

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

How about that Jesus, eh? One could make the case that all helpful sermons begin with a question. It might be a rhetorical question like 'How about that Jesus?', or it might be an implied question, an implicit rather than an explicit one which, while unstated, just hangs there in the air, waiting to be addressed. You may remember that in our readings just a few weeks ago, when Jesus first meets some of those whom he will call to be disciples, his first interaction with them is a question: 'What are you looking for?' he asks. One might make the case that the life of Jesus, both then and now, is an extended sermon which begins with that very question. 'What are you looking for?' It's a leading question, for sure, since it invites us to sort out the priorities of just what's important to us. Are we looking for something which provides some temporary gratification, for example, or are we looking for something with lasting value, maybe even eternal value? Are we looking for a way out, a way forward, or a way home?

Meanwhile, back at the Sermon on the Mount, from which we heard an excerpt this morning, Jesus is trying to address some of our questions. How about that Jesus, eh? There are indeed questions hanging in the air, or else why would all those crowds of people have sought him out and followed him to this remote hilltop. I suppose they would all like some quick and explicit answers to their questions. And perhaps that's what they will hear. But listening closely, they will more likely find that throughout Jesus' signature sermon, there is an underlying, fundamental, and implicit question which he, in fact, is silently asking them. 'Why have you come here? What are you looking for? Is it because you want to become citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven. about which you have heard me speak? Verily, I tell you, the answers you seek are neither obvious nor easy to accept, but even these questions you have are a gift from God.' Okay, so I'm presumptively and pretentiously putting words into Jesus' mouth, but after all, I'm trying my best to make this sermon useful to you, too.

This interrogative gift, this ability and desire to ask questions, has been with humankind since the beginning, I expect, as an essential component of God's creative dream. Could it be that God had more than enough obedient house pets, thank you, but dreamt of creatures who had the curiosity, the longing, the fear, and the temerity to ask their own questions? Who had the freewill to set priorities and make choices and become personally invested in their own conclusions? Could it be that those were the kind of creatures God dreamt would inhabit the Kingdom of Heaven? There I go again, being presumptuous, but the Biblical evidence leads me to wonder and ask the question. In the Torah, the first five scriptural books, the foundational backstory of our faith, the narratives lead us through the first conversations God is said to have had with these new and curious creatures, and the rest of the Bible texts record just how hard it has been for them to agree to be housebroken. But there in the Torah, like in Deuteronomy for example, God responds to their wondering by giving them counsel, God gives them, and us, advice and laws and commandments intended to guide them through loneliness, frustration, desperation, meaninglessness, and separation from their Creator. In short, God encourages them to choose not that which degrades and destroys, but that which brings forth the blossoms of new and fulfilling life. And therein, I think, God asks the question, 'Isn't that what you really want?'

So, all the 'laws' of the Torah, as they are called, are distilled down into the Ten Commandments which many of you learned as children. In two weeks, when we begin our observance of the Lenten Season, those ten cardinal rules will find our way into our Sunday liturgy, and I hope you will consider

their meaning each and every day. They are concise enough to have been chiseled onto two stone tablets they say, and could, I suppose, be printed on a card small enough to carry in your pocket for reference. And Jesus has told us explicitly that his mission is not to change or replace those guiding laws, but to fulfill them and make them come alive in our hearts. So, maybe a wallet-sized card isn't really big enough for all the questions we have. Maybe we need a deeper discussion. Maybe we need Jesus to mount a nearby hill and consider some of those questions with us. Maybe we need Jesus to hear our questions about life and death, about living well in community, about what it means to make vows, and so on. Have you asked him? And when you do, whether in prayer, or perhaps by turning to the Gospel texts, don't be surprised or distressed that he might answer your question with another provocative question of his own. Don't be surprised if he begins his conversation with you in the form of some random parable, a coincidence, or a revealing epiphany. Don't be surprised if he asks you what you think the faithful thing is to do now.

Paul was well aware that his little flock at Corinth were merely human beings, prone to quarreling and jealousy, each given to think of themselves as the center of the universe, and to be consumed with unhelpful, inappropriate questions. He prayed that Jesus would guide them, by asking them useful questions, to an understanding of the spirit of fellowship and common purpose, working together to build a faithful community. Not an obvious or easy thing for mere humans to do. If they were to endure persecution, ridicule, and estrangement from the surrounding Greek society, they needed not just to be housebroken, but to grow a spine. They needed to be committed enough to their own questions that they could be agents for growth in an otherwise barren landscape; they needed to be confident enough to see optimism and love while together they planted the seeds of faithfulness with wonder and hope. Choosing life, and doing so sincerely and enthusiastically, might depend on more than just following decrees and ordinances; it might depend on a sense of wonder and inquiry

Meanwhile, back at the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus continues to be provocative. After teasing the crowd with the paradoxes of the Beatitudes and tantalizing them with their potential to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, he takes up some ordinances and laws of the Torah and the Ten Commandments. And he begins with the law about murder. Now, who could argue with that one? You have heard it said 'You shall not murder', and everyone nods their heads. But God's dream lies deeper than that, he teaches, and he preaches against all violence and disrespect. Adultery, too, is unlawful since ancient times, he declares, but there's more to it than that, especially when it comes to the unalienable rights of women in marriage and divorce. And swearing, too. Swearing oaths and making vows. In those days before written contracts and reams of paperwork, one's word was one's bond, and Jesus reminds us not only of the law, but also of the need for honesty and sincerity.

It seems that we creatures are designed for community. While we might think our faith is personal, the expression of it makes most sense and has the most impact in our families, our communities, our schools, our churches, and anywhere we gather. There are laws and policies and ordinances, of course, which we agree regulate such interaction, but Jesus, like Moses and Paul, reminds us that there is a spiritual component to our community life. Isn't it profoundly important, he asks, that we build our communities on trust and compassion, on patience and goodwill, on justice and reconciliation, on forgiveness and mercy? Isn't it then that we fulfill the teachings of our benevolent Creator and become authentic citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven? Every useful sermon, BTW, ends with a question, a rhetorical or even an implicit one, and so I ask you this morning: How about that Jesus?! Do his life and teachings provoke you to deeper questions? Do they make you curious about our life together here in this place? Do they inspire you to wonder? Amen.