

Thursday, January 26 and Sunday, January 29, 2017

Questions of Jesus: "What do you want me to do for you?"

First in an Eight-Part Series

The Gospel according to Mark 10: 35-40, 46-52

The Rev. Dr. Annika Lister Stroope

Mark 10: 35-40, 46-52

³⁵James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." ³⁶And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" ³⁷And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." ³⁸But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" ³⁹They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; ⁴⁰but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared." They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. ⁴⁷When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" ⁴⁸Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" ⁴⁹Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you." ⁵⁰So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. ⁵¹Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again." ⁵²Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

This week I'll begin a sermon and study series with each week focusing on a question that Jesus asked. I got this idea from a book called "Questions of Jesus," written by a Roman Catholic priest named John Dear. You might have a question about this (ha ha)! One question might be: why should we focus on the QUESTIONS of Jesus?

Shouldn't we look to Jesus for ANSWERS? Isn't Jesus the way, the truth, and the life – that seems to be an answer, after all, not a question, for Christians. But when Jesus said that he is the way, the truth, and the life, that was an answer to a question from his disciple Thomas. In that moment, Thomas was worried. Thomas did not understand why Jesus kept telling his disciples that he would leave them.

For Christians still today, Jesus' answer did not finish the conversation, but keeps it going. We know that questions are the way we learn in school as children and teens. Somehow we enter adulthood, however, and it becomes all about having the answers.

We seem to be living in a time when many people in many places are uncomfortable with questions. We have leaders in many places who do not want to deal with any questions.

But that's not the Christian way. If we take the time to really study the gospels, **one thing** we find is this:

“Jesus only directly answers 3 of the 183 questions that he himself is asked in the four Gospels.”¹ 183. That's a lot of chances for Jesus to tell it like it is. 183 opportunities to lay down the law.

But Jesus only directly answers three questions. He lets questions live and move and breathe in the gospels. He encourages the Christian conversation to flourish. I hope you are intrigued as I am about the questions of Jesus.

Here is a sampling of the questions coming up in my sermons and Bible studies in February. [slide] The question we focus on this week is: “What do you want me to do for you?” It might seem to be the simplest question that we'll focus on in this series.....and *it might also be the hardest*.

“What do you want me to do for you?” – it's a straightforward question, right? It's even shortened to “what do you want?”

But how many people here, when you have been asked “what do you want?” find that it's maybe the hardest question to answer. At least, to answer *honestly*. So we have two homework assignments from today's scriptures: For our spiritual well-being as Christians, we have to do number one: a lot of praying about what we want, and number two: we have to do a lot of praying about what we think we want Jesus to do.

I know I need this homework for sure. A really strange thing happened to me when I married Jeremy West. He would ask me what I wanted, and, here's the crazy part – he wanted the answer to what I wanted because *what he would do would depend on my answer*.

Now why is this crazy? Well, for me, it's because I was raised in a family where decisions were **not** made based on what you wanted. What I needed, I was provided. I always had what I *needed* – a warm, clean bed, clean clothes that fit me, healthy meals three times a day. I was taken to school on time every day.

But what I wanted – well, that was nice, but guess what? There were three children in the family younger than I. And my parents got hit hard by the great recession of the early 1980s. What *anybody* in the family might have wanted was nice, but we were not a family of six that could accommodate six different people's *wants*.

¹ Dear, John Forward by Richard Rohr in *Questions of Jesus* (New York: Image Books Doubleday, 2004), xxi

So if you grew up like I did, or if your family had an even harder time than mine did, you might hear Jesus' question the same way I heard it when Jeremy asked me "what do you want?" ...you might be completely stumped how to answer.

Now, James and John and Bartimaeus were not stumped. They were quite clear about what they wanted. In the case of Bartimaeus, people would agree that sight for someone who is blind would be considered a *need* instead of a want.

At the same time, there are people who are born blind and people who are born deaf who would not change that they are deaf and blind. It's too inherent to their identity. Folks with sight and with hearing might not understand that, but it's not for us to judge.

In Bartimaeus' case, he gets what he wants, which is his sight. **And** he also gets what he needs. Or does he? The gospel tells us that Bartimaeus received his sight, but that's not *how **Jesus** describes* what happened. What Jesus tells us is that Bartimaeus' *faith has made him well*.

What makes you feel "well?" *That's* what Jesus asked Bartimaeus when he asked "what do you want?"

We all want to be *well*, and that means different things for different people in different circumstances. Maybe *being "well" for Bartimaeus* meant 20/20 vision. And remember – there was a crowd at the gates of Jericho where Jesus and Bartimaeus met. *A lot of people* heard Jesus ask his question to Bartimaeus.

What did Jesus show the crowd about how to be a disciple?

Jesus might have restored Bartimaeus' sight, AND Jesus ALSO restored *Bartimaeus' humanity*. Just by talking with a beggar, just by bothering to stop and treat him like a human being, Jesus made *everyone* who was *there WELL*.

When Jesus recognized Bartimaeus' humanity, it was *everyone* in the crowd who was able to *see better*.

After Jesus asked his question – and before there was an answer – everybody in the crowd was able to see a whole person, not someone they could dismiss as a beggar.

After Jesus asked his question – and before there was an answer – everybody in the crowd was able to see a whole person, not simply a condition or a disability.

After Jesus asked his question – and before there was an answer – everybody in the crowd was able to see that Jesus *does not just do something* for someone, he does something for *everyone*.

James and John knew what they wanted. They had signed on to this Jesus project, and they wanted there to be some “deferred compensation” in their contract.

They might have seemed really confident, but James and John remind us that when we ask for what we want, we are vulnerable. We show what we feel we are lacking. And a lot of us are not comfortable doing that. And I think it can be easy to hear Jesus as chastising James and John and their mother.

When Jesus says “You don’t know what you’re asking” it could sound like he finds the Zebedee family short-sighted.....or maybe greedy.....or maybe scared.

And maybe they were short-sighted and greedy and scared. I’m those things sometimes. Aren’t you those things sometimes? Isn’t our country those things sometimes?

James and John got a *reply* from Jesus, but they did not really get an answer. Remember, “Jesus only directly answers 3 of the 183 questions that he himself is asked in the four Gospels.”² James and John got a lesson, but they did not get an answer. At least not the one they wanted.

So even after we go through these next several weeks, and into the season of Lent, we will still be with James and John.

We will still be with Bartimaeus, because we will not know if the response to a question for someone else will be an answer...or if it will be a lesson of another kind.

I hope this isn’t too disappointing. I hope that you will stick with me in this series, and even if we do not find answers,

Or when all of us do not find the *same* answer, we will still find wholeness and we CAN still find healing.....by walking with Jesus and his questions.

I’ll close with a reflection by a poet about questions, and I’ll ask that we bow our heads in prayer. Let us pray:

O God, we ask you be with us as we are *patient with regard to all that in [our] heart[s] is still unresolved and [that we] try to love the questions...[to] Live the questions now. Perhaps [we] will live thereafter and gradually without realizing it, one day, live [our] way into the answer.*³

In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

² Dear, John Forward by Richard Rohr in *Questions of Jesus* (New York: Image Books Doubleday, 2004), xxi

³ Dear, John Excerpt from Rainer Maria Rilke in *Questions of Jesus* (New York: Image Books Doubleday, 2004), viii