

Ask Me Anything!
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz
Date: October 18, 2015

18:28

“Ask Me Anything!” Pilgrim Church UCC, October 18, 2015, (Psalm 91:9-16) Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Last week those gathered wrote out questions for an Ask Me Anything Sermon. Questions you've been wondering about God, the Church, and theological topics. One of my favorites was, "If there is a God, why have the Yankees won the World Series so often?" I've been asking why God refuses to lift the Cleveland Curse of no championship for the Browns, Indians, or Cavaliers since 1964. So I'll let you know about the Yankees after I get some answers. At any rate, we'll do our best to explore 7 questions you asked.

Question 1: "What is heaven to you, to the church, and how should I think about heaven?"

Heaven is being at home with God, being in God's very heart. It's never mattered to me if that's a spiritual state of being or a physical location. There are two Bible passages that have wonderful descriptions of heaven. In John Chapter 14 Jesus says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?"[1] Jesus' words reflect that we will be with him and that our hearts need not be troubled. At the end of the Book of Revelation, John of Patmos describes a vision of a new heaven and a new earth. "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."[2] God will dwell with us, and we won't be alone.

I've been at the bedside of people who've died, and have had a sense that the person is now beyond us. Yet their life doesn't just get extinguished. After blessing the first patient who died during my shift at the hospital, I was sitting next to him praying and looked up to see the sun rising out the window at the same moment. I knew deep in my heart that this person was now home with God where there will be no more death, mourning, crying, or pain and that's where comfort can be found.

Question 2: "Did Paul really think women should not be preachers or leaders in the Church? If so, doesn't he need some serious attitude adjustments?"

First off, thank you for this sentiment. In the Pastoral Letters of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus one can find verses like: "Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent."[3] Paul didn't write these words. There are 7 undisputed/genuine letters of Paul and 6 disputed letters. The Pastorals (women should be silent, blah blah blah) weren't written by Paul.

Though there are other places where Paul definitely reflects the attitudes of his time and speaks about wives submitting to their husbands for instance. That's in there—Paul was a celibate man (never married) and lived in his historical context. Yet Paul commends Phoebe to the Romans and calls her his patron and a Deacon of the Church—Phoebe is a recognized church leader. Paul praises two married couples for helping spread the Good News and even lists Prisca before her husband Aquila which wasn't supposed to happen. In fact, when Paul thanks and commends good Christians to the Christian community in Rome ten are women and seventeen are men. So it seems that for Paul women as well as men were called by God

to be leaders in the Church.[4] And best Pauline passage for all those who get snarky about women who are preachers or church leaders is Galatians 3:28 "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." Can I get an Amen?

Question 3: "How do I teach my kids about God when I'm not sure what I believe?"

Conscious that I'm not a parent, I phoned a friend for this one in the form of my mother. My mom didn't grow up in the Church and wasn't baptized until she was 25, so one can imagine her shock when God called me to the ministry at age 12. I had a deep relationship with God early on and asked my parents a ton of questions. Their response was usually in the form of I statements. "I think, I feel, I pray, I hope."

"What happens when someone dies?" "I hope that they are now in heaven with God and there's no more pain." "Why do we call today Good Friday, shouldn't it be Bad Friday?" "I think it's because Jesus shows so much love on the cross and we look to his example when we suffer." My parents' responses weren't often in the form of this is how it has to be, it was that we're on a journey of faith and figuring these things out together.

There were also times when I stumped them, and they encouraged me to ask my Sunday School teachers and our minister who happened to live two doors down. Literally, it was sometimes: "I don't know, go ask Jonathan!" And I did. Who gave me my first definition of prayer? Mrs. Baxley in Sunday School who told me, "Prayer is just talking to Jesus, Lauren." When reflecting with my mom she said that the comfort was that she didn't need to be the only one responding to my questions. She had members of the congregation and Church Staff to help raise her children to be Christians. Respond to your children with honesty, model that you're also figuring out your faith, and phone a friend because it takes a congregation to raise a Christian child.

Question 4: "Elaborate the Good Samaritan Story?"

In the Parable of the Good Samaritan found only in Luke's Gospel (Chapter 10) we see Jesus respond to a challenge about how people are acceptable to God. When questioned by a lawyer (who may have been a Pharisee) Jesus says that we must love God with all our hearts, souls, strengths, and minds and our neighbors as ourselves. This is the crux of Christianity—love God completely and love our neighbors as we love ourselves. The lawyer then asks, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus responds with a story.

A Priest, a Levite (a minor religious figure), and a Samaritan encounter a man left for dead on the side of the road after robbers had beaten him up. It's the Samaritan who saves the helpless dying man. Samaritans were foreigners and Samaritans and Jews had a complicated relationship, no love loss there. So the fact that the Samaritan is the hero/the one moved to pity for a person who was an enemy is one of Jesus' most beautiful and difficult teachings. This is Jesus calling us to show forth love to people we may not naturally feel inclined to love.

Question 5: "Why do people/animals need to suffer? (Why are sick babies born, why are sweet children/animals abused, why do we need to watch loved ones struggle with loss and pain?)"

Suffering can lead to a crisis of faith. When people suffer, they sometimes come out transformed having grown and learned, other times they come out bitter or numb or hating God/other people/themselves or believing that there is no God. People and animals suffer because God can't prevent every bad thing from happening no matter how much God wants to. Our God is the God of the sufferers and the God who suffers.

God's love took on the form of weakness. God's power doesn't come in the form of rescuing sick babies and abused children and animals in ways we wish God could. God's power is often disguised in weakness like Jesus Christ showing us that love wins after he suffered on the cross. God's power isn't manipulative because we have free will to use for good or ill and God seeks for us to help relieve one another's suffering and bear one another's burdens. So the best I can answer this question is that God gets suffering because God suffers with us. God is not removed from our suffering. God is present with us as we struggle with loss and pain. And God can't prevent our suffering even as we know God loves us and doesn't want to see God's people or creatures in pain.

Question 6: "Don't all the world's major religions point to the same place? What is that place? Is it in our hearts?"

The five major World Religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) are united in some ethical teachings. Muslims teach, "No one of you is a believer until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself." Christians teach, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Jews teach, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Buddhists teach, "Hurt not others with that which pains yourself." And Hindus teach, "Do nothing to your neighbor which you would not have him do to you." The similarities are striking, right?

There are distinct ways that Christians relate to other World Religions which we discussed extensively in the Sermon Series on World Religions. Those ways are Exclusivist, Inclusivist, Pluralist, and Postliberal. Not all of these understandings would say that World Religions point to the same place. Though the one that does is the Pluralist Position. Pluralists would argue that we have to be open to the fullness of other religions because all religious paths lead to Ultimate Reality and are true in some sense. When we witness to the Good News, we might say that Jesus is the savior of the world, but not the only savior of the world. The image often used is that the World's Religions are like planets—all in orbit around the truth or God and each faith has its insights into God. All religions orbit the same thing just using different languages, symbols, sacred texts, and rituals.[5] World Religions point to the Divine—God, Ultimate Reality, Love—and it's vital for us to understand as Christians that we are but one path to God.

Question 7: "Why did Jesus preach against divorce? Instead he should preach for thinking a bit before you get married!"

Believe it or not, Jesus preaching against divorce was radical in that Jesus spoke of equality in marriage. When the Pharisees question Jesus on divorce in Mark Chapter 10 Jesus points out that God made humanity and that two become one flesh in marriage. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate. Divorce was a male prerogative at the time and Jesus referenced the Creation Story in Genesis to speak about people being made in the image of God. Jesus sees spouses as partners and not that adultery was always an offense against the husband alone.

His teaching against divorce protected vulnerable women whose husbands could easily cast them aside. And God forbid they didn't have a son who could take them into his household in this patriarchal society. Jesus was bound by his historical context, seeing divorce in terms of men and women (he didn't speak about same-sex relationships at all for instance.) Now if other Christian Clergy were teaching about divorce you may hear a very different Biblical interpretation besides Jesus radically protecting women. But this is one way to understand Jesus' teachings about divorce in their historical context which maybe you haven't heard before.

In the end, thank you for asking such great questions. Hopefully my answers (whether you agree with all of them or not) will help you go deeper as you explore what you believe about

God and the Church and important theological topics. For the persistent search for God produces an authentic relationship with God. Thanks be to God and may it be so with us. Amen.

[1] John 14:2

[2] Revelation 21:3-4.

[3] 1 Timothy 2:11-12.

[4] Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The First Paul: Reclaiming the Radical Visioning Behind the Church's Conservative Icon*, 51-53.

[5] John Hick as quoted by Dr. Benjamin Valentine, *Systematic Theology II*, Andover Newton Theological School, Spring 2008.