

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

Have you ever read the 1979 classic Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy by Douglass Adams? If not, you should. It will bring a grin to your soul. It's series of 4 books, and near the end of the first book, a race of highly intelligent pan dimensional beings, who turn out to be mice BTW, decide to build a supercomputer which will have but one task: to compute the ultimate answer to life, the universe, and everything. It seems that knowing that answer will enable their civilization to finally flourish and be at peace with themselves. So the artificial intelligence is built, data is inputted, and the massive machine predicts that it will achieve the desired answer...in 7 and a half million years. The beings then wait for generations to know the ultimate answer to life, the universe, and everything. Meanwhile, their civilization plods along without much advancement, expecting the answer to solve everything. As the time approaches, the AI announces that the answer is forthcoming on a particular day at a particular time, but warns that the great answer may be both disappointing and disturbing. Everyone gathers with excited expectation to hear the ultimate answer revealed, and finally the printout comes. The ultimate answer to Life, the Universe, and Everything, reports the supercomputer, is...42. Now, when that answer is, in fact, disappointing, the computer AI remarks that the original question wasn't properly asked, and that to give a more helpful ultimate answer, the ultimate *question* must first be discerned. A new supercomputer could be built, designed by the first one, to compute the ultimate question, which will take 10 million years. The new answer, then, will be in the form of a question. (sounds like a popular game show, doesn't it?!). The new computer is built and named Earth, and immediately goes to work. Sadly, some 5 minutes before it is to complete its work, Earth is destroyed by the Vogons who are building a hyperspace bypass through the solar system. So, the ultimate question which leads to the ultimate answer remains a mystery.

In today's gospel lesson, a lawyer comes to Jesus with a question. In the other gospels which describe this event, the man is identified as a scribe, or a Pharisee, as a person who knows the traditional religious laws well, but who nevertheless has a question, an ultimate question. He asks Jesus "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He is like one of those cartoon pilgrims who climbs to the peak of an isolated mountain to seek the ultimate answer from some Tibetan guru. And Jesus, like the guru, answers the question with another question. "You want to know what you must do to inherit eternal life? Well, what does the law say?" And so the lawyer quotes from the revered Torah of Jewish law, that one is expected to love God and one's neighbor as oneself. Right so far, says Jesus, but then who then is your neighbor? In living out our faith, there is always another question, isn't there? In the gospels, Jesus is always drawing us onward to another question. Even when we think we have achieved the final answer, there are more questions. Life isn't a television quiz game, and the prizes, the blessings, which we receive are not rewards for knowing the right answers, even if they are posed in the form of a question. Jesus, teaching by parable and hyperbole and cryptic sayings, doesn't seem to be insisting that we, his students and followers, have the correct answers down pat, but that we are motivated to continue asking the important questions. For example, when Thomas, in another place, asks about eternal life and "how will we know the way there?" Jesus responds famously, "I am the way and the truth and the life." Which raises even more questions, doesn't it?

In another place, Jesus is quoted as telling his disciples that they are not yet capable of knowing the ultimate answers, but that he will send the Holy Spirit to guide them through the helpful questions and guide them through their faithful lives. The life of faith is not, in my humble opinion, one of knowing all the answers, but one which dares to discern the faithful questions. As your priest, I don't presume to have all the answers to life's perplexing issues, and I'm more likely to answer your questions with even more questions. I'm not likely to point to the Bible on the shelf and tell you that all the answers are written in there if you just dust it off and read it sometime. The Bible is, rather, a book of really good questions which we ought to be asking every day,

even without the expectation of becoming know-it-alls. Jesus prompts us to keep asking the helpful questions, to live with those questions and, in fact, to love those questions. That, I think, is a true life of faith. At our parish picnic in two weeks, we will be baptizing 5 youngsters, and the prayer which the Prayer Book provides for us, the prayer we will say for them, concludes this way: "Sustain them in your Holy Spirit. Give them an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works." Love the questions, wonder at them, and find joy in them.

But it might be a good thing to be skeptical when someone insists that they have the undisputed answer to all life's problems. I was thinking about WWI the other day, and the responses to it from a hundred years ago. The 4 years of global war had horrified people and had shaken everyone's confidence in the traditional, trusted institutions of the time. How had the great monarchies of the time let the world down? How had new technologies not been able to subdue evil? And as the 1920s began, many came forward with great answers to the ultimate problems: A League of Nations? A great idea? Not so much. Bolshevism? Nazism? Redrawing national borders? A roaring economy? The Ku Klux Klan? That all turned out well, didn't it? All arrogant, man-made answers which ignored the faithful questions and the unintended consequences. God help our children to have inquiring and humble and discerning hearts!

When Gale and I were considering the possibility of getting married, we had to admit that we didn't know all the answers. We instead decided to ask the question "what is the faithful thing to do now?" Not knowing the ultimate answers, we thought, should not prevent us from living faithfully, from pursuing our intentions, or from moving forward with what we thought could be right. We deliberately continued to ask that particular question every time a new decision needed to be made. What is the faithful thing to do now? When it came to having children, when it came to arranging our meager finances, when it came to choosing a church to attend, when it came to discerning who was our neighbor, that was, and has been, the first thing that comes to mind. Not an answer, but a question. Not expecting to find the ultimate answer to life, death, the Universe and everything, we just humbly have asked that question and sorted the possibilities together. More often than not, with a bit of discussion and prayer, the incremental answers come to us and have actually seemed obvious, even if they were some measure short of the whole big picture. For fact, we have come to love that question, and love to live it through.

How should our parish reach out into the community...what's the faithful thing to do now? How do our parish finances reflect our mission and ministry...what's the faithful thing to do now? How do we tackle the sins of racism and violence...what's the faithful thing to do now? How do we show our care for our aging parish population...what's the faithful thing to do now? How do we use our time, talent, and treasure (including our building and property) to witness for God's grace...what is the faithful thing to do now? The collect the church has provided for today, which we prayed a few moments ago, says: "O Lord, mercifully receive the prayers of your people who call upon you, and grant that they may know and understand what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to accomplish them; through Jesus Christ our Lord." It doesn't presume that we will be able to understand the ultimate answers, but it does acknowledge that, with Jesus' help in choosing the best line of questions to follow, we can accomplish faithful things. Live the questions. Love the questions. So that's my sermon for this morning; it was helpful, wasn't it?? Amen