Sunday, August 18, 1974
ON ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS
Matthew 6:24-25; Mark 10:17-22

At a college not long ago, a professor of logic submitted a list of 10 questions to his classes and a large majority of the students answered affirmatively to eight of them. Then the professor rephrased the questions and just as many of the students answered “no” to them. Both times, they were responding to words rather than to ideas.

Being able to ask the right question so that an honest answer is obtained is not as easy as it sounds. And being able to hear the real meaning of a question, the idea in the question is not as easy as we think.

There is a story about two priests arguing whether it was proper to smoke and pray at the same time. One said it was, and the other said it wasn’t. To settle the matter, they agreed that both should write to the Pope for his opinion.

A few weeks later they met and compared notes. Each claimed that the pope had supported his view and suspected the other of falsifying the reply he got from the Holy Office. Finally, one asked, “How did you phrase your question?” The other replied, “I asked whether it was proper to smoke while one is praying, and the pope answered, ‘Certainly not, praying is serious business and permits of no distractions.’ And how did you phrase your question?” “Well,” said the other, “I asked if it was proper to pray while smoking, and the pope said, ‘Certainly, prayer is always in order.'”

People were all the time asking Jesus questions. Some were the right questions, and some were cover-ups for deeper questions. In the scripture passage read a moment ago, a man confronts Jesus and asks a question that has been on his mind for some time, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus heard the real question --the man was asking, “How can I make some sense out of my life? What can give my life goal and a direction?”

The man told Jesus that he was obeying all the commandments. He was a moral person in these specific details. But he knew there was still something lacking in his life. More than that, he wanted to be sure that he would have eternal life — life after death. He didn’t, however, expect the answer which Jesus gave him — “Go, sell what you have and give to the poor and come follow me.” Jesus was saying that “eternal life” is not somethi.ng totally separate from this life here and now but is really an extension of it. Thus, he was telling the man that he would have to change the whole direction of his living — that obeying the letter of the law was not enough. The man’s question had been too narrow, but.in this case, Jesus saw beyond it.

Sometimes our questions can be too narrow. A person may ask, “What’s wrong with my marriage?” And then he or she may come to believe the answer is that a new spouse is needed and so a divorce is sought. However, it is possible that the deeper question or the right question is — “What’s wrong with my overall way of living? How can I find meaning and direction? If that’s the right question, then a new spouse may not be the answer. In other words, an answer to the wrong question is not much help.

Thus, our faith reminds us that asking the right questions is part of finding the right answers, just as people were all the time asking Jesus Christ questions, so also Jesus calls us to ask ourselves some questions. But it’s not always so easy to do.

Most of us because we are so busy and are under daily pressures to act, to do, to decide, fail to stop and think, to consider and to examine our life goals, our directions, our priorities. In fact, most of us will not ask the right questions unless someone says as I am saying now — STOP! Think about some of the issues in your life. That's precisely what Jesus asked the man who came to him to do.

What then are some of the right questions our Christian faith wants us to ask of ourselves? Here are a few of them. You will have to provide the answers for yourselves.

1. What are your goals in life? Toward what objectives are you aiming? Where are you heading? Is it where you want to be going? Are the goals toward which you are working for real, or only for show? In other words, what are you worshipping? What is of ultimate significance in your life?

Most people reach a certain point in their lives and then have a bitter sense of loss and regret, wondering where time and opportunity have gone. I think that's what was behind the question of the man who came to Jesus.

We cannot think about our life's goals without asking other related questions. To what purposes do you dedicate your efforts and your life? What are your personal priorities? And how well — does your life's work reflect those priorities? Most of us find such difficult questions easy to avoid, presuming that time will answer them — as indeed it will, though not necessarily to our satisfaction.

2. Closely related to the question about goals is one which bears on the use of our time and energy. Does your use of your vital resources, your time, your health, truly reflect your priorities? Without much thought, most of us would certainly answer yes, failing to appreciate that for 90 percent of us the answer might be "no."

Executives with broad responsibilities are presumed to use their time for the big decisions. Yet with a consistency that is hard to believe, studies have repeatedly shown that this is rarely true and that much more often the busy executive is spending 90 percent of his time on matters that could better be done by others, are simply a part of the daily routine, or have limited relation to the responsibilities which he or she carries.

Most of us will recognize in a moment of more somber thought that the. important things in our lives are frequently deferred with some comforting but self-deceiving assumption that there will always be time tomorrow. The man who came to Jesus was unwilling to face this question honestly, and so as the Gospel of Mark puts it, he went away sorrowful. He was afraid to change the direction of his living.

3. A third and related question concerns our courage — not the sort more commonly associated with the battlefield, or challenging or embarrassing situations, important as that may be. I am referring to the courage we need to face our internal foes, for we are in many cases our own worst enemies. Thus, it's no accident that a best-seller in books for months has been one entitled — "How to be your own Best Friend."

The kind of courage we are talking about and which I think Jesus was implying as he talked to the man who came to him is that courage exemplified in an ability to look at ourselves honestly and fairly. It is the kind of courage which enables us to face, to articulate and finally to accept

our disappointments and losses and to go on from there. Life is a succession of losses, beginning with the loss of the warmth and comfort of the womb, progressing through childhood and its many losses, the loss of the family as adolescence separates us from childhood, the loss of the irresponsible pleasures of youth with the advent of maturity, the loss of jobs, or positions, or self-esteem, money, opportunity; the loss of one's friends with advancing age; these and a million others and finally the ultimate loss of life itself. It's something to ponder how extensive the experience of each of us is with loss, big and small.

It has been said that the quality which distinguishes a great person from others like him is the capacity to manage disappointment and loss.

Another part of the same kind of courage is the ability to acknowledge that we've made a mistake. Being right is one of the most satisfying experiences in the world. That's why people don't want to change. It would mean admitting they were wrong. A person once said to me, "But that would mean I wasted the first forty years of my life!" Some people would prefer to go on making the same mistake for another forty years rather than admit they made a mistake and cut their losses. But it takes a special kind of courage to admit we are wrong and to change our ways.

4. A fourth question is to ask ourselves to examine the consistency and the quality of our personal relationships. Most of us accept the truism that people are important to people, yet we fail to perceive how often human relationships are superficial, meager, and unrewarding. Is this true of yours? Which of your relationships can you say has a quality of involvement with the other, expressing a depth of emotional investment which is real and mutually experienced?

It is again too easy to explain that the pressures of our lives and the demands upon us, the superficial materialism of the age and all the rest are what account for a deep sense of poverty in our relationship with others.

To call again on that element of courage — can we examine the quality of the relationships of those who are closest to us as to how honest, how open, how real they are?

It is clear that the capacity to establish close, significant emotional ties with others is characteristic of emotional security as Christian commitment. It is also clear that the work, the effort and sometimes the pain of doing so is quite enough to discourage many people. Relationships which show a depth of emotional involvement require a willingness to engage, to share, to listen, to give and to receive. What can you say about these qualities in your human relat-ionships?

5. A fifth question which our Christian faith requires that we ask of ourselves concerns the role of "love" in our lives. For many of us, the word — love — brings with it a deluge of sentimentality. Certainly, love contains sentiments, but by the use of the word here we mean also the capacity to care. This implies a willingness to invest ourselves in others, to be involved with them, to listen to them, in short to care about them. It also involves seeing all persons as human beings, as brothers and sisters in the human race.

And it involves how truly and how well you love yourself-- not in irrational or overblown terms, but as an object of pride and self-esteem — a thing of value, a person of worth. As we love ourselves in mature and realistic ways, so we are also able to extend the help of love and caring to others in ways which are not demeaning, not controlling, and not condescending or patronizing, but respectful and genuine caring.

Often our relationships to others do indeed mirror our relationship to ourselves. How well we deal with others may depend upon our success in managing ourselves.

These are a few of the right questions which Jesus Christ would ask us to ask ourselves. The God who created us wants us to be healthy wholesome human beings and wants us to have loving caring relationships with one another. Then we will also having the same kind of relationship with God. Amen.