

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, the Sun, the Moon, the trees, the land, the birds in the air and the fragrant smell of spring bring newness to our lives. Every morning brings us to wake up to the possibilities you place before us, to choose new opportunities, to discern faithfulness, to be your people with the gifts and abilities we have now. For these possibilities, we give you great thanks and lift ourselves to you, that you may hear our hearts and refine us.

Holy One, you know us, for you fashioned us to be incredibly wonderfully made. You fashioned us in your image. You created us to seek, to strive, to understand, to become the best we can be and to know all that we can know. You created us to question. It can be hard to raise questions, God, to learned others or even to you, but we know you created us to question. Guide us to accept the freedom to ask the questions we wonder and give us the strength to accept the answers to our questions, wherever they may lead. Sometimes the answers are difficult, for they push us to places of growth we'd rather not go or to contemplate ideas that we'd rather not think about. But you are the God of life; when we abide in you, we know that we can find fullness and rest, even in the most uncomfortable places in our lives. We pray all these things in the name of Jesus, the one who hears our faithful searching and guides us to new life, the one who taught us to pray together...

## SERMON

Although I don't get to watch it often, I enjoy Jeopardy. When Catherine and I do, it ends up being a competition of who can respond first. It is one of the most unique game shows in that an answer is given, and one needs to respond with a question. It seems backward, but in life, I don't think that this is not necessarily the norm. Sometimes life gives us a situation, and all we are left with is the questions. It can feel shameful to ask

them, but it feels so much better when we do. How did I get here? Why is this happening? Where is God when we most need God? Just like Jeopardy, we find incentive when we ask.

The last two weeks, we've talked about discipleship in the gifts that God gives us for service and how to use them. These are very much "doing" oriented, but this week, we shift to the being. How do we consider the discipleship life? How do we build ourselves up for the tasks of faithful doing? What am I doing right now? We need to question well.

Questioning is vital, but it can be difficult. Traditionally, churches haven't validated the practice of questioning. It's traditionally been a top-down approach, with the pastor saying, "Do what I tell you to do," and that's it. There's no place for the seeker. When we read the scriptures, we have a different example. We see in Jesus a leader with authority who doesn't mind answering questions of true seekers. We need to recognize, to grow into the deepest disciples we can be, that it's OK to question, even the hardest things in our lives. Let's look at the scriptures from the Psalms and John and see how they work today.

The psalms really show what it means to be human, good, bad, and otherwise. We think of the psalms as praiseful, loving songs, but when you look at the whole book, you get a different story. Some of them are harsh, painful, difficult to hear. Psalm 22 is one of them, diving into scary territory. It raises the often-unanswerable questions of existence. It speaks of pain and abandonment. It asks trying questions of God, who has seemed to disappear. It is so wrenching Jesus quotes this psalm when suffering on the cross. What the psalmist shows life can be difficult; we get into places where even God feels far away. In those times, we have to cry out for God. Indeed, let me say that again, we have to cry out for God, even in anger. We can have this mindset that it's downright wrong to question God or ask where God is in our most frightful hour. We get this strange idea that we cannot

question the situation we are in, we cannot be unhappy, but we have to just push down all of our emotions and trust God. We believe that we have to bear down with what we call our faith and say that it will all be OK. That's not necessarily scriptural, as we see here. Let me say it clearly: when we are angry and need to yell out, God is big enough to take it, and loves us no matter what. God knows, as we should, when we push down our emotions like that, we create deeper frustration. As a pastoral caregiver, I recognize our unfortunate tendency to keep squishing down negative emotions. We don't want to deal with disagreeable things, so we go into denial, but the effects are the same as blowing up a balloon too far. The balloon doesn't expand infinitely; at some point, it bursts. We have our own emotional balloons. If we don't occasionally deflate, we will burst. The psalmist gets this at a visceral level, understanding that sometimes the bigger questions of suffering in life need to be directed toward God. The psalmist first encounters this anger and is more faithfully able to come to trust in the end; the balloon is deflated. The 22<sup>nd</sup> Psalm is a journey from questioning to new understanding, and that journey is required to get there.

There are the times, like in Psalm 22, when the questions we raise will have no good answer immediately available. On the other hand, there are times when we have questions that can be answered by those more experienced or learned that can guide us into greater understanding. When we look at Jesus' ministry, there are places where faithful seekers asked hard questions. What did he do? We might think Jesus would answer with, "Oh, great, this again?" or "What a foolish question!" or "Stop Groveling!" He didn't. He responded with an attitude of working with these people, not putting them down. In John 3, a Pharisee, Nicodemus, came to question this Jesus character. Nicodemus asked Jesus many questions, but, as you can see, there was a problem. It wasn't that Nicodemus was

asking too many questions; they talked over one another. Nicodemus may have been hearing but not listening. He took in what Jesus said, but Jesus' teaching was oriented changing his mode of thinking. He was showing him a new world. Nicodemus tried to impose what he already believed on Jesus. While Jesus spoke in metaphor, Nicodemus looked for the literal and missed the mark. Nicodemus' story teaches that we must ask questions AND be willing to go where the answers take us. It's not question for question sake. Nicodemus didn't go where Jesus called, and that's where Jesus reproves him.

That may be the harder part of the two. When we have the courage, it can be easy to ask the questions. The answers from reputable teachers must also be respected, even if we must change our thought process. It can be hard, especially if the answers are super tough. I remember the story of the rich young man in scripture who came to Jesus and asked what he needed to do to earn eternal life. Jesus told him to sell everything and give the money to the poor, but he walked away, not wanting that answer. We must be honest seekers. Even if we get an answer we don't like or have a hard time accepting, we must sit with it to see if there is truth. We mustn't be those who only accept the answer they want or get cranky.

Let's look at one situation. Many of you have met our little guide dog in training. Well, he and I have had a time figuring out how to work together. Last Sunday, we went with about 10 other guide puppies on a monthly outing. It was my first such outing after Catherine had been to several, so I was a bit lost. There were three teachers with us who taught us along the way, yelling out instructions. Here I was with this unruly dog wanting to sniff the other puppies as they went by and always insisting on his own way. This little puppy, the youngest in the group, has a bad reputation. He's in "puppy adolescence," a phase of pushing back against authority. As a result, it was overwhelming with insistent

instructors and an difficult puppy to someone without much training, but I really had no desire to let lack of experience keep me down. I sought to actively be in the lessons and respond whenever there was an issue with their teaching or something I didn't quite understand. I wanted to be on the ball and faithful to the teaching, so I took an active part in the discussion and raised many questions. When this adolescent puppy wouldn't respond to my commands to sit, it wasn't that he didn't hear or he didn't understand me. He was just having his little adolescent fits, and so they told me to give him a tug on his gentle leader. I saw them teaching this and wondered, "Could I be hurting the dog if I do that?" The teachers responded, without me raising the question, "You don't hurt them with the gentle leader. It just reminds them who's in charge." With a tug, he sat down. I had to utilize the teachers, with their best techniques that sometimes went against what we felt, including that tug on the gentle leader. However, most often, we respond with positive reinforcement. When he's doing a good job, he gets kibble and lots of love.

Two lessons immediately come out of the example; we can take the place of myself learning the lesson of Nicodemus, or our little pup, who shows us how not to understand the psalm. First of all, one has to learn the lessons and well before we can be teachers. This was a time for me to learn. I had to utilize the questions that came to mind and fully take in the answers to move toward the faithfulness I needed in this task. In order to be a proper teacher, like Nicodemus, I needed to become humble enough to let the answers flow through me to work with our little student. Nicodemus had trouble learning them, and Jesus therefore questioned his ability to lead.

On the other hand, if we put ourselves in the pup's position, we must do it faithfully. We cannot do so without warning. I don't suggest that God gives us difficult situations in

order that we can once again see “who’s in charge.” God is not tugging our gentle leaders to teach us lessons. God does not send troubles our way so we can learn better to follow God. That’s lazy theology. But God walks with us to find wholeness on the other end if we travel through difficulties. God gives us the freedom and support to move through issues. Our emotions are another factor in working it out. Through questioning, anger, and other emotions, we live through trials to grow in relationship with the one in charge.

What is separating you from becoming the best disciple you can be? Do you need to release the fear and anger in your heart to God so that you may grow closer to God? Do you have the questions and fears of Nicodemus that are stopping you from understanding the tasks and path of discipleship the best you can? All of these things are fair; they are human, and they must be encountered before we can be most fully in tune with God. God created a complex machine in human beings; to fully follow and be the best we can be, we must attune this machine consistently. We have to be in-touch with our minds, our bodies, and our souls. They are interconnected; one affects the rest. We often only think about the last one, our souls, in these walls, but we definitely should not neglect the whole picture.

Our lives are full of questions. There are the questions without answers and questions that spark growth. We need them both to be at our most whole, whether or not there are answers. When there are answers, we must receive them as they are instead of only being willing to accept answers we want. A faithful discipleship requires a life of loving action and faithful contemplation. Through these understandings of what it means to question in the life of discipleship means that we can better connect with who we are as human beings to grow into the best and faithful people we can be in all situations that come our way. Thanks be to God for these gifts and the wisdom to use them! Amen and Amen.