asking questions. Students learn by asking questions. It is the simplest and most effective way of learning. Eventually our questions broaden from why and what if, to more complex queries: How? Who? For whom? But what about?

In 2016, during a commencement address, James Ryan, who was the Dean of the Harvard Business School of Education stated that one of the hardest and best things to learn in life was to ask good questions.ⁱ

Dean Ryan gave graduates five questions that he believed were five essential questions. These are: “Wait, what?” “I wonder...” “Couldn’t we at least...” “How can I help?” and “What really matters?”

Ryan says, “Wait, what” is at the root of all understanding. “I wonder” is at the heart of all curiosity. “Couldn’t we at least” is the beginning of all progress. “How can I help” is at the base of all good relationships. And “what really matters” gets you to the heart of life. If you ask these questions regularly, especially the last one, “what really matters?” you will be in a great position to answer the bonus question, which is, at the end of the day, the most important question you’ll ever face.

The bonus question comes from a poem by Raymond Carver, and it is, “And did you get what you wanted out of life, even so?”

“The “even so” part of this, to me, captures perfectly the recognition of the pain and disappointment that inevitably make up a full life, but also the hope that life, even so, offers the possibility of joy and contentment.”ⁱⁱ

If you ask good questions, like “Wait, what?” “I wonder...” “Couldn’t we at least...” “How can I help?” and “What really matters?”, Ryan

contends that even so, even with all of the ups and downs of life, one will have a full life.

All of this makes sense to me as a kid, and adult, who loves to ask questions. I believe some people think that asking questions, particularly asking questions about God, might be out of bounds. Or maybe they think it makes them look weak, ignorant or unsure. They like to give the impression that they are decisive and in command of the relevant issues. They fear that asking questions might introduce uncertainty or show them in a poor light. In fact, I believe, asking questions is a sign of strength and intelligence, not a sign of weakness or uncertainty.

I know for sure that God can handle the questions. And, I think God, in fact, asks us to be curious, to seek, to ask, to search. Questions are sacred. Judaism is a religion that not only permits questions but encourages them. This is the tradition in which Jesus was raised. This is the tradition in which Christianity has its beginnings. We ask questions because we believe.

One of the values that is demonstrated at Oak Grove that we affirmed through the discernment process was the value of Humble Curiosity. It's defined this way:

Humble Curiosity

We are never finished. We practice a faith that seeks understanding and our learning is never complete. We ask questions and curiosity is encouraged.

We also recognize that we make mistakes and that we might be wrong. Because of this understanding, we are open to new people, new ideas, and nudging from the Holy Spirit.

The motto “faith seeking understanding” is considered one of the classical definitions of theology. “Faith seeking understanding” means that faith in God revealed in Jesus Christ prompts a questioning search for deeper understanding. The exact phrase “faith seeking understanding” was introduced by Anselm of Canterbury, a monk, theologian, and Archbishop of Canterbury all the way back in 1033–1109.

Scripture promotes the idea of faith seeking understanding. Jesus taught that the greatest commandment adjures us to love the Lord with all our *minds* (Matthew 22:37). Speaking to the disciples in one of His post-resurrection appearances, Jesus “opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures” (Luke 24:45).

We hear in our scriptures from today the call to search and ask and knock. But I get this can be difficult also, our experience contradicts these promises in scripture.

So often we have asked, we have pleaded, we have prayed, and not received; we have searched and not found. Despite our most fervent prayers for their health and safety, we have lost loved ones to cancer, accident, to violence, to Covid. Despite the fervent prayers of people around the world, daily we hear of tragedies of violence, hunger, disease, and natural disasters. Despite the work done to make sure that black lives matter too, another black man is dead when he was just trying to make his way home.

If God is like a loving parent who desires to give what is good and life giving, why do we not always get what we ask for? Why do so many prayers seem to go unanswered?

There is no simple answer to this question, though simple answers are often given. One answer given is that it only *seems* that God has not answered our prayers; God always answers, but sometimes says no.

There are times, perhaps, when that is the case. Yet this explanation cannot account for the many cases in which our requests must surely be in tune with God's will. Scripture bears witness to God's will that everyone has enough to eat and that violence and war cease. Jesus tells us to pray for daily bread and for God's kingdom to come. Yet millions continue to go hungry and wars rage on.

Another explanation we sometimes hear is "everything happens for a reason." God has some purpose in everything that happens. No matter how bad it may seem, it is all part of God's plan to bring about some higher good. I've preached on why I don't like this phrase before.

This is a troubling explanation, to say the least, as it holds that whatever happens must be God's will. One would then have to say that all kinds of evil such as violence, torture, starvation, and premature death, are the will of God.

I do believe God can bring good out of evil and even death. But that is quite a different thing from saying that whatever evil thing happens is God's will.

What do we say then? What do we do with no answer, delayed answers, or bad answers?

We can affirm what Scripture tells us: that God is with us. That God is for us. We can continue to hope, and pray, and work, and trust, and build relationships and connections, we can continue to see understanding, to search for better ways.

We can affirm part of the promise we hear elsewhere in scripture that “in all things God works for good for those who love God, who are called according to God’s purpose” (Romans 8:28), and trust that nothing can separate us from God’s love.

We can keep asking good questions. We can affirm that it is ok to ask questions. We can do away with the idea that faith is about certainty.

The writer Anne Lamott talks about certainty when she writes, “I have a lot of faith. But I am also afraid a lot and have no real certainty about anything. I remembered something Father Tom had told me, that the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. Certainty is missing the point entirely. Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Writer and theologian Brian McLaren has written extensively about the difficulties and problems of a Christian faith centered in a belief system instead of a way of live where one’s belief informs their actions. He has said that this belief-system Christianity has a mixed history “in which colonialism, racism, environmental destruction, scapegoating, religious violence, and marginalization are not marginal [and] we have good reason, if not a moral summons, to consider a conversion that places a Christ-like way of life in the center. That way of life is characterized positively by love and a constellation of related words: compassion, nonviolence, shalom, reconciliation, and peacemaking.”^{iv}

That constellation of words ultimately is about a way of life that is directed in loving, compassionate, non-violent ways toward others. At the end of our reading today, Jesus’ encapsulates states the Golden Rule, “In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.”

The process of searching, of questioning is a call to discipleship that envisions ethical and moral interactions. “Those interactions are to be marked by mutuality, love and justice, and not domination and enforced deference typical of many interactions in a hierarchical, competitive society.”^v This Golden Rule is another reiteration and framing of the law and prophets that Jesus says are the greatest, that is, to love God with our whole heart, mind, and soul, and a second like it, to love our neighbors as ourselves. This is to be our orientation in our life of faith. Questions are key to loving ourselves, God, and our neighbors.

To be part of God’s work, to be about helping the world be a better place, requires questions, requires searching, requires a faith seeking understanding. It may require us to ask, “Wait, what?” that spark of a question to learn more. To learn more about our neighbor, to learn more about a particular injustice, to learn more about what someone is struggling with. That moment where we can take a second look and seek to know more.

Or maybe we might ask, “I wonder?” I wonder how Oak Grove could be a better neighbor? I wonder if we really know our neighbors? I wonder why it has to be that way? I wonder what it would look like if...? How do we continue to cultivate that curiosity?

Perhaps we might ask, “Couldn’t we at least try it this way?” Couldn’t we at least invite someone new into this process?” What might be that small first step into something new?

Frequently I have heard someone at Oak Grove ask the question, “How can I help?” We recognize that life cannot be done alone, as to love one another means to offer a helping hand.

Or, sometimes, it is good to stop and ask, “What really matters?” That strikes at the heart of something and helps us align ourselves and our resources on things that give life.

Wait, what?

Why?

What about?

What if?

Who, me?

Why not us?

If not now, then when?

May we never stop asking questions as we strive for God’s kingdom.
Amen.

ⁱ <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2017/04/dean-of-harvard-ed-school-discusses-the-essential-questions-and-right-answers-in-new-book/>

ⁱⁱ <https://leadingwithquestions.com/personal-growth/5-essential-question-in-life-2-2/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Anne Lamott, “Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith.”

^{iv} Brian McLaren, <https://www.patheos.com/topics/future-of-faith-in-america/progressive/a-desirable-future-for-progressive-faith-brian-mclaren-07-29-2015>

^v Warren Carter, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/the-golden-rule/commentary-on-matthew-71-14-24-29>