

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

Text: Mark 9:30-35
LHUMC 9/29/13

I. Introduction

- A. So... back to the question we started with this morning-- Have you ever asked the wrong question? Those that our participants asked in our opening meditation were only a sampling, I'm sure you all could think of a few from your own experience.
- B. When I think of my own history of asking the wrong questions, I always think back to algebra class.
 - 1. I wasn't good at math, so Algebra 3 was as far as I got.
 - 2. And in Algebra 3, I was a real train wreck. I still have nightmares about Algebra 3—you know those kind of nightmares where it's the final exam and you've never been to class? When I have those, the class is always Algebra 3.
 - a) I was a pretty good student in everything else, and a hard-worker, so when I didn't get something, it really bothered me.
 - b) I was absolutely terrified about the ACT that I was going to have to take soon. I was sure that the math section was going to be a disaster.
 - c) And so I was one of those kids who ask lots of questions.
 - d) Luckily I had a patient teacher who took the time to try to not so much answer them, but make some sense out of them. Because frequently there were no answers to my questions.
 - e) My friends in the class—not so much—there were lots of rolled eyes and laughter from them
 - 3. I remember many times asking the completely wrong question—like when there was a problem with more than one variable, I'd obsess with questions about “y” when we were supposed to be solving for “x”. Remember that image—we'll come back to it.

II. Based on this overall human tendency that we all have to ask the wrong questions once in a while, my guess is that it may be more than a little comforting for most of us to read in this week's chapter in the book that we're not alone in our asking of the wrong questions. Because as the authors make clear, the Bible, especially the gospel of Mark, is full of people asking the wrong questions.

- A. If you follow our verse of the day on Facebook, we used one example each day of people asking Jesus the wrong questions.

1. And I have to say it was difficult to narrow down the list to fit in seven days—we could have had about three weeks of daily verses of people asking the wrong questions from Mark alone. If we'd included the gospel of John, we could have gone about three months.
2. But here's a just a sample from Mark--
 - a) "Some Pharisees saw that Jesus was eating with sinners and tax collectors. So they asked his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" Wrong question!
 - b) "Suddenly a man with an evil spirit entered the meeting place and yelled, "Jesus from Nazareth, what do you want from us? Have you come to destroy us?" Wrong question!
 - c) "Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Wrong question!
 - d) "As Jesus was walking through the Temple, the chief priests, the nation's leaders, and the teachers of the Law of Moses came to over to him. They asked, "What right do you have to do these things? Who gave you the authority?" Two wrong questions!
 - e) And it wasn't always the bad guys either—"Now the disciples were even more afraid than ever and said to each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!" Wrong question!
- B. And then the book focuses on perhaps the all-time whopper of a wrong question that the disciples weren't just asking, but apparently arguing about. That question being "Who is the greatest?"
 1. Why is that question about who is the greatest the greatest of all wrong questions?
 2. As the book makes clear, that is a power question. When we are asking and worrying and arguing about that question, it is all about power.
 3. When I was brand new to the ministry, all bright-eyed and bushy tailed and more than a little naïve, I began serving as an associate pastor at a church in Ohio where the senior pastor and I came at the same time and you could say that we inherited a few issues, to put it mildly What was amazing to me in the midst of that conflict that was freaking me out and keeping me awake at night was how calm the senior pastor was about it all. And what he told me I've never forgotten—he said that in his long experience, just about all conflict in the church, if you boil it all down, it 's about power.

Who's got it, who's lost it, who wants it, etc. He said, "all we have do to is remind folks who really has the power, and it'll be fine." And in the three years we were there, that's what we tried to do, and eventually that church came through it okay.

4. As the book says, it wasn't just that question of who is the greatest, but all those questions that people asked Jesus and Jesus asked them, and those questions we still ask. It says "they all lead to one point: where is the true power found?" (p.40).
 5. As my senior pastor mentor said, "It really is all about power."
 6. And the other thing I've realized is how many forms that question takes. There are many ways to ask "who is the greatest?" Often they are questions we sort of ask internally. Here are few, maybe you have a favorite.
 - a) Is my list of things that I do for God longer than your list?
 - b) Is what I think is important in the church more important than what you think is important?
 - c) Why should I try it your way?
 - d) And you see the reality—once those disciples started asking those kinds of questions on the road that day, we should hardly be surprised when it says "they were arguing".
 - e) Any form of "who is the greatest" question pretty much inevitably leads to that.
 7. But it is so easy to ask those questions. All this talk about questions has gotten me thinking about "Jeopardy". I've heard it said that "Life is like a game of Jeopardy. Do you like Jeopardy? Picture yourself playing Jeopardy. When Alex Trebek says the answer is "you", so often our question is "Who is the greatest?" To which Jesus says, "Wrong question."
- C. And so how this relates to the church takes me back to my algebra questions. When we are all obsessed with our own little "who is the greatest" questions, the church becomes obsessed with "y" when we should be solving for "x".
1. And so we begin to ask other wrong questions like:
 - a) Can we afford it?
 - b) What if people get mad?
 - c) What if it works? (And over the years, I've seen more than one ministry idea get derailed by that question)
 - d) And then the one that the book talks about—"Why do we need to change?"

- e) Those are all “y” questions that keep us from solving for “x”—“x” being God’s vision for us as individuals and as a church.
- f) And if we get bogged down in asking those questions, getting to God’s envisioned Promised Land is going to be a long and rough trip.

III. Enough about wrong questions. It’s a little depressing, to tell the truth. Except to say that when those first disciples asked them, and when we ask them, it is simply because we misunderstand who Jesus is and what is expected of us. Or in other words, we forget who really has the power. So what does it take to ask the right questions, and what are some of them?

- A. First, as the book makes the difference between the wrong questions and the right questions, what the authors are talking about in part at least, is the difference between closed and open-ended questions.
 - 1. Do you know about those?
 - 2. A closed-ended question would be when we ask our kids when they get home from school, “How was your day?”
 - 3. And when we ask that question, what answer do we typically get? “Fine”.
 - 4. Our son Matthew is in college and still gives that answer when we talk to him and ask him that question. But he learned from the master—that was always my response to my parents too.
 - 5. Close-ended questions are the kind that encourage limited responses with little room for further discussion.
 - 6. An open-ended question would be “Tell me about your day?” (When my parents asked that question of me, there were times when they got only a slightly longer answer—“**It was fine**”, but you see the point.)
 - 7. As a rabbinic kind of teacher, Jesus was great at asking open-ended questions. And as the book says, the classic one is when he turns to those arguing disciples and says, “What were you discussing along the way?” No one-word “yes or no” kind of answer is possible to that question.
 - 8. And I don’t know about you, but I think Jesus is just amazing there. If that had been me, I might have asked that classic question that my dad always used to ask when my brother and I were arguing in the back seat of the car, “Do I have to come back there?” That would be a closed-ended question!

9. But what unfolds, as you continue the story, is this great dialogue between Jesus and the disciples about who he is—all of which was triggered by his open-ended question.
10. As individual disciples, and as a church, the open-ended questions we are to ask of Jesus are pretty much the same:
 - a) Where are you calling us to go?
 - b) What are you calling us to do?
 - c) What is your vision for us?
 - d) How can we reach God's Promised Land together?
11. Notice that a one-word answer will not suffice for any of those, and as the book says, they are the kind of questions that "extend an invitation to dialogue", in which there are no winners or losers, because it's not about "me vs. you" or "us vs. them".
12. They are questions that throw any of our power struggles right out the window, because they are recognizing who is really in charge, who really has the power, and it's not us!
13. They are the questions a servant would ask, they are questions that remind us that in God's Promised Land, those who seek to be first are last, and vice versa.
14. In short, they are the "right questions".

IV. Conclusion

- A. To close let's go back to our Jeopardy game.
- B. What we need to remember in order to ask ourselves, and each other, and even God, the right questions is pretty simple.
- C. (Show "Jesus" slide). When we realize that that is the only possible answer to the question "Who is the greatest?", then that question that the disciples were arguing about becomes the right question.
- D. When we realize that Jesus alone is the greatest, that Jesus alone has the real power, then that frees us from worrying about our own power - and who has it, and who has lost it, and who wants it. Because none of that stuff matters anymore.
- E. So today we give thanks to the one who asks us the right questions so that we might ask the right questions of ourselves and of each other as we continue this journey to God's Promised Land.

