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Asking the Questions and the Importance of Saying No

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Text Matthew 21:23-32

I want to talk about two things this afternoon: questions and the importance of saying no. Voltaire, the French philosopher in the Enlightenment period once stated, “Judge a person by their questions rather than by their answers.” There certainly is wisdom in this. Matthew’s gospel is full of questions asked by all sorts of folks. John asks Jesus if he is the one they have been waiting for; Pilate asks if he is the king of the Jews, the Pharisees, Scribes, Sadducees, chief priests and elders asked questions to try to trap Jesus, the disciples ask Jesus questions about who is the greatest among them, what good deed do they need to do to receive eternal life?, etc.

The various questioners reveal something about themselves in the questions they ask of Jesus. So, it is with the question that is asked in today’s Gospel lesson. “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” Do you think the priests and elders who asked this question really wanted an answer or did they already have a preformed answer to the question? Jesus recognized that they already knew the answer they wanted and were just asking the question to try and catch him. So he wisely didn’t answer it but rather posed a question that would put the priests and elders in their own difficult position.

In an academic environment, I would say learning is about asking questions. In fact, it’s about living the questions. Sometimes in class students are reticent to ask questions, thinking they might look stupid or be shown up for their not knowing. Except, if you don’t know something, how else to learn if you don’t ask?

What kinds of questions do you ask? Do you ask questions expecting a particular answer or do you ask questions that are open to whatever answer comes back? Do you ask questions to have your knowledge or understanding confirmed? Do you ask questions and then not really listen to the answer because you are formulating your rebuttal? Certainly the priests and elders in our gospel today were not open to Jesus’ answer. They were only looking to confirm what they already knew.

When we ask questions to confirm what we already know it’s a way for us to stay within our certain, safe, and known world. Sometimes, it’s important to do that, we need that certainty. However, in order to push the boundaries of what we know we need to ask questions that move us beyond our certain borders, into uncharted territory for us. This can be scary at times but it is intrinsic to learning. Sometimes, it’s the questions we ask that are even more important than the answers because we may have to live the questions for a while before we find a response. One way that I have found helpful to push the edges of what I know is by being curious. What is intriguing to you these days? What is niggling in the back of your mind? What do you want to know as you begin your degree or start a new class? Certainly, you probably can name some areas that you want to learn about but aren’t you curious about who you might become as a result of your learning experiences here?

How might you hang on to your curiosity about those things? How might we do that together? What if we agreed to become a curious community? Curious about learning and growing as individuals. Curious about noticing God's presence in our midst. Curious about the places that we avoid because they are scary. Curious about the places we are energized by and thrive in. Curious about the opportunities that present themselves each day to be the hands and feet of Jesus as we interact with our peers and others who might be in need of a kind word, a little help with something, a compassionate ear, or some encouragement. Curious about the ways in which we as a gathered community can work for justice and peace in our larger community and world.

Holding the questions is important and curiosity can help us remain open to what unfolds.

Jesus then goes on to tell the parable of the two sons: the one who says yes and then doesn't go and the one who says no and then does go. How ironic is that?

How easy is it for you to say no when asked to do something? I don't know about you but I find that challenging. In fact when I was younger I would say yes often when asked to do things and then find myself over committed and stretched too thin. Then when the time would come I would not be happy about the choice I had made and sometimes even resented the fact that I had to go or complete the task. Finally, I got to the point where I was tired of being tired, tired of being too busy, tired of getting to events I didn't want to be at or completing tasks that I didn't want to do. Slowly I became more comfortable with saying no.

One of my early clinical supervisors said to me, "If you can't say no, you really can't say yes". Do you get that, if you can't say no, you can't say yes, because it's not really a choice. And if there is no choice then my "yes" really isn't a yes. Being able to have choice and say yes means I can live within my integrity. I am being honest and faithful in my intentions.

So, let's go back to the two sons: We have the one child who says yes and then doesn't go and then the other child who says no and then goes to work in the vineyard. Which child was faithful, lived with integrity? I would say the child who initially said no but later went and worked in the vineyard. It's interesting that both individuals are described as children no matter their behavior. So, they both belong to the father, or we would understand the parable to be saying they were both God's children. However, the question becomes who is most willing to participate in the father's business? Who is faithful? Saying yes too quickly may not allow us to live faithfully in response to God's call whereas saying no allows a choice later that supports a life lived with integrity and faithfulness. So, being able to say no is important. In fact, the ability to say no allows us to say yes with integrity.

May we be courageously curious so as to ask questions that move us beyond what is certain and boldly say no so that we might be faithful in following Jesus. Amen