

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

What is the faithful thing to do? I have recently spent some pulpit time telling you how important asking questions can be in our lives of faith, and that question is, for me, the quintessential one. What is the faithful thing to do? I have also told you that I don't think that it's reasonable to expect many of our questions to have readily identifiable answers, but that rather, in matters of faith at least, our best course is to live the helpful questions, to make them part of our daily lives, so that they may help shape our journey. What is the faithful thing to do? It is a question which long ago Gale and I started asking each other deliberately. Should we get married? Should we have a child? Should we buy that old house, even at 11 percent interest? Should we reconcile with our exes? Should we pack all the kids in that little Plymouth Sundance and drive straight through to Florida to visit our parents for Christmas? Should we have another child? What should we have for dinner? What's the faithful thing to do, we have asked each other. It has become a habit.

Truly, though, we have been asking God, not just each other; asking for discernment, asking for guidance, asking for that better next question which could lead us in a better direction. And I think I have learned a few things, as probably you have too, about how God answers. You might actually hear God's voice once in a while, or Jesus'. Or you might feel God's Spirit nudge you in an unexpected direction. Or you might feel God's presence in a clarity of conscience. Or something you're reading in scripture might just jump out at you, bringing insight and excitement. But don't expect God to give you detailed instructions, don't expect a detailed answer, but expect a deeper question. I ordered a rather large birthday present for Gale this year, knowing that it would require heavy-duty assembly, and that the step-by-step instructions would be confusing and frustrating. You know: 'Attach bar A to flange K with bolt M, making sure to have the extra hole facing outward, and tighten. But be careful not to tighten too much.' It hasn't been my experience that God gives such instructions when we ask 'what's the faithful thing to do', but rather gives us the liberty and respect and love and encouragement to survey the landscape with divine help and companionship, and then to act.

Twenty-one years ago this very morning, in the very midst of terrifying chaos in lower Manhattan, firefighters and police officers chose to enter the burning buildings with the intent that not one of God's endangered sheep should be lost. What were they thinking?! As utterly hopeless as the task might obviously be, they must have paused for a split second and asked 'what's the faithful thing to do now?' Doug Miller, and others with firefighting experience would probably tell us that the response is almost instinctual, thanks to training and commitment, but just imagine what that must be like! And having asked the initial faithful question, the flood of consequential questions that followed that day led those first-responders up the down staircases, many making the final, faithful sacrifice. God was with them in those stairwells as they lived those questions, made their choices, and were martyred as we watched in real-time. It was as scriptural as any Bible story.

Contrast all that with the Pharisees in today's gospel passage. They are again grumbling and complaining that Jesus has the audacity to invite sinners and riff-raff to join him at a meal, to sit with him in conversation as if they were somehow acceptable characters. You would think, wouldn't you, that such leaders of the community, especially the religious one, would *want* to reach out to the

unfortunate and to those who were habitually making bad choices. Wouldn't they think it was their mission? Wouldn't they think that it was the faithful thing to do? Apparently not so much. Jesus has an opinion about that, a better path he thinks these leaders should be taking, but rather than give detailed instructions, Jesus asks a question. Yes, in response to their question, 'what is this man thinking, eating side-by-side with sinners', he asks a question himself: "Which one of you does not go after the one that is lost until he finds it?"

Jesus doesn't belittle their questioning; he isn't condescending or angry or dismissive, but takes their questions seriously. He looks them squarely in the eye and addresses them directly: YOU. Wouldn't *you* yourself act like this shepherd I'm telling you about in this parable? And if we were to put words in his mouth (never a good plan, although you have to wonder if the gospel writers like Luke didn't do that once in a while), we might hear him say: Listen, I have told you that I'm the Son of God, and so by paying attention to the habitual sinners I'm trying to demonstrate God's loving compassion. Don't you see that?! So, I'm asking you a question in return, which I hope, God hopes, will lead you to other questions and guide you to a better life, a more effective way of leading your people. Don't you see that?! Then Jesus goes on to another parable, the one about the woman who has lost one of her treasured coins. And asks yet another question: "what woman does not search carefully until she finds it?" So, that invites some follow-up questions for consideration: Is the woman greedy? Is she obsessive-compulsive? Is she desperate? Does the coin care whether or not it is found? Let those questions cascade over you, my dear Pharisees, that they might stimulate your minds into new insights.

And above all, Jesus might say, think about the effort both the shepherd and the woman make in search of their dreams. 'Where is that darn coin?!' Where has that darn lamb gone off to again?!' The shepherd takes a risk, makes a judgment call, lives with the question about whether the ninety-nine will be safe enough in the wilderness while he goes to search for the missing. And when the one is found, he carries it on his shoulders in an act of love. The woman turns on the light and sweeps and cleans her home thoroughly until she successfully finds the coin. Living the question about the whereabouts of these two treasures (the lamb and the coin) causes the faithful to act. The question is not just 'what's the faithful thing?' but 'what's the faithful thing to DO?!' Living the questions faithfully doesn't just mean to consider or contemplate, but to act. Maybe to search; maybe to clean; maybe to speak; maybe to rejoice, or sing, or praise, or rush bravely up life's firey stairwells.

St. Paul heard the voice of Jesus ask him a question out of the unexpected blue: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" And the questions kept on coming. They put him on a different path, as he explains in the letter to Timothy we heard this morning. By grace and by mercy and by paying close attention to the questions, Paul was led along a life of remarkable activity. His was a life of confrontation, of shipwreck, of itinerate travel, of disappointment and imprisonment, and yet so very rewarding. All thanks to that one first divine question! Friends, please don't let the questions trouble you, or frighten you, or anger you. Life would certainly be more predictable if there were just an instruction manual; y'know insert tab F into completed section J and then twist clockwise until you hear a click, and then move on to step 23. No, it is curiosity and creativity, I think, through which God's kingdom truly comes, guided forward by asking that question: 'what's the faithful thing to do now?' Amen.