

Ask Me Anything 2
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz
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20:00

“Ask Me Anything 2!” Pilgrim Church UCC, January 31, 2016, (Psalm 71:1-6) Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

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. After Diane shuffled the cards and while closing my eyes, I picked 7 to answer. We'll explore the chosen questions you asked this morning.

Question 1: What is the appropriate "Christian" response to those Christians who proclaim ours is the only true faith, that other faith traditions are false, or worse, evil?

We can go with the wisdom of Monty Python and the Holy Grail and just run away! Seriously it's hard to respond to Christian Exclusivism in a loving way. We can heed the guidance of the great Quaker teacher Parker Palmer who says that when the going gets rough, turn to wonder. When you find yourself uncomfortable with someone's perspective, don't allow judgment to set in. Instead, become intrigued. Ask that person for more information, and be open to their experiences. We can learn from each other.

We can ask questions and gently share different scriptural interpretations. Here's how it's gone for me with Christian Exclusivists, Jesus is often cited from the Gospel of John: “Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’”^[1] And that person says, “See! Jesus is Lord and Savior. Christianity is the only true religion!” One can respond with—did you know that the Gospel of John was probably written when Judaism and the Jesus Movement were separating? Do you think that historical context shaped the Gospel? What do you make of Jesus saying that he's the gate and the true vine in John's Gospel—do you literally believe that Jesus was a gate and a vine? Well then why do you literally believe that Jesus is the only way? Do you remember that Jesus was Jewish? Do you think that he would want to condemn everyone from his own religion?

It helps to ask a lot of questions—yes some of these are leading questions. But we can respond to people by meeting them where they are. We can do our best to listen while also explaining respectfully why we don't share those exclusivist views.

Question 2: Why are American evangelicals so involved in the political process?

The reasons American Evangelicals are so involved in the political process are many. Those reasons can include: wanting to have an impact on culture and society, concern over abortion and changing sexual mores, and dissatisfaction with mass media and popular culture. Though the single biggest factor why evangelicals may be involved in the political process is the expansion of the Federal Government after WWII. This expansion led to the feeling that the government is becoming involved in areas that used to be the domain of state and local governments, the family, the individual, and the church.^[2] For further information, please see the political scientists among us after worship!

Question 3: Some Christians believe that every word in the Bible is true. When did this view develop? Why?

Biblical literalism is a more modern view of the Bible for sure. You can begin to trace the roots as a conservative Christian response to the Enlightenment. Humanity had an explosion of discovery and exploration in the 18th Century—reason and the scientific method greatly improved society. Though there are other ways of knowing, and that's where religion will always be there to answer questions of ultimate concern. Religion and science don't need to constantly fight with each other. Biblical literalists felt threatened that religion was seemingly pushed to the sidelines in favor of Enlightenment ways of knowing. In some ways, the belief that every word of the Bible is literally true developed as a response to a perceived threat—the Enlightenment.

Question 4: The Lord's Prayer—what is the difference between "debts" and "trespasses" and why use one over the other?

The Lord's Prayer can be found in Mark, Matthew, Luke, and an ancient text called the Didache—it's one of the most important prayers in Christianity. Mark uses trespasses, Matthew uses debts/debtors, Luke uses sins and debts, and the Didache uses debts. Christian scholar Marcus Borg argues that debts/debtors was likely the original wording.[3]

Trespasses in Greek is *paraptoma* which means a falling away or sin. Yet trespasses more often makes us think of "keep out, no trespassing!" On the other hand, the debts/debtors part of the Lord's Prayer comes directly after "give us this day our daily bread" which helps frame its meaning. If you were poor, your focus was on acquiring enough food for one day at a time. That's still the case for people on the margins—daily bread is about daily food. The great peril in Jesus' day was falling into debt. If you fell into debt, you could lose your land and your family basically became indentured servants. Jesus, being a member of the lower class of society, taught his followers to pray a prayer that focuses on justice. We pray that we have enough food for the day, we pray that if we fall into debt we will be forgiven, and we pray that we would forgive anyone indebted to us. It's amazing to consider how Jesus taught his followers about God's Kingdom on earth through a prayer. Debts/debtors is the most historically accurate translation and captures Jesus' ethical teachings the best.

Question 5: How do we encourage our kids to attend church without punishing them?

My caution to begin is that I'm speaking from my family's experience and I'm not a parent. Encouraging kids to attend church does deal with parenting styles. My upbringing was rather strict; attending church was an expectation. Maureen and I were baptized as infants and our parents took their baptismal vows seriously when they promised to grow with us in the Christian faith and help their children to be faithful members of the Church. Church attendance through Confirmation wasn't negotiable. At the end of Confirmation, the choice was ours to become adult members of the Church or not.

We often heard about their own beliefs. Remember, studies have shown that parents are the most important religious voice in the lives of their children. You don't have to defend God or the Church all the time. But be authentic about your faith journey, your beliefs, and your questions/doubts.

We attended worship almost every Sunday. Church was just part of what we did as a family. Once you get into a routine and church is a priority, it's easier. And it's easier the younger you begin. During Browns season, we'd wear our gear and head up to the game during the last hymn. When my grandparents came to church, we'd often go out to brunch afterwards (and there was no going to the game or brunch if you weren't in worship!) Our youth group was close so I went to church in high school to hang out with my friends—we'd sit together in the balcony and not always pay close attention. Encourage your kids to attend church by authentically speaking about your own faith journey/beliefs/ questions/doubts, make church a

routine and priority, and sometimes do fun things after worship. Call it bribery, but those were my favorite Sundays growing up—church, family, friends, and the Browns.

Eugene Peterson who translated the Bible into modern English in *The Message* wrote about speaking to teenagers who don't want to go to church. Peterson reflects that if you stay away from church at a time in your life when you're questioning everything, there's no way to have conversations with people who've come out the other side and have stuck with Christianity. Take your thoughts and feelings into the sanctuary each Sunday to test them out. Peterson wrote, "Part of my responsibility as a parent is to try to keep you in the flow of experience as long as possible so that you feel as much and face as much as is there and so be equipped to make good, adult decisions." [4] Please know how important parents are in the faith development of children, whether they would ever tell you that or not!

Question 6: Does it really matter if Christ is God or not? Don't we all have some part of God in all of us and did Jesus just feel the presence of God more closely?

It does matter if Christ is God or not. And no matter how you understand the theological concepts of the Incarnation and the Trinity, you're welcome here. Sometimes we've been called Unitarians Considering Christ, though I'm a UCC minister with a fairly High Christology. It matters how we understand the Incarnation (that Jesus is the Second Person of the Trinity/the Word Made Flesh/Emmanuel) because it can inform how we understand God and humanity.

In the words of Nicholas Wolterstorff, a Christian philosopher whose son died in a mountain climbing accident, "God is not only the God of the sufferers but the God who suffers . . . through the prism of my tears, I have seen a suffering God." [5] The belief that God suffers, a claim that we see most clearly when we fix our eyes on the cross, makes Christianity unique. It shows us the depths God is willing to go to be radically with humanity. Of all World Religions, Christianity has one of the most personalized and humanized views of Divinity because of our trust that Jesus was God incarnate. Marcus Borg explains that "Christians throughout the centuries have continued to experience Jesus as a living spiritual reality, a figure of the present, not simply a memory from the past." [6] Our trust that Jesus is the Christ is important.

We can understand Jesus as someone who was able to tap into God in a profound way, or we can understand Jesus as the Second Person of the Trinity, and on and on. We're allowed to have diversity of belief especially in a denomination like ours. But Christians trusting that because Jesus suffered, God suffers with us and Christians continuing to experience Jesus as a living spiritual reality does make Christianity special and unique as a religion. Even while knowing that the divine spark is within all of us and Christianity isn't the only way to get to God (in my mind anyway.)

Question 7: Does scripture address this: deepening faith as you become more aware of mortality?

There are many Bible passages that deal with mortality. Two stories that show deepening faith in the face of mortality are Job's story and Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. The Book of Job is the story of an innocent man who suffers—his children die, he loses his property, and then he gets deathly ill. In the midst of all this, Job declares: "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at last will stand upon the earth; and after my body has wasted away, then without my flesh I shall see God." [7] Job and God have a confrontation in the whirlwind and Job comes out of this with deeper faith and an understanding that God's ways will always be mysterious to us mere mortals. Job is known for his deep faith in the face of suffering and confronting his own mortality.

Jesus in the Garden prays to God before he's about to die. In Luke's version, an Angel appears and gives him strength—in his anguish he prays more earnestly and his sweat becomes like drops of blood.[8] In Matthew's version, Jesus prays, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want." [9] Jesus was a real person, and realizing that the end was near probably did pray to God as so many people of faith do to this day. That's another biblical example of deepening faith and trust in God in the face of mortality.

In the end, thank you once again for asking such great questions. There's only time to answer 7 though the rest were just as compelling as the ones we heard this morning. Hopefully my answers (whether you agree with all of them or not) will help us continue to explore what we really believe about God and the Church and theological topics. For in the United Church of Christ we are always encouraged to bring our questions as we come to worship to be part of something greater than ourselves. Thanks be to God and may it be so with us. Amen.

[1] John 14:6.

[2] Larry Eskridge, "Evangelicals and Politics," <http://www.wheaton.edu/ISAE/Defining-Evangelicalism/Politics>

[3] Marcus Borg, *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power--And How They Can Be Restored*, 228.

[4] Eugene Peterson as quoted by Brad M. Griffen, "What Should I Do When My Kids Says, 'I'm Not Going to Church'?" <http://fulleryouthinstitute.org/blog/im-not-going-to-church>

[5] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 81.

[6] Marcus Borg and N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions*, 135.

[7] Job 19: 25-26, adapted.

[8] Luke 22:43-44.

[9] Matthew 26:39.