

Proper 20 B
Mark 9:30-37
September 19, 2021

“Living the Questions”
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

[Jesus and the disciples] went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, ‘The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.’ But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, ‘What were you arguing about on the way?’ But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, ‘Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.’ Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.’

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Nobel laureate in physics, Dr. Isidor Rabi, was once asked why he became a scientist instead of a doctor, lawyer, or businessman, like other immigrant kids in his neighborhood. His answer was profound:

My mother made me a scientist without ever intending it. Every other Jewish mother in Brooklyn would ask her child after school: ‘So? Did you learn anything today?’ But not my mother. She always asked me a different question. ‘Izzy,’ she would say, ‘did you ask a

good question today?’ That difference - asking good questions - made me become a scientist!¹

I’ll never forget the day that my own father asked my brother, four years my junior, what he learned in kindergarten. My brother responded flatly, “Sex.” We were not what you’d call a progressive family and there’s no doubt my father would’ve thought kindergarten far too young for such a conversation. “What do you mean?” he asked my brother. “Today we learned about sex,” he responded. Concerned, dad asked, “what did you learn about sex?” My brother answered cheerfully, “You know: one, two, three, four, five, sex.”

While adults may curiously ask children what they learned or what question they asked, most of us expect children to be inquisitive—to ask lots of questions. In fact, in a fairly recent British study of 1500 households, researchers determined that kids ask an average of 73 questions per day. For young parents or expecting parents among us this morning, you’ll be pleased to know that the study also revealed that a child’s inquisitive nature peaks at age four—hopefully that’s good news.

The researchers compiled a list of the top ten most challenging questions children typically ask and I thought you might be entertained, or impressed, to hear them.

1. Why do people die?
2. Where did I come from?
3. What is God?
4. How was I made?
5. What does “we can’t afford it” mean?
6. Is Father Christmas Real?
7. Why do I have to go to school?
8. When you die who will I live with?

¹ Donald Sheff. “Izzy, Did You Ask a Good Question Today?” The New York Times, January 19, 1988, Section A, Page 26.

9. Why is the sky blue?

10. Why can't I stay up as late as you?²

Children are naturally curious about the world around them. They have questions and they want answers. Jesus' disciples weren't so different.

In the reading I shared a few moments ago from Mark's gospel, Jesus was teaching and, as per usual, the disciples didn't understand what he was saying. However, the author tells us that they "were afraid to ask him." And therein lies one of the big differences between children and adults. For children, the world is a secret garden to be explored, full of mysteries to be unlocked. They don't pretend to have all the answers and their imaginations fill in the gaps in their knowledge. They're not afraid to ask questions and they genuinely believe that the adults in their lives have the answers.

For adults, on the other hand, the world can be a scary place because we know too much to explore. We're often too afraid to ask questions about its mysteries for fear of looking foolish. And we're often impatient with the children who ask too much and fearful for children who explore too much. We know better. They don't. Simple. Except that even as adults, we still have questions—the disciples had questions—but, like them, we can be afraid to ask.

Famed marine biologist Sylvia Earle once said:

The best scientists and explorers have the attributes of kids! They ask questions and have a sense of wonder. They have curiosity. Who, what, where, why, when and how!' They never stop asking questions, and I never stop asking questions, just like a five-year-old.

² Emma Elsworthy. "Kids ask a staggering 73 questions every day..." Swnsdigital.com, December 4, 2017, <https://swnsdigital.com/2017/12/kids-ask-a-staggering-73-questions-every-day-half-of-which-mums-and-dads-struggle-to-answer/>.

But, so many of us do stop asking the questions, at least out loud. The Jesus of Mark's gospel knew that there was something his friends weren't asking so he "took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'" Later in Mark's gospel, Jesus says, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

Children in Jesus' time had little value. Of course, their parents loved them, but infant mortality rates were very high and of the babies that survived infancy, less than half would reach adulthood. Theologians and commentators tell us that in naming children the inheritors of the realm of heaven, Jesus was flipping conventional wisdom on its head and bestowing value where society did not—on children. But I don't think that's the only reason Jesus had for lifting up their example. Jesus knew that children aren't afraid of questions, aren't encumbered by conventional wisdom, aren't satisfied to sit still. And when we become like the children—tireless in our quest for knowledge, boundless in our exploration of mystery, fearless in the face of the unknown and the unknowable—then, only then, do we welcome Jesus in our midst.

We at New England Church profess to be "a caring church, for thinking people." We state that:

We do not profess to have all the answers to life's questions, but we believe that by joining together in worship, prayer and social gatherings we can walk with one another through the difficult times and better discern God's ways in our lives.

We claim to value the individual's experience of the divine and create opportunities for children and youth to explore faith and learn from the Christian tradition. We state as goals of our confirmation program:

To create a safe space for young people to honestly and authentically explore faith, doubt, meaning . . . [t]o stretch our students' critical thinking skills so they can face questions and challenges to their own dearly held beliefs without fear or the inability to hear other perspectives, and to prepare them for a faith journey that includes ongoing re-evaluation over time and the flexibility to change when they encounter new information or new inspiration.

And we claim to value good questions over “right answers.” This is who we say we are and who we believe we are called to be.

Today, as we remember Jesus pulling a child in close and telling his friends that “whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me,” let’s commit anew to welcoming the children among us; to nurturing the child-spirit within us; to having more questions than answers; to wondering more and knowing less; to living the questions each and every day, as individuals and as a community of faith.

On the quest for answers, Ranier Maria Rilke once said this:

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.”

May it be so with us. Amen.