Book 28

Sunday July 24, 1994

WHAT IS THE QUESTION? Mark 10:17-22

Sometimes in the afternoons when I am in my car on the way to visit someone in the hospital or I am on some other church business, I listen to the car radio. One of the "talk-radio" programs I frequently hear features a psychologist, Dr. Joy Brown. People call in to talk with her about all kinds of problems and decisions they are trying to deal with in their lives. In an attempt to get the caller to focus on what the real issue is in that person's life, Dr. Brown will frequently ask, "What is the question you want to ask me?" In other words, "What's the central issue you are facing in your life as you understand it?"

To know how to ask the right question is crucial. On the old Johnny Carson show not very many years ago, there was a regular feature called "The Question Man." The premise was that there are a lot of answers floating around, but people have forgotten the questions so the answers are meaningless. An answer would be given and then Johnny would provide the question. I did a sermon some years ago with the title, "If Christ Is The Answer, What Is The Question?"

Knowing what questions to ask of yourself and of life and how to phrase them is very important. The truth is that we often need help in asking the right questions.

At a college not long ago, a professor of logic submitted a list of ten questions to her classes

and a large majority of the students answered affirmatively to eight of them. Then the professor re-phrased the questions and now most of the students answered "no" to them. Both times the students were responding more to the words of the questions rather than to the ideas as expressed in them.

Being able to ask the right question so that an honest answer is obtained is not as easy as it sounds. And if you are the listener, being able to hear the true meaning of a question, the idea in the question is not as easy as it seems. How the question is phrased can elicit a different answer.

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 each one 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 point of 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 the Pope whether it was proper to smoke while one is praying, and the Pope answered, 'certainly not, praying is serious business and you should have no distractions." "And how did you phrase your question?" The other answered, "I asked the Pope if it was proper to pray while smoking, and the Pope said, 'certainly, prayer is always in order.'"

What the key questions are and how we ask them, are especially important issues for those among us who want to discover and enjoy the deeper meaning in life. It's not a new problem.

People were all the time asking Jesus questions. Some were direct and straightforward questions and others were cover- ups for deeper questions. In the story we heard from the Gospel of Mark read earlier, a man came to Jesus and asked a question that had been on his mind for sometime. "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus heard, behind these words, some deeper questions--"How can I make more sense out of my life?" "What can give my life meaning and direction?" "What is lacking in my life?" "How can my life become more connected to God's eternal meaning and

purpose for me and for all of creation?"

In order to help this man discover the deeper questions and therefore to find the answers behind his surface question, Jesus said, "You know the commandments. You shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear falsewitness; you shall not defraud; honor your father and mother." "O yes," said the man, "I've been following all of these since I was a youth." The man was admitting to Jesus, however, that simply following the rules, as important as that is, was not enough. He was a good, upright, moral person, but there was still an emptiness in his life. Something was lacking.

Then Jesus said to him, "Go, sell what you have

and give to the poor and come follow me." This was an answer the young man had not expected. The story ends with the young man rejecting the answer to his question. Mark writes: "When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions."

Jesus was telling this individual that if he wanted to discover the good life, if he truly wanted to find joy and meaning in his living, he would have to change directions in a more radical way than he had expected.Although the young man didn't like the answer that Jesus gave and couldn't accept it, Jesus had helped him to discover the important question. That brief conversation with Jesus was perhaps the most important conversation he ever had in his life. I like to think that although this is the end of the story as Mark

tells it, the young man continued to reflect on this conversation with Jesus and that later on he did take the action which Jesus suggested.

The point here is that sometimes our questions are too narrow or too shallow, and that we need help in discovering the wider and deeper questions behind them. A person will ask, "What's wrong with my marriage?" And then he or she will decide that the answer is that a new spouse is needed and so a divorce is sought. However it is possible that the deeper question behind that one is, "What's wrong with the purpose of my life?" If that's the question, then a new spouse may not be the answer.

Another issue related to this is that even when we begin to ask a question such as "why am I

unhappy with my life," we have a strong tendency to want to blame something outside ourselves for our unhappiness. So often we hear ourselves and others make statments like the following: "She made me angry." "He got me upset." "If my parents had been kinder or more supportive, I would have been happier." "Balancing my checkbook drives me crazy." "Your questions about our relationship make me feel insecure." We talk as if our emotions (anger, upset, happiness, craziness, insecurity or excitement) are totally caused by people and/or events outside ourselves.

As I read the New Testament stories about Jesus, it is clear that an important part of his ministry was helping people to ask the right questions and then to accept some personal responsibility

for the answers. Until we begin to ask the right questions, it's very difficult for us to discover the right answers.

The problem today is that most of us because we are so busy and are under daily pressure to act, to do, to decide, fail to stop and think, to consider and to examine our lives, our directions, our priorities.

Recently a woman said to me, "When I was 20 years old and in college, we used to sit up late at night talking about important things like life and death, good and evil, God and meaning. Now I'm 45 years old and when I get together with friends, all we ever talk about is what the children are doing, what's on sale at the mall, and who Nebraska is playing next weekend. We never talk

about the deeper issues of life. And that's so strange, because now we've all lived long enough to have some real questions and we have enough experience to begin to formulate some answers." Then she added, "One reason I like to attend church once a week is because then I'm taking at least a little time to consider some of the deeper issues in life."

This remarkable woman had come to a realization once expressed by Socrates when he pointed out that in our busy lives something unfortunate begins to happen. The most important things we think and talk about the least. And the least important things we think and talk about the most. The result is predictable.

Thus many people when they do stop to think more deeply about their lives, feel like they're lost in the woods without a map or compass. And that's where our Christian faith is so important. It can provide the map, the compass. It can help us formulate and ask the important questions about life and it can lead us in discovering the answers as well.

Here are two important points from our Christian faith which will help you in asking and answering the right questions.

Point number one: Jesus taught that greatness according to God's values is a spiritual condition. It is not primarily a matter of wealth, fame, power or social standing. It is not at its heart a matter of outer trappings, but instead is one of inner

realities. Therefore the meaning of things lies not in things themselves, but in our attitude toward them. The way we choose to see the world creates the world we see. Jesus taught that happiness is a choice.

If meaning is a matter of inner attitude, and greatness is ultimately a spiritual condition, we need to ask ourselves: with what attitude do we approach our daily work? Our family activities? What is the spirit of our daily routine? What kind of spirit is there in the workplace? What is the spirit in our homes? Only you can choose the attitude that you are going to have.

Remember too that all human beings have spiritual needs. We all need to find inner satisfaction in what we do, at work and at home.

We need to feel that we are a part of some of community of common values and positive attitudes. Only in that sort of setting are we most likely to attain the personal and corporate greatness of which we are capable.

What is the question that emerges from this? The question for you to ask and answer is: how am I meeting my spiritual needs?How am I satisfying my spiritual hunger? Am I living a good life, or simply chasing the good life?

The second point that Jesus taught is this: we all need a big picture for our lives, a broad context, a frame of reference, an ennobling conception of what we're doing and a vivid vision to guide us and motivate us. The Bible says, "Without a vision, the people perish." Again, that's what our

Christian faith at its best can provide, a vision, a frame of reference, a sense of direction and purpose for our lives.

I've come to believe that a major cause of many of the problems we see in the world today, from a personal level to the national and international level is that so many people nowadays have no positive vision for their lives, their families, their communities, their countries and for what human life is all about on this earth. And so they perish. Chaos threatens and evil creeps in. Even people who have some vision for their lives frequently have an insufficiently clear, positive and inspirational vision.

Wasn't that the main problem with the young man who came to Jesus? His only purpose for

living was following the rules and hanging on to his wealth. We all need a big picture for our lives within which the smallest act of kindness, exertion or creation can make sense. We need a picture within which sacrifice and self-discipline can make sense.

So today and in the days to come, in addition to asking how and if your spiritual needs are being met, I also encourage you to examine the big picture for your life and to consider whether or not you are simply chasing the good life or living a good life?

This will take some courage on your part because as part of this examination you will also need to accept your disappointments and losses and go on from there. And another part of this

courage is the willingness to acknowledge your mistakes. Being right is one of the most satisfying experiences in the world. That's why people find it so difficult to change because sometimes it means admitting they were wrong.

A person once said to me, "But if I make that kind of change it means that I wasted the first 40 years of my life." Some people would prefer to go on making the same mistake for another 40 years rather than admit they made a mistake and cut their losses. Amen.