Sunday, August 7, 1988
IS THIS ALL THERE IS? (No. 1 in a Series: Everyday Questions)
Matthew 11:2-6

Life is filled with questions. Earlier this year, a little paperback book was published with the title, The Book of Questions. It was a big seller. There are 217 different questions in the book — and no answers. As the back cover of the book says, "The Book of Questions gives you permission to ask those things that are too bold, too embarrassing, or just too difficult to ask by yourself. You will find questions of integrity; of sex; of what you would do for money; even things too personal to talk about out loud."

It is not a book of trivia questions or questions that can be answered with facts or statistics. These are questions about values, beliefs, fears, love, life, and death. Thus, these are questions that do not have one correct answer. In fact, there are no correct or incorrect answers, only honest or dishonest answers.

Here are a few examples:

If you were to die this evening with no opportunity to communicate with anyone, what would you most regret not having told someone? Why haven't you told them yet?

Your house, containing everything you own, catches fire; after saving your loved ones and pets, you have time to safely make a final dash to save any one item. What would it be?

If you were at a friend's house for Thanksgiving dinner and you found a dead cockroach in your salad, what would you do?

Would you like to know the precise date of your death?

What has been your biggest disappointment in life? Your biggest failure?

These are hard questions.

Children can ask disarming, yet difficult, questions. My second daughter Caris, when she was about eight years old, asked me one day, "Dad, if my mother and I were out swimming together and both of us were drowning, which one of us would you try to save?"

There are some questions in our culture that I am choosing to call "Everyday Questions," that is, these are questions that many people ask in different ways and have been asking since the beginning of time. We will be dealing with some of these "Everyday Questions" in this sermon series.

The first question is: Is This All There Is? I hear people in all walks of life asking this question repeatedly. When people ask this question, behind it is the loss of a dream, or the failure of an expectation. It is a question that comes out of disappointment. Is this all there is? The asking of the question implies that something more was expected or deserved. Sometimes, for example, after ten years of marriage, I hear the husband or wife or both of them asking, Is this all there is? Or someone has taken a new job which she thought would bring new meaning to her life, and after three years, she asks, Is this all there is?

The course of human events is littered with the remnants of unfulfilled wishes, or outcomes never attained. Disappointment is a universal theme. It touches all of us.

Is there anyone here this morning, or who is listening on the radio or watching on television, who has not asked the question, Is this all there is?

We know from the Bible stories that people were all the time asking Jesus questions similar to this one and others. One day, they brought a man to him who had been born blind. They asked, “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” At another time, some others asked Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” One day, a lawyer asked Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” Some others asked, “Is it lawful for us Jews to pay taxes to Caesar?”

And in the story read a few minutes ago from the Gospel of Matthew, some disciples of John the Baptist came to Jesus with a question that is similar to the one we are dealing with in this sermon: Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another? In their own way, they were asking, Is this all there is? Can you be the Messiah? We really had expected something more sensational, more dramatic, more unusual. It was a question springing from unmet expectations, from disappointment.

These disciples of John the Baptist, and John the Baptist himself who was now in prison for his preaching and especially because he had mixed politics and religion in his preaching, were disappointed. They had expected more fire and brimstone from Jesus, more judgment.

What bothered John the Baptist was that he kept hearing about Jesus healing people of their diseases: the blind were receiving sight, cripples were walking, lepers were being cleansed, and good news was being preached to the poor. John heard how Jesus had forgiven a woman caught in adultery who was about to be stoned to death. He heard that Jesus had forgiven and reformed a dishonest tax collector. At a wedding, he had turned water into wine, and by some people, Jesus was even being called a wine-bibber and a glutton.

As John the Baptist sat in prison and heard these things about Jesus, he began to wonder, Did I make a mistake? Is Jesus the Messiah? He wasn’t behaving like John the Baptist had imagined the Messiah would behave.

So John sent some of his own disciples to find out if they could whether or not Jesus was the Promised One from God. Thus they came to Jesus with the question, Are you he who is to come or shall we look for another? Or as we might ask the question today, Is this all there is?

How did Jesus deal with the disappointment of John the Baptist? Knowing that will help us deal with our own disappointments. It will help us answer the question, Is this all there is?

First of all, Jesus did not seem surprised by the question from John the Baptist. Jesus’ message and mission had been misinterpreted before and it would continue to be. We all have different expectations, and when they are not met, we are disappointed.

So Jesus was not defensive, nor did he criticize the disciples of John the Baptist for their question. He knew that anyone who hopes and dreams can expect some disappointment. Alexander Pope wrote years ago, “Blessed is the man who expects nothing, for he shall never be disappointed.”

As Christians, we know that some disappointment is going to be a part of every human being's life. Our faith does not promise us a life free of disappointment. We are not promised that all of our wishes and expectations will be met.

God has created us with the capacity to dream and with the wish to build and have a better world. Having expectations is built into our nature. And when we have expectations, the fact is that all of them are not going to be fulfilled according to our desires. Thus, some disappointment is inevitable.

Sam Keen wrote: "Life is not a bowl of Librium. And a good part of the secret of happiness lies in learning to suffer with dignity. Loneliness, loss, disappointment, failure, disease, boredom are inevitable. The price of trying to avoid the unavoidable is illusion, or neurosis. Even if you jog, eat health foods, grow, meditate, and go to confession regularly, you will sometimes fall sick."

Even though our Christian faith does not promise us a life free of disappointment, many times it seems as if the world around us does. There are many people who have been duped into believing that all of their expectations will be fulfilled. This is a pervasive attitude in our society, especially in these times. We believe we are entitled to gratification by virtue of our birth. Thus, for many people, their disappointment in life is a consequence of the belief that they have an inalienable right to the satisfaction of all of their desires.

And there is a corollary to this belief about all of our gratifications being satisfied. It goes something like this: "Yes, existence is filled with loneliness, anxiety, boredom, meaninglessness. The way to avoid these discomforts is to surround yourself with all manner of goods. Acquisition is the answer to alienation and misery and disappointment."

To put it another way, what we frequently do is to empower objects. A couple determines that buying a new house in another location will correct the disturbing impasse in their marriage. Once settled in their new residence, they are plagued by the same relationship problems. The new house offers no cure for their alienation from each other.

A college sophomore wants a new sports car to enhance his image and combat inner feelings of unworthiness and inadequacy. After getting the new car, he discovers that even at 120 MPH, he feels bad about himself.

We are particularly attracted to objects we can't possess. It's part of the belief that acquisition is the answer to alienation and misery. But according to the Christian faith, nothing could be further from the truth.

Secondly, Jesus knew that in addition to accepting the fact that some disappointment is inevitable, we can deal with our disappointments and learn from them by being willing to re-examine our expectations and taking another look at what is.

In effect, that's what Jesus asked John the Baptist to do. He said to the disciples of John the Baptist, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them."

Jesus was saying—"Forget your expectations and disappointment for a moment and take another look at what's happening. I don't know what you and your teacher John the Baptist expected to see, but this is what's happening, and it's valid. Take another look."

Sometimes wonderful things are happening, but we simply take them for granted and thus miss what's happening. A friend told me recently of his plans to move for the third time in as many years. He lives in a lovely beach home with a magnificent view of the ocean. Around and near his home are a number of beautiful hiking trails, and there are wildflowers everywhere. I asked him why he might want to leave such a beautiful setting.

"Oh, I'm tired of it," he responded indifferently. "It was terrific when I first moved in, but now it's just the same old thing. I can't see it anymore."

"I can't see it anymore." How accurate that statement is. His eyes literally failed to look out at the ocean. He walked by the flowers without so much as a glance. He thought of his home as merely a place to lay down his head. Living in paradise, he might just as well have resided at the city dump. Nine people out of ten would have jumped at the opportunity to rent my friend's house, yet he no longer appreciated its virtues.

We human beings have a curious capacity to take things for granted. The most exquisite diamond loses its luster with familiarity. Even miracles fail to astonish when they're commonplace. And soon we are asking, Is this all there is? The mystery and wonder have gone out of our lives, and we are disappointed.

Many people walk through life unconsciously, only going through the motions. They eat without tasting, listen without hearing, look without seeing. They are preoccupied with thoughts of the past and the future, and never truly experience the present.

Jesus said, "Take another look, a fresh look at what's happening in your life and all around you." Re-examine your expectations. Maybe the answer God is giving you to the question, Is this all there is? is "Yes, that's all there is, but what you forget is that it's enough. In fact, it's more than enough."

Jesus was not talking about the kind of Stoic resignation, or about not having any expectations or goals. He was not talking about the throwing up of the hands and saying—"Whatever will be, will be," drivel.

Later the Apostle Paul put it into other words when he said, "I have learned in whatever state I am to be content." It's so rare, in this life, to meet a truly free person, a person who can say in all honesty: "Whether I live or I die, whether I succeed or fail, whether I am in riches or in want, I am content."

If you need the praise, the validation, the adulation of the world, or happiness or riches, and continual joy in this life to make your life, you are going to be miserable, and you will be continually asking, Is this all there is? If you have God, you have all there is. Amen.