Book 7

Sunday February 5, 1978

"IF CHRIST IS THE ANSWER, WHAT IS THE QUESTION?"
Colossians 1:15-20

Most of us are familiar with signs or bumper stickers which say something like--"CHRIST IS THE ANSWER." We're also familiar with the fact that in our society there are all kinds of answers being given, but often the questions are not asked. Some people seem to know all the answers, but do not know any of the questions.

In other words there are a lot of answers floating around but people have forgotten the questions and thus the answers no longer make much sense. We who call ourselves Christians are not immune. Sometimes we quickly offer answers before we hear the question. So this morning let's see if we can reverse this tendency just a little. We're going to try to hear some of the questions that every person asks in one way or another and then see how Christ is the answer to some of these questions.

The story is told of the philosopher Schopenhauer who was sitting one day on a bench in the park of a city. Since he was not well dressed and was lost in thought, a police officer asked, "Who are you? What are you doing here?" To which the philosopher replied, "I would to God I knew. . ."

Who are we? What are we doing here? What is the purpose of human existence? Why is there something and not nothing? These are questions which every person asks in one way or another. We do not always use these words or ask the questions out loud. And when things are going well with us, we do not bother much with such deep questions. But there are moments when we do bother. Late at night when we are unable to get to sleep, we may wonder about it all. When life is "too much for us" as we say, or when we've had a big disappointment or feel rejected by a friend or someone on whom we thought we could depend, or when some tragedy enters our life, then we ask in one way or another, "What's life all about?"

From the moment a child is born, he or she begins to get answers to the question, "Who am I?" even though the child doesn't ask the question in words. If the child is loved and cared for and begins to grow up in a happy secure environment, the child begins to know that he or she is a

loved person, a person of worth, a persons who is wanted and enjoyed. If the child is most of the time rejected and not cared for and grows up in another kind of environment, he or she will begin to experience a different kind of answer to the question, "Who am I?" "I am someone who is not liked, someone who is unwanted, someone who is a nuisance and in the way." And that persons' self-image will be quite different.

How is Christ the answer to such questions as "Who am I?" What am I doing here? What is the purpose of life?"

To see how Christ and the church which is his body in the world today supplies the answer to such questions, it is necessary first to ask each of you a question. "What is your deepest desire? What do you want more than anything else in the world? What is it for which you would sell everything else?" Your answers to these questions are necessary before you can answer the previous questions. After all, what you are living for, what you want the most, helps define who you are and what the purpose of your life is.

Some of the things we want are superficial, others are not. We might want a new car, or to change jobs. We might want happiness for our children or success in our own endeavors. But what do you want most of all?

Listen! Here's what most of us want. The deepest desire of all human beings is the desire to be at one with someone and to have someone be at one with us. All of us seek a certain harmony in our lives and the deepest part of the harmony we desire is the friendship and love of other human beings, and beyond that with the Creator we call God.

Now we can live without such relationships of course, but our lives will be less fulfilling and meaningful. And if we are honest we have to admit that when we have the experience of human love, it also creates a longing for a greater love than that which we have known. The full truth about human love and human relationships is that they both meet and do not meet our deepest needs; the more we have the more we want. And this is more true of love than anything else.

Sometimes we also have difficulty in accepting love even though we desire it. Sometimes we cannot accept love

because we are too worried about not being loved, which is to say that we do not believe that the love we really need exists.

So it is that loneliness is one of the most universal human experiences, and one of the most universal sources of human suffering. The roots of loneliness are deep because our loneliness is in part a result of the nature of existence. We are separate human beings, each one unique and yet we are all part of one another and related to each other, the creation as a whole and related to God.

To affirm our uniqueness we separate ourselves from each other and often stand over against one another. In fact, one of the best definitions of sin is the separation we help create between one another and from God. We know that we really belong to someone and that somehow we have participated in the separation for which we now seek re-union. Much of our life, therefore, is an effort to overcome our separation and to find each other and God in fulfilling relationships.

We try to satisfy this deepest desire in so many ways, and often some of the ways we attempt only make the matter worse. Some individuals try to overcome their loneliness and their desire to be at one with others by gaining more power for themselves. If we are successful in our struggle for power, then we have both exploited persons and used things destructively with the result that our loneliness and separation are increased.

Also we soon learn that human love of one for another, human relationships no matter how vital and meaningful, can only fill part of our desire to be at one with others and with God. And all of us since we need love so desperately, demand love and others demand love from us.

If we're parents, we've probably read books and articles on how to raise our children. These tell us again and again that all we need to do is to love our children and they will be all right. We have discovered, however, that our love does not produce such easy and simple success. The problem is that none of us on our own has the power to love perfectly or completely.

If I could love my children or any person with the kind of love that person needs and to the degree to which he

or she needs it, then my love could have a saving effect. Often we try or want to love someone perfectly because we erroneously think that we must meet their every need as if we were God. But we cannot love perfectly because we are not God.

All of this is to say that no friend or lover, no husband or wife, no parent or community or commune, no human relationship will be able to put to rest our deepest desire for harmony and wholeness. Only God's love will suffice.

It is sad, therefore, to see people suffering from loneliness, often deepened by the lack of affection in their intimate family circle, search for a final solution for their pains and look at a new friend, a new lover, or a new community with the expectations that now their deepest desire and need will be satisfied.

Although their mind knows about their self-deceit, their hearts keep saying, "Maybe this time I have found what I have knowingly or unknowingly been searching for. It is indeed amazing that men and women who have had such distressing relationships with their parents, brothers or sisters, or spouses, or lovers can throw themselves blindly into new relationships with far-reaching consequences in the hope that from now on things will be totally different.

But we human beings can never satisfy completely another persons's need for love and wholeness because our love is always imperfect and limited, nor can our need be satisfied by someone else. Part of the difficulty is that when another person most needs love is often when that person is the most unlovable. Then that person's dark side brings out our own unlovableness, so that the love that is needed is not given but rather an unlovingness is given.

It is in relation to this deepest desire of all of us--to be at one with someone and with God and all of creation that Christ is the answer. God gave himself in Jesus of Nazareth as the personal answer to this need, this longing.

Certainly we can and do partially experience the perfect love of God through the love and care of other human beings. But we need much more than that. Nothing less than God will suffice.

Throughout history and in all religions there has been the attempt through rites, ceremonies, feasts, fasts, and the meeting of ethical demand to overcome the separation between ourselves and others and God.

Unfortunately religious activity as such in and of itself does not overcome the separation. In fact, nothing that we do ourselves can overcome the separation. This is what Martin Luther and St. Paul meant when they said, "we cannot be saved by works,"

Now we can understand in a fresh way the meaning of God's action in and through Jesus Christ. God made himself known in Jesus through a living face to face encounter with human beings in order that God might bring to our separation and alienation, God's healing.

In Jesus Christ, in his teaching, ministry, healing, death and resurrection we can see love that has the power to love as we cannot. In Christ, we see God's love suffering on our behalf. We see in Christ's death, God taking into himself the awful pain and burden of the unlovable. God's love takes our hate, our rejection, our separation, into itself and overcomes it.

The resurrection is the victory of God's perfect love, the love that cannot be killed--in fact the more it is killed, the more powerful it becomes. This power of God's love is therefore made available to us and is working through God's creation. It's what we call in Christian language, the Holy Spirit.

This is what St. Paul was saying in our scripture reading. "Christ is the image of the invisible God. In Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell and through Christ to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross."

For us to experience God's answer to our deepest need, all it means is accepting the fact that God accepts us. This is what it means to be saved by faith in Jesus Christ.

Now to say that Christ is the answer to our deepest need, does not mean that believing in Christ and accepting God's love, or being born-again answers immediately all our deepest questions, or magically solves all our problems.

But it is a beginning. Yet there is always a mystery to human existence. At the same time, because of God's action in Jesus Christ, we Christians know that everything in the world, including ourselves, is getting somewhere--is on the move toward a goal or purpose which can be shared by the whole creation.

That goal or purpose is that same love which is the meaning in the mystery of our existence, but now it is emphasized that such love is dynamic, active, living and potent. It cannot be overcome finally by any evil force.

The point of everything is in growing toward the moving forward in love, toward the widest and fullest possible sharing together in a life whose central and dominant motif is nothing other than God, known as the cosmic Love which cannot fail.

So we Christians have the faith that whatever surface appearances may seem to be, the purpose of life means love; and that whatever may be the risks, the dangers, the difficulties, in the way, the purpose of human existence and the purpose of the whole universe is to make such love more really visible, more fully realizable and more adequately expressed. God takes the initiative in doing this through Jesus Christ.

We Christians then, see a world, a creation, where God is at work, ceaselessly striving to bring about more good to more people in more places and in more ways. God himself is Love as the Bible says. The world in which we live is the place where we can learn what love is and what God's love gives and demands. So through Christ we are able to become what we are meant to be; lovers, however frustrated and broken we may be in our loving.