Sunday, November 17, 1985
THE FOLLOW-UP QUESTION
Luke 10:25-37

I Like lawyers because they are always asking questions: This was as true in Jesus' time as it is today. In the scripture lesson just read, Luke reports that a "Lawyer stood up to ask Jesus a question."

I like people who ask questions because it's a good way to learn. A good question makes us think. Being able to ask the right questions is not always as easy as it seems. And as the person being questioned, to be able to hear the true meaning of the question takes concentrated listening. Sometimes we have to look for the question beneath the question.

As all lawyers know, the way a question is phrased can sometimes help determine the answer.

Two priests were arguing about 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 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.'"

The lawyer, in the Bible story read earlier, asked Jesus a most important question — "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" As a good listener, Jesus heard the meaning beneath the surface. The man was asking — "What is the meaning of life or how can I find new meaning in my life?" Another way of phrasing it would be — "What do I have to do to find significance and purpose in life? What is God's will for us? For me?"

Although not a lawyer, Jesus was quite adept at asking questions himself. Often he returned a question with a question. So he asked the lawyer — "What is written in the law?" In other words, what does your religious faith tell you is the answer? The lawyer had a good answer to Jesus' question — he replied, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself."

The lawyer in this case knew the Old Testament very well. He was quoting from Deuteronomy 6:4, and from Leviticus 19:18. So Jesus told him — "You have answered right; do this, and you will live." In other words — follow this commandment and your life will have purpose and meaning and you will truly be serving God.

And then the Lawyer asked a follow-up question — "Who is my neighbor?" It's all right to talk grandly of loving one's neighbor as oneself — but unless the term "neighbor" is defined, it's not much help. Asking the follow-up question is very important.

The writer, John Gould, in a book entitled "Stitch in Time," tells a little story which illustrates the importance of asking the follow-up question. It takes place on the coast of Maine.

Nathaniel Bowditch Sinnett Got a cod-hook through the back of his hand while fishing and it bothered him some, so he ran up the flag on his fishhouse. Marty Bascombe, across the way on Tinsnip Island, saw the flag and rowed over in his dory to find out what it meant. He decided Nathaniel needed better attention than he could give him, so he cranked up the motor in Natty's boat and ran into Smeltrun Cove, where there's an old folk's home. The nurse there fixed Natty right up, and he was all right, but the cod-hook was a total loss.

It was now something like half past two, going on three o'clock, in the morning, so Natty and Marty decided to wait for daylight before going back down the bay. They took some sleep in one of the vacant rooms up on the third floor, and at breakfast time they sat down with the people who lived there and tucked away some food.

While they were eating, an "interviewer" arrived from the State Department of Gracious Living, Bureau of Statistical Investigation, and she began asking questions about the general situation at the Smeltrun Cove Old Folk's Home. Not knowing that Natty and Marty were what you might call transients, she asked them the questions too, and they told her they thought everything was fine, except for the scrambled eggs. After breakfast, Marty ran Natty back to his place, rowed his dory back to Tinsnip, and the two of them went separate ways about their affairs — said affairs being seaward and remote.

Now, the food service at the Smeltrun Cove Old Folk's Home is a contract job handled by a catering firm in Schenectady, New York, with a regional manager in Sanford, Maine, and an area distribution center in Bangor. The result is "institutional food," but this company services a number of schools, hospitals, and so on in Maine and is proud of its long record of dietary and gustatory excellence, and to put things in focus, it takes its scrambled eggs very seriously. So when the service manager was notified by the State Department of Gracious Living that there had been a complaint about the food at the Smeltrun Cove facility, the computers went to work and the next day there was consternation in the home office at Schenectady, New York. Immediately, further details were asked for, and along the chain of command this request came at last to the resident house mother at Smeltrun Cove — this was the first she knew about any complaint. She knew none of her happy old folks had complained and presumed the whole thing was a mistake until she happened to recall that Natty and Marty had freeloaded a breakfast, so she wondered if the complaint might have been something of their doing. She knew both boys from away back, and they would never be malicious — could this be their idea of a joke? Anyway, there was no need of tumult, so she notified the catering command that there was no need to pursue the matter.

But the catering company wanted its good name untarnished, and didn't want the State House on its back, so it asked the interviewer of the Humane, Etc., for more specific information. She, feeling this challenged her position, got uppity and in a snotty mood replied that the complaints had been made by Mr. Nathaniel Bowditch Sinnett and Mr. Martin Bascombe, at breakfast, such and such a date, and the item complained about was scrambled eggs.

So files were pulled, sources of fresh eggs located, telephone calls made, and everything in the long line of ordering, receiving, forwarding, opening, cooking and serving scrambled eggs seemed in order. The catering firm decided that the interviewer was either misinformed or trying to star something. Things were sticky enough so a trouble- shooter was sent to find Natty and Marty.

He hired a lobsterman at South Overlook to run him down the bay in his boat, and when he found Natty and Marty, he asked them just what was the matter with those scrambled eggs. He brought back their complaint: “Not enough of them.”

The importance of the follow-up question. News reporters are good at asking them. Jesus often asked them. It’s not enough to hear the answer — “Love your neighbor as yourself.” The follow-up question also needs to be asked and answered.

I think sometimes we’re afraid to ask the follow-up question because we’re afraid of the answer. It gets too specific for comfort. In the case of scrambled eggs, sometimes the follow-up question can give us a surprising answer, one we hadn’t expected.

No doubt when the lawyer asked the follow-up question of Jesus, he didn’t get the answer he expected either. Instead of a direct answer, Jesus told a story and then the lawyer answered his own question. “Which of the three,” asked Jesus, “proved to be a neighbor to the man who was hurt and in the ditch?” And the lawyer then answered— “The one who showed mercy — the one who helped him.” It’s easy to love our neighbors in general, but it’s more difficult to love individuals in specific situations, particularly people we wouldn’t normally associate with. Then loving one’s neighbor can be downright inconvenient.

Asking the follow-up question almost always leads to getting specific. And that’s what usually got Jesus in trouble — he got very specific. If a preacher talks against sin in general, everyone says, “Amen,” but let the preacher get specific and people don’t like it.

Don’t you get tired of generalizations? Then ask the follow-up question. Whenever I hear a person blithely announce that the whole trouble with the world is that people don’t follow the golden rule, I want to ask two follow-up questions. “What is the golden rule?” “How does it apply in this specific situation?”

In a similar way, people talk about the ten commandments — “If only everyone in the world would follow the ten commandments.” Then I want to ask the follow-up question — “Can you recite the ten commandments and tell me their meaning?”

Or people will say, “As long as one has faith, that’s what’s important.” The follow-up question is — “Faith in what?” Or someone will say, “It doesn’t matter what you believe in, as long as you believe in something and are sincere about it.” But it does matter a great deal what you believe in. Follow-up questions are desperately needed.

It is the tradition of both the Jewish faith and our Christian faith, which comes out of it, not to be afraid of asking questions, and then follow-up questions. God gave us minds and bodies and spirits and choice. God wants us to be asking questions and seeking the best answers. There are no assumptions too sacred to be questioned.

If Jesus were here in person this morning, I believe he would ask each one of us such questions as: 1. “What are your goals in life?” And then the follow-ups: “Are they adequate? Do they help you fulfill your God-given potential? If not, are you afraid to quit what you are doing and try something more satisfying?”

Are the goals you strive for those which benefit others and yourself?

2. A second related question Jesus would ask is this: “Does your use of your vital resources, your time, your health, your energy, 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.”

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

Perhaps Jesus would ask these questions in another way. “How do you define your life’s purpose? Does your work further that purpose? Why or why not? If you have only a year left to live, would you continue in the same work?”

The message of Jesus is that God loves the world, the whole creation, and that God loves you and me. Our lives begin to take on added significance and purpose the more we become aware of and act on the knowledge that we are connected to each other because that’s the way God made us and the world.

Therefore, God expects us to care for each other in very specific ways. In order for us to do this we have to constantly be searching and asking questions of ourselves and each other. Only in that way can we continue to discover what God’s will is for us in specific situations.

We are not to be afraid of questions and follow-up questions because we believe that there is yet more light and truth to break forth from God’s word. Amen.