

Matthew 28:16-20

More Questions Than Answers

June 11, 2017

Rev. Kelley L. Becker

You are aware that I started out in ministry as a youth minister. Because of this, I am comfortable with questions. A person can't spend much time with children and youth without being prepared to answer questions...in some cases, lots of questions. I've had mixed experiences with young people and questions. Over the years, I was asked insightful, thoughtful questions, some of them such good questions I was embarrassed I hadn't asked them myself! On the other hand, there were questions like this one, which I was asked by a camper at church camp one year, "What kind of animal left this poop here?" This particular camper was obsessed with identifying every dropping he saw.

I was always glad to entertain the curiosity the young people demonstrated. I encouraged them to ask questions of each other so they would really grow to know one another. At dinner time on youth group nights, I would often put questions on the tables, kind of as discussion starters, to encourage them to engage in conversation, rather than just inhaling their food and then creating chaos. The questions covered a wide range of topics, like:

What is your perfect pizza?

Would you be willing to eat a bowl of crickets for \$40,000?

What is the longest you have gone without sleep?

If you could be any age for a week, what age would it be?

What cheers you up?

What is your favorite word? Least favorite?

Questions help us learn about each other. Questions also help us learn about God. I love our children's worship program, Worship and

Wonder. Children hear God's stories told in a way that encourages children of different ages, and with different learning styles, to engage and enjoy. Throughout the story and when the story is finished, the children are invited to *wonder* about the story. They are asked "wondering questions" to help them explore the meaning of the story for them and listen for God's still voice that is found there.

The Worship and Wonder story that includes our passage for today is called Baptism. The story begins, "Once there was someone who said such amazing things and did such wonderful things that people began to follow him. But they didn't know who he was. So, one day they simply asked him. And he said, "I am the Light."

At that, the story teller lights the Christ candle and invites the children to, "Sit peacefully and enjoy the Light." After a moment, the story teller says, "People who love the Light can become one with the Light. This is how your light becomes one with the Light. Watch."

The story teller picks up a small candle and looks at it. Then he or she looks at a child, addresses the child, by name, saying, "Avery, this is your light," and lights the small candle from the Christ candle. The story teller does that for every child in the room, drawing attention to how the light is growing, is in many different places, and the original Light is not smaller for having lit the other candles. "I wonder how so much light could be given away and the Light still be the same?", the storyteller asks.

The storyteller talks a little more about the light and then says, "Now the day you received your light may have been a day when you were very tiny. Or it may be a day when you are grown big. When that happens, something is done in the church called baptism. It is the day you come into the family of families we call the church.

The storyteller asks one final question, "I wonder what it will be like on the day of your baptism?" This is how the curriculum explains

discipleship to our children. Isn't it beautiful? These wondering questions ask the children to consider how they are part of the story and how they are a part of the bigger Christian story. They begin to see that the stories in the Bible are their stories too. Right around Easter, I saw a video of a young boy who was being baptized. If ever there was someone who wanted to be part of God's story, it was this child.

(show video)

What a celebration!

Jesus' command to the disciples was to go into the world and help everyone see their part in God's story and to celebrate their part of the story through baptism "in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Since today is a day of asking questions (and it happens to be Trinity Sunday), what about the trinity anyway? Theologians love to talk about the doctrine of the trinity. Seminarians love to talk about it too. Give a couple of seminarians some beer and mention the trinity and they will be busy for hours. Two of the founders of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) movement, Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell, actively debated their theology of the trinity. In fact, their disagreements over the trinity almost kept the Stone-Campbell movement from becoming the Stone-Campbell movement!

I think it's important for us to understand and remember that questions, uncertainties, and disagreements do not have to threaten unity. We come from a long line of questioners and strong opinions. We come from a tradition that values intellect, debate, and diversity. This is one of the things I love about being a Disciple.

With regard to the trinity in our passage today, understand that when the author says, "baptized in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," this was not an attempt at presenting a fully formed theology of the trinity. His goal was to get the rather tentative followers of Jesus to venture out into the frightening world with the gospel.

Earlier in the passage, remember what happened when the disciples saw Jesus, “When they saw him, they worshiped him; *but some doubted.*” The common translation (in the NRSV, which we generally use in worship) “but some doubted” seems to refer to others, besides the eleven disciples. Another translation (TEV, REB) “but some of them”, implies that some of the eleven worshiped, but others doubted. According to Rev. Dr. Fred Craddock, a third option, found in the New American Bible, best represents the author of Matthew’s theological understanding of the meaning of discipleship, “but they doubted,” referring to all 11 disciples. This same word is used in Matthew 14:31 when Peter walks on water and then sinks, Jesus says to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” Craddock says that little faith, by its nature is not the same as certitude, but holds within it doubts even in the midst of worship. Frankly, it is comforting to me that Jesus was willing to entrust his message to these people who even then didn’t have it all figured out.

It was these beloved doubters whom Jesus told to go baptize in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit...in other words, “You aren’t going to be alone, you have all of this muscle behind you! Go and do it and figure it out as you go...ask questions, mess things up. I am with you!” Telling this little band of confused, disoriented disciples that they were to seek out, go to, teach, and baptize all the people, seemed an impossible task. They had no choice but to rely on God and each other. And today, we, with all of our doubts and questions are called to the same mission.

And the good news is, we don’t have to wait until we get it all figured out. We, too, can learn as we go! Christian doctrine is formulated through life experience, articulated by people like you and me who, under stress and in the face of questions and challenges, sweat it out to live a life that looks foolish to others, caring for people who can never

repay the kindness shared with them, practicing courage and forgiveness, sacrificing and sometimes even suffering...all of it for the wild notion that the Spirit has gathered us into the life of God, the God who is working through all of us to make wholeness in the world.

The problem I see with today's passage, in our 21st century Bartlesville context, is that it is often lived out in ways that make people feel less than, or at the very least, really uncomfortable. For example, this past week, a local faith community had an event in which teenagers were taken to downtown Bartlesville to engage people as they walked from building to building. I became aware of this when a member of one of the Facebook groups I'm part of described her experience. This is what she said:

"So, {insert faith group here} apparently has a camp going on. They've unleashed these campers on downtown Bartlesville to evangelize the heathens of {insert company name here}. Literally three separate groups tried to stop me on my way to a meeting between building A and building B. Maybe I'm old fashioned, but I feel like beating people over the head with teenagers and a Bible isn't exactly the best way to bring people to Christ. It does however, seem like a great way to make 'sheep' out of teenagers sent to spread the 'good news'."

In response to her post, another woman said this, "Yes, they swarmed us while we were there. One girl asked me which church I attend and when I said Unitarian Universalist, she clearly had no idea what I was talking about. Her next question was, 'Do you accept homosexuals?' I said yes, we do. The whole thing was really weird and it seemed like an attack more than a few questions."

This social media thread went on for a long time. Person after person shared their negative experiences related to this particular faith community, and other Christian groups that have made them, or people they love, feel uncomfortable and as if their way of being in the

world is wrong. I did mention to the group that there is a more progressive option in Bartlesville. I've been thinking about the job those teenagers were given to do. If talking to people on the sidewalks of downtown Bartlesville is an effective evangelism tool, what might we say to the people that would accurately reflect Jesus' ways?

Here are my thoughts:

Rather than quizzing the people on where they go to church and what their personal beliefs are, why not say something like, "Hi, I'm Kelley and I attend Disciples Christian Church. And I just want to say, 'Congratulations! You made it to Friday! Have a great weekend!'"

OR

"Hi, I'm Kelley and I attend Disciples Christian Church. Our church is active in the community, helping people who are homeless and standing with groups who are marginalized. If that kind of thing is important to you and your family, join us any time. Here's a bottle of water...stay hydrated!"

Honestly, I don't know if these approaches are any better than the ones our friends witnessed downtown this week. Certainly, they feel better to me! The bottom line is that making disciples requires relationships and good relationships don't start with judgment and making other people feel like they aren't living up to our standards. Relationships start with valuing one another and being able to see God's image in our neighbors. Healthy relationships aren't built on having the answers to all of life's big questions or one person being right and the other wrong.

So, I am comfortable admitting that I don't have all the answers. I'm comfortable with mystery and changing my mind. Because the thing I know for sure is that people will choose to follow the ways of Jesus, not because any of us have all the answers, but because the love he lived and came to proclaim is the answer...everything else we will just have to figure out together, along the way. Amen.