



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT
LISTENING ALONGSIDE: ECHOING CHRIST

Listen for the Questions
I Samuel 16:1-13; John 9:1-41

One of my happy childhood memories is of summer days when my father would come home for lunch. We would usually enjoy a sandwich (often with tomatoes from his garden) and, after lunch, he would always sit down to rest a bit, which usually meant, for him, a fifteen-to-twenty minute nap. But first, we would watch *Jeopardy!* which, back in those days, was hosted by a fellow named Art Fleming.

Today *Jeopardy!* is a mainstay for many folks Monday through Friday evenings. It is interesting and informative trivia at its best. The thing which makes it unique among all of the game shows on TV is its method. Instead of contestants answering questions on a variety of topics, players on *Jeopardy!* are given the answers and they have to come up with the correct question. It is obviously a good formula for the current version of *Jeopardy!* is now in its 33rd year.

Questions are important. Our tendency, I think, is to focus on answers. That is how most of us prepared for tests in school. Unless we answer the question that is asked, however, we will not provide the right answer. A good teacher will ask probing questions that make you think rather than regurgitate an answer. Good questions guide our thinking. Good questions lead us in life.

Earlier we heard one of the stories of how David came to be tapped to be the King of Israel. There was a problem in Israel because Saul, the first king, was no longer fit to rule. God assigned his prophet Samuel to anoint the king on his behalf, but Samuel was dragging his feet on choosing a new monarch. God asked him a question: "How long will you grieve over Saul?" That question was not only a recognition of Samuel's disappointment in his king, but also a prod to do his job. In other words, God said, "I know you anointed Saul to be king, but he is not working out and you know it. It is past time to choose a new king. Get up and get going!" God sent Samuel to Bethlehem where he had chosen a successor from the family of Jesse. Samuel responded, "How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me." Samuel's fear was holding him back, but God offered assurance: Go to

Bethlehem and offer a sacrifice. Worship with the people and have a revival—and be sure to invite Jesse and his sons.

When Samuel arrived at Bethlehem, his presence caused a stir because it was feared that he might be bringing judgment from the king. “Do you come peaceably?” the elders asked. Everything was just fine until someone from the government showed up with a heifer in tow. Something was going up in smoke, and they hoped it was the cow!

The sacrifice was arranged and, when Jesse and his boys arrived, Samuel was excited because they were all tall, strong, good-looking fellows. As each one was presented to Samuel, however, God whispered that he was not his choice. Frustrated, Samuel asked another, important question, “Are all your sons here?” Had he not asked, he would have gone home disappointed and God would not have been served. Asking that question opened the door for David the shepherd boy to be summoned from the pasture. He came, God affirmed that he was the chosen one, and the rest of the story is history. Good questions frame this story and help us to understand all that is going on behind the scenes.

What you ask and how you ask it can make all the difference. If you have been watching any of the Senate hearings on the confirmation of Judge Gorsuch, you have noticed that where someone sits at the committee desk determines the questions he or she asks. Democrats and Republicans ask different kinds of questions and phrase them purposefully in order to get the answers that they want to hear; yet, a politically motivated question will not always lead you to the truth. It is important that we ask questions that seek truth.

The story of Jesus healing the man born blind is full of questions. It is a longer story than most, but listen carefully and pay attention to the questions, who asks them, and why.

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and

spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight." They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet." The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him." So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner." He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of

Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.” The man answered, “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” They answered him, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out.

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” He answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” He said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped him.

Jesus said, “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.” Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains. John 9:1-41

This wonderful story, like the anointing of David, begins with a question. As they walked along the road, Jesus and his disciples saw a blind man. In synagogue they had learned that human suffering is God’s punishment for sin. Perhaps they were trying to score points with Jesus by engaging him in a theological debate, but the question took them to a place they never expected to go. Jesus told them that physical disability is not a result of sin; instead, it is an opportunity for God to exercise grace. Their question, while not really seeking the truth, allowed Jesus to expand their understanding of God and his ways.

Other questions in the story reveal much about the people involved. The man’s neighbors asked, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” They have known this fellow all of his life and do not recognize him. They do not even call his name but refer to him as “the man.” They are blind in their compassion for their neighbor.

Not surprising, the Pharisees are resistant to the truth that stands right in front of them. These religious leaders who would quickly remind people of

the parting of the Red Sea that enabled their ancestor's escape from Egypt, the miracles of manna and water in the desert, the protection God provided to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed'nego in the fiery furnace and to Daniel in the lion's den, as well as the oil lamp that burned for eight days and nights when the temple was purified and sanctified again, refused to believe that a man received his sight because it was Jesus who had healed him. They asked, "How can a sinner perform such signs?", condemning the act of mercy because it occurred on the sabbath. Their questions tell us a lot about their faith. Even the man's parents buckle under the severe questioning of the Pharisees. Afraid of being kicked out of the synagogue, they claim ignorance of the whole affair and, rather than support their son, leave him to deal with the powers-that-be on his own.

Only Jesus asked the important straightforward question, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" The newly-healed man asked, "And who is he, sir? Tell me so that I may believe in him." "You are looking at him," answered Jesus. "Lord, I believe," confessed the man. And we are told he worshiped Jesus.

The story is about blindness, but not really about physical blindness. It is about spiritual sight and blindness of the heart. The questions that are asked help us to determine who can see and who cannot. They also lead us to new places of understanding about sin and God's grace in the world.

What questions do you hear? What questions do you ask? If you are like I am, the questions you whisper in the dark of night when your head cannot find a comfortable spot on the pillow are very different from the ones that you ask in the light of day when other people are in earshot. When we allow ourselves to be honest with God, all kinds of questions rise to the surface. I vividly remember driving back to college on a dark, winter's Sunday evening, listening to the radio. There was a program on about the Vietnam War, a conflict in which some of you fought. It was not a program that condemned the government or railed against the military. It was a former soldier talking about his experience and the horrors of war.

As I drove through the night and listened, I thought about prayers I had offered as a child during that war. I thought about the thousands of people on both sides of the conflict who had died or been wounded with no good outcome. I wondered why God allowed such fighting, why prayers for peace went unanswered, and why we continue to find ways to wage war when the entire world has seen its horrific results. I became angry and agitated and,

in the darkness of Highway 9 in Upstate South Carolina, I asked God some tough questions. I actually spoke a few of them out loud because I needed some answers. Even more, I needed to ask the questions and to realize that no matter what I asked God or in what tone, God was not going to ignore me or turn me out like the Pharisees had turned out the man who had been born blind but was given the ability to see.

There are a lot of questions in the story of God and his people. When God called Moses from the burning bush to set his people free, Moses asked, "Who, me?" and began to discover what God could do with a fugitive murderer who stuttered. When Isaiah heard God ask who would go to speak truth and hope to his people, he answered and said, "Here am I, send me." Joseph and Mary had serious questions about their role as parents of the Messiah, but allowed God to guide them into that sacred role. The Magi traveled to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is this child born to be king of the Jews?" Jesus himself asked many questions and he answered some very difficult questions: Is it lawful to heal on the sabbath? What must I do to inherit eternal life? Who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar? What is the greatest commandment in the law? Who is my neighbor? Each time Jesus answered a question, but did so in a way that caused people to dig deeper into their faith. The questions helped people to grow.

As I have told you before, when I lead our Discipleship classes, I always talk with our young people about the questions they have about faith. They are naturally inquisitive and ask good questions about everything, and I do not want to squelch their curiosity about their faith. So I encourage questions and remind them that if they stop asking questions, they will stop growing in their faith. Questions are to faith what sunlight and water are to plants. They spur growth.

What are your questions? What questions do you hear other people asking? What is it that you want to know? Are you wondering what it really means to be a neighbor to someone who is quite different from you? Have you been thinking about all of the people in the world who now have no place to call home and our obligation toward them? Do you think about the place of Christianity in a world where missionaries of other religions are coming to us? Do you ponder tough questions about life and death, equality and justice, faith and how we are to live in the world? If so, do not ignore the questions. Instead, pay attention to them. Listen to them. Think about them. You can learn a great deal about the person who is asking and you can learn a great

deal about God. Turn to scripture and prayer and fellow Christians as you look for answers. You may not always find the answers you want, and that is okay. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote to a young friend,

. . . I would like to beg you dear Sir, as well as I can, to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.¹

Sometimes we have to live the questions until God can prepare us to discover the answers. Know this: the questions we have are God's gift to us for they provide opportunities to act, to learn, to challenge old assumptions, to claim new understanding, or simply to sit for a while and ponder the wonderful mystery of God and God's love for us. Listen to the questions and discover that God is listening with you. Amen.

¹Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, 1903.

March 26, 2017

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

In those moments when we are willing to be honest with ourselves as well as with one another, O God, we admit that we do not always know your voice. Sadly, we too often mistake the voices of authority, the voices of our dearest pleasures, even the voice that we hear inside our heads as your voice. We speak our wants, our desires, and our needs but we seldom take the time to listen. Forgive us, O God, and open our ears and our hearts.

Help us to hear the kind voices of friends and strangers who want nothing of us other than our good fortune. Help us to hear the loving voices of family and friends who love us and pray for us. Help us to hear the voices all around us which ask for help, for comfort, for understanding, and for prayer. Help us to listen to your world so that we might hear you speak.

Open our ears as we seek guidance for choices we should make. Speak to us through parents and children and trusted friends. Help us to pay attention to clear signals to move ahead as well as to the alarms that signal warning and the need to choose a different path.

Open our hearts to hear the whispers of your Spirit which remind us of the commands to love you and one another. Help us to hear the urging to love ourselves as well. Teach us to know how to love in ways that benefit the other person and enable us to listen to what they tell us about what they need.

Help us, we pray, to learn to distinguish your voice among all of the voices that compete for our attention. Turn us to scripture and tradition and to one another to learn the uniqueness of your voice and the way of your love. Guide us as we learn to distinguish truth from lies and good news from fake news. Teach us to hear your voice, O God, and then to follow; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.