Sunday, November 12, 1995
APPROPRIATE AND INAPPROPRIATE QUESTIONS
Luke 20:27-38

Dr. Carlyle Marney, who passed away some years ago, was a very sensitive, loving pastor. He was also a creative theologian and scholar, in addition to being a popular preacher on university and college campuses. One time, while visiting a college campus and after finishing his prepared remarks, a student asked, “Dr. Marney, would you say a word or two about the resurrection of the dead?” Dr. Marney smiled and gently replied, “I will not discuss that with people like you.”

“Why not?” asked the student.

“I don’t discuss such matters with anyone under thirty,” Marney said. “Look at you, in the prime of life, potent, never have you known honest-to-God failure, heartburn, or impotency. So what can you know of a dark world which only makes sense if Christ is raised?”

There are questions that are appropriate and those that are inappropriate, depending on the circumstances and the context in which they are asked. Whether a question is appropriate or inappropriate also depends on the reason the question is being asked. Is the person asking the question truly seeking information, or is it a baiting “what if” kind of question? Some questions ought not to be asked except by those who are famished for an answer. This is true of the questions we ask each other and the questions we ask God.

A few weeks ago, when a CBS reporter asked Coach Tom Osborne a “what if” question about one of his football players who had recently been reinstated as a member of the team, was the reporter in search of basic information, or was he seeking an attention-grabbing lead for a story? Was it an appropriate or inappropriate question? In most situations, there’s nothing we can do to prevent someone from asking what we consider to be an inappropriate question.

I wonder what would’ve happened if Coach Osborne had smiled at the reporter before replying and then said, “I usually don’t answer theoretical ‘what if’ kinds of questions, but in your case, I’ll make an exception if you will first answer my ‘what if’ theoretical question: What if the football player we are discussing had been your son? What would you have wanted me to do?”

We all know that it’s very difficult to know how to reply to an inappropriate question, and it’s easy to think later, “I should have said something else.” That’s why I always admire people who can reply in a creative way on the spot to inappropriate questions. Years ago, a brash young student asked Reinhold Niebuhr, “Are you saved?” Niebuhr quickly replied, “From sin, yes! From impertinence, no!”

The story read earlier from the Gospel of Luke is about appropriate and inappropriate questions. When some Sadducees asked Jesus about the resurrection, they were not really hungry for an answer. They had gone to Jesus for a little theological ping-pong. They had no personal investment in the question. Their aim was to argue, to embarrass, to force Jesus into taking a particular point of view, and to divide the audience. There was among them no spirit of inquiry or desire to learn. They had already settled the matter in their own minds. The Sadducees did not believe in any kind of resurrection or life after death.

Although Jesus knew that the men who had asked the question did not believe in the presuppositions of their question, he gave them an answer anyway, but it was not the answer they expected.

They had posed their question in terms of a hypothetical woman, married to a succession of seven short-lived brothers, all of whom tried valiantly but unsuccessfully to get a son by her. Then the woman died. So tell us, they asked Jesus, who gets her in the resurrection? Apparently, they thought this was funny.

In addition to the insincerity of their question, its wording betrayed them. The question could've been posed to ask whether we will recognize one another in the resurrection or whether we will continue to be in relationship with those we love in the hereafter. Instead, the answer they sought was whose wife the woman would be. It was a question of property and ownership. To whom will she belong? Which brother's rights will be protected? The question was more legal than theological. What property rights are preserved in the resurrection? The question is not all that different from asking how heaven is zoned or whether stray animals are allowed to roam the streets.

Furthermore, the question was based on the assumption that life with God after death is a continuation of the kind of life we have now. Although Jesus gave no specifics about life in the resurrection, he let the Sadducees know that it is not the same as life here and now. Everything will be changed.

None of the categories we use to arrange life as we now know it will be relevant. Life with God in the resurrection is not like earthly existence, and therefore questions of marital relationships cannot be answered by using models of the life we know.

In this life, marriage and having children are necessary if human life is to continue. The fact that we all die makes this so. However, in the life to come, according to Jesus, there is no death; we are all children of God, so marriage and having children are not necessary. This having of people, one by the other, will be finished. All relationships will be changed, all relationships transformed. Transformed into what? If Jesus knows, he doesn't tell us. The only thing he said is that we will be like angels and will be children of God. And he strongly implied here and in other places that's all we need to know.

One biblical commentator I read this week had some fun with this story by asking, "What if the hypothetical woman the Sadducees talked about were real, and what if she took the risk one day of saying to Jesus after all of her husbands had died, 'It was Eli I loved; will we be together in the resurrection?' Or, 'Lord, they all treated me awfully; am I free of them in the resurrection?' Or, 'Lord, I loved all seven like crazy, can I have them all in heaven?' Who is to say by what word or gesture Jesus might say to her on all counts, 'Yes, better than you imagine, dear daughter.'"

We don't know. We are left in wonderful ignorance, and that's good news. This, after all, is Jesus' point: whatever the resurrection is, it is utterly different than what we have known. Equally important, the emphasis throughout the New Testament from the life and teachings of Jesus is that we are not to worry about the afterlife but to live life fully and lovingly here and now. Then the afterlife will take care of itself.

Therefore, according to Jesus, most of the questions we have about life after this life are inappropriate because they lead us into self-centeredness and are based on the wrong assumptions.

What then are some appropriate questions we need to be asking about our life in the present?

There are many examples from Bible stories in both the Old and New Testaments of appropriate questions that people on their journey of faith asked God or Jesus, and they are good models for the kinds of questions we need to be asking.

In the Book of Exodus, when Moses had a life-changing experience in the presence of God, and when God told Moses that he had been chosen to lead his people out of slavery, Moses appropriately asked, “Who am I that I should go and lead my people? I’m only a human being. I can’t do it alone.” And God answered, “You are right, you cannot do it alone, but remember I will be with you.” It’s always appropriate to ask if God is going to be with you in what you are being asked to do because if God is with you, you are probably doing what God wants you to do, even though you may be reluctant to do it, as Moses was.

When faced with a difficult decision, another appropriate question to ask is: What would Jesus do in the same or a similar situation? The best-selling novel, In His Steps, is based on that question.

One day, a lawyer came to Jesus to ask: “Which of the commandments is the most important, first in priority?” That was an appropriate question. Jesus responded, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Then the lawyer asked another appropriate follow-up question, “Who is my neighbor?” It was in response to that question that Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan. “How can I be of help to my neighbor?” (and neighbor, according to Jesus, is anyone in need) is always an appropriate question.

As the minister of a church congregation, an appropriate question that I continually ask is: What is the purpose of the church according to Jesus? The best answer I’ve found over the years, and one which I keep testing, is: The purpose of the church is the increase among people of the love of God and neighbor.

Let me suggest a few additional appropriate questions for you to ask yourself, but before I do that, here’s an amazing statistic I recently discovered: “Beginning January 1, 1996, every eight seconds, and continuing for the next eighteen years, someone in the United States will turn 50.”

Although it’s difficult to define “mid-life,” most of us would agree that it’s sometime between the age of 35 and 55, and it’s within that period of time that most of us begin a period of self-assessment, which hopefully causes us to ask some very appropriate questions. It’s a time of evaluation, of taking inventory of one’s failures and accomplishments, and of planning for the remainder of one’s life. It’s the time for asking appropriate questions.

Midlife can be, to use one person’s metaphor, like half-time in an athletic event, a time when one can ask, “Am I moving from success to significance?” Or, “Am I making a living or making a life?” These are most appropriate questions.

Some people have used the metaphor of unpacking and repacking one's bag for the rest of life's journey. We need to consider all that we are carrying on our journey to determine if it is truly what we most need for the road ahead. Unpacking simply means taking a long, hard look at what we are carrying and why. It is seeing if our possessions, responsibilities, and relationships are still helping us move forward or if they are dragging us down. It's a very appropriate question to consider not only at half-time but regularly as we follow the way of Jesus.

Not only are we to ask ourselves and each other appropriate questions, but God has some appropriate questions for you and for me. Are you making good use of what God has given you? Are you fulfilling your God-given potential? And in all that you are and do, are you glorifying God? Amen.