Sunday, September 2, 1984
THE IMPERTINENT QUESTION
John 5:2-9

Studs Terkel, a writer and interviewer, tells about riding in a New York taxicab. It was the time of the Christmas bombings of North Vietnam, and Mr. Terkel had asked a cab driver what he thought of the bombings. The driver said, “We can’t be a pitiful, helpless giant.” Terkel knew that he’d picked up that phrase from President Nixon on television. The driver went on to say, “We’ve got to be number one.” Then Terkel asked the driver the impertinent question, “Are you number one?” and the driver paused. No one had ever asked him that question before. He said, “I’m number nothin.” Then he went on to tell about his wife leaving him, his daughter was in trouble, his son on drugs, and the driver hates himself. Terkel then thought to himself, “If you are number nothing, you’ve got to be part of something else, no matter how brutal it is.”

“The impertinent question” is a phrase used by J. Bronowski, who did the public television program, “Ascent of Man.” A book was also published by Bronowski which contained the basic material from this program series. In one of his lectures he said, “The great scientists and poets always ask the impertinent question.” Einstein asked it and Newton asked it. The technicians who are banal people never ask; they just go along.

Not only do the great scientists and poets ask the impertinent question, but also the great philosophers and religious teachers: Socrates, Jesus Christ, and others.

The impertinent question is one which questions what many people simply accept as obvious or true. It questions the basic assumption. Christopher Columbus asked the impertinent question, “Is it true that the world is flat so that if one sails across the ocean too far, the ship will fall off the edge?” The impertinent question is necessary because most of us are altogether too complacent, too rigid in our conclusions about life.

In the area of religion, those who ask the impertinent question are often labeled heretics — yet in the long run, a number of these so-called heretics are those who help us toward finding the truth. The first person to question the validity of human sacrifice in order to placate the gods was no doubt branded a heretic for raising such an impertinent question, but it helped get rid of a useless ritual.

In one of our longest struggles — the struggle against diseases which have threatened human beings for centuries — the most significant discoveries have often been made by individuals who, by standards applicable to their time, could only be considered scientific heretics, people so dedicated and so passionately altruistic that they have dared dream impossible dreams of victory over disease and have made those impossible dreams become reality. They asked the impertinent question. But the penalty for dreaming such dreams has been severe: derision from their professional contemporaries, the label of fraud, or worse. These individuals have willingly faced the threat of professional banishment and total loss of reputation.

Dr. Jonas Salk may be looked upon as a dogged heretic who refused to be deterred by orthodoxy. Basil O’Conner, Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s law partner, had been given the task of running the March of Dimes program by the late president. O’Conner raised over $500,000,000 to combat polio, and in the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis he was financing a vast research establishment which was slowly grinding out hopeful developments toward a polio vaccine. The men in the orthodox establishment showed every sign of wanting

to continue this grinding out process, which meant good salaries, promising pensions, and exposure to Nobel Prizes ad infinitum, without thought of ever trying to produce a vaccine for children.

Then young Salk emerged from the rear ranks of the establishment where young men should be only seen and never heard. He produced almost overnight a satisfactory, killed polio vaccine. When the orthodox heard of his vaccine, they turned on Salk with the cry, “Too Dangerous... Abolish Salk’s vaccine and any thought of using it on children.”

It was then that O’Conner, with no authority in medicine at all, intervened. With an intense memory of the crippled Franklin Roosevelt, O’Conner became Salk’s champion — a knight in shining armor, who cut a path through the phalanx of the orthodoxy on two occasions. First, it was to get the Salk vaccine tested on a nationwide basis in the spring of 1954; then O’Conner fought the battle all over again in 1955 to keep Salk’s highly successful vaccine from being abolished altogether.

A few weeks ago, on the editorial page of the Wall Street Journal, a columnist asked the impertinent question about patriotism. Here’s a part of what we wrote:

“Patriotism is back, as everyone seems fond of saying these days, and more power to it — I think. As an older flag-waver who still gets a thrill from July 4 celebrations and visits to the Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials, I didn’t know patriotism had ever gone anywhere. Unless, of course, what some people mean by patriotism isn’t what some of the rest of us have in mind. And that, of course, is the rub. Depending on how you define it, patriotism can be a healthy love of country or something quite different or disturbing. Unfortunately, for some, patriotism properly understood requires unquestioning support of American policy abroad and intolerance of critics at home.”

The writer went on to say, “The kind of patriotism that its current enthusiasts seem to be promoting was given a permanently bad name (or so many of us hope) in the Nuremberg war crimes trials after World War II. One after another, the Nazi defendants pleaded not guilty, citing their obligation to obey the fatherland. Their conviction seemed to have established for all time that there was no independent, automatic moral content in blind obedience to and support for the state. What I thought Nuremberg was all about was the thesis that each individual not only had a right, but a duty, to decide for himself or herself whether his or her country was acting for good or for evil and to resist it — to raise the impertinent question when he or she thought the country was going in the wrong direction.”

In the Nuremberg trials, men and women were executed because they hadn’t put their loyalty, their patriotism, to that higher test.

Even today our government says it values such expression of individual conscience. We rightly make heroes of the people of Solidarity, the same people whom the Polish state has defined as political criminals. We insistently ask after the health and whereabouts of Nobel Laureate Sakharov, whom we revere for speaking truth to Soviet power, but whom the authorities in Moscow regard as traitor. As the same time some of our own leaders seem to question the patriotism of our own citizens when they question the policies of our government.

Asking the impertinent question can be more patriotic than a flag-waving mob. There are lots of impertinent questions that need to continue to be asked about our country’s involvement in Nicaragua and El Salvador. Questions need to be asked about the arms race. If both our own

country and the Soviet Union continue to believe that we have to keep up with each other in the weapons race, how can that race be stopped?

What's all this got to do with our Christian faith? It is the tradition of both the Jewish religion and our own Christian religion to ask the impertinent question. The Old Testament prophets frequently asked such questions of the government of their time and of individuals. Jesus Christ frequently asked the impertinent question. Read the Gospels in the New Testament of the Bible and you will find him asking impertinent questions over and over again. For example, he strongly questioned the tradition of not being allowed to heal a person the Sabbath. He asked, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good, or to do harm, to save life or to kill?"

When good people tried to flatter him by calling him good, he asked, "Why do you call me good? Only god is good."

And in our scripture reading for this morning, he asked an impertinent question of a man who had been crippled for 38 years. The impertinent question: "Do you want to be healed?"

If Jesus were here today, here are some of the impertinent questions I think he might ask us:

Do you believe God loves you? Do you care?

Where are you likely to spend eternity?

What do you think about when you wake up at three in the morning?

What is the most interesting thing about your life? The most boring?

Do you laugh much? About what?

When did you last forget yourself? Under what circumstances?

What has been your greatest disappointment?

Whom are you trying to impress? Whom are you trying to show up?

What are you really curious about?

Have you ever had the experience of being totally at one with the universe? Has this experience changed your way of looking at the world?

Do you pray regularly? If not, would you like to have prayer become a part of your everyday life?

As Christian, we need not be afraid of the impertinent question. We know that God gave us minds and spirits and choice and that God wants us to use potential for building a better world. We can do this by asking the right questions and not being afraid of the answers. The impertinent question needs to be asked over and over again in every field of endeavor. There is no assumption too sacred to be questioned.

There are impertinent questions I've often wanted to ask at times, but didn't have the courage to do so. An individual told me that because of economics difficulties, he and his family would have to cut their financial commitment to the church, yet I had noted that their participation in

leisure time activities at the country club were not cut back at all. So, I wanted to ask, but didn't, "How come you decided to cut back at the church and nowhere else?" The country club dues had gone up every year and were paid without question. Another impertinent question I've often wanted to ask and haven't as I've watched countless individuals suffer in agony and then finally die from lung cancer and/or emphysema — I've wanted to ask other family members the impertinent question, "How can you go on smoking?"

This is the kind of church that is not afraid of the impertinent question. We are not afraid to ask questions about the origin of the Bible, how it was written, by whom, and when. We are not afraid of the critical study of the Bible and not afraid of new discoveries. We are not afraid to critically study church history, and we are not afraid of the new discoveries and theories of science. We are not afraid of the impertinent question because we believe "there is yet more light and truth to break forth from God's holy word." Amen.