Sunday, April 27, 2003
THE RIGHT QUESTIONS
Luke 10:25-29; Mark 12:28-31

Every day, each one of you makes a multitude of choices that affect your life. Some of these decisions are minor and will only impact the next few minutes, hours, or days. Other choices will completely change the direction of your life. Some decisions are easy to make, while others are more difficult. Some of your choices will lead you toward success, and others will bring you face-to-face with failure.

God, in creating you, has given you the gift of free will — the ability to choose between right and wrong, good and evil. God has also given you the ability to ask questions. Therefore, you carry an enormous responsibility. What makes you special and distinguishes you from all other forms of life is your ability to ask the right questions, the capacity to weigh your options, and the ability to make conscious, deliberate choices.

When you were much younger, you eagerly anticipated the moment when you no longer had to do what others told you. You saw your ability to choose for yourself as a priceless gift — and it is. You anxiously waited for the day when you could get out from under years of your parents' rules and take more control of your life. You longed for the time when you could step out and become the controller of your own destiny, savoring the moment when you could decide when to wake up, what to eat, and when to go to bed — or not.

In your youth, it's easy to say, "I'll make my dreams happen later," or, "Next year will be my year." Youth affords you the luxury of believing that "one day" you will magically arrive at the destination of your dreams. But then something happens. Adulthood catches up with you, and a sobering reality sets in: the day you've been waiting for will not magically arrive.

That's because your todays and tomorrows are based on the choices you made yesterday, the ones you made three days ago, three months ago, and three years ago. Therefore, knowing the right questions to ask is crucial. Following the way of Jesus can help you ask the right questions and find the right answers. The Christian way is the best road map for life.

Today, in our worship services, 51 young people will be received into membership in our congregation through the Rite of Confirmation. Your choice today — your decision to follow the way of Jesus — is one of the most important decisions you will ever make. To some of you, it might not seem that crucial, but it is. Since last September, these young people have participated in weekly class sessions and group discussions led by a team of dedicated teachers, all coordinated by our Youth Director, Rita Christensen.

Kathryn Campbell, Matt Geiger, and I have also had the privilege of meeting with the whole group from time to time, and each of these young people has had a personal one-to-one discussion with one of us in our offices during the past several weeks. During these past months, class members have been expected to attend worship services, listen closely to the sermons, write summaries of selected sermons, and volunteer for a specified number of hours in various service projects.

In their class sessions and group discussions, these young people have been encouraged to ask questions, with the assurance that any honest question is a good one. In their one-to-one discussions with Matt, Kathryn, and me, they have also been encouraged to ask us questions,

and we have asked questions of them. We have said to them over and over again, “Do not be afraid to doubt. Do not be afraid to ask questions, to seek new information, and also do not be afraid to believe. The art of gaining knowledge and understanding consists in not being afraid to ask the right questions.”

Every major advance in human history has come about because someone had the courage to doubt and the courage to ask the right question. In the New Testament stories of Jesus, people were continually coming to him and asking questions. One person asked him, “Which is the greatest commandment?” Another individual asked him, “What must I do to find eternal life? What must I do to find meaning in life?” The disciple named Peter asked, “How many times shall I forgive someone who has wronged me; as many as seven times?” Another person said to Jesus, “Our faith teaches us that we are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Who is my neighbor?” Pontius Pilate asked Jesus, “What is truth?” These were all the right questions. I hope each one of you hearing this sermon or reading it will ask these questions and then pay attention to the answers that Jesus gave.

Jesus also asked questions of his followers. One day he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am? What are you hearing about me?” And then he asked them directly the same question, “Who do you say that I am?” Another time, a man came to him and asked to be healed of his disease. Before doing anything, Jesus asked the man, “Do you want to be healed?”

Asking the right questions is not always as easy as it seems. There are many people who ask the wrong questions. A professor of logic at a university submitted a list of ten questions to his class. Each question was to be answered with a “yes” or a “no.” A large majority of the students answered “yes” to eight of the questions. Then the professor rephrased the questions, and just as many of the students answered “no” to them. Both times, the students were responding to words rather than ideas.

One of my favorite stories is about two priests who were 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 both should write to the Pope for his answer. A few weeks later, they met and compared notes. Each claimed that the Pope had supported his view. Finally, one asked, “How did you phrase your question?” The other replied, “I asked whether it was proper to smoke while praying, and the Pope answered, ‘Certainly not. Praying is serious business and permits no distractions.’ And how did you phrase your question?” The first priest responded, “I asked if it was proper to pray while smoking, and the Pope said, ‘Certainly, prayer is always in order.’”

People who design and conduct polls know how important it is to phrase the question the right way if you are going to obtain accurate and useful information. Many times, follow-up questions are necessary. For example, from time to time, polls are taken with the question, “Do you believe in God?” The result will then be reported that 90% of people living in this country say they believe in God. That’s useless information unless the follow-up question is also asked: “What kind of God do you believe in?”

Another follow-up question is also necessary: “How does your belief in God affect the way you live? Has it made you more compassionate?” At other times, pollsters will ask, “Do you attend church?” And the results will report that 72% of those polled attend church. However, unless

the follow-up question is asked—"How frequently do you attend church and is it making a difference in your life?"—the first question is irrelevant.

In the Rite of Confirmation, those being confirmed will be asked three very important questions. They are listed in your bulletin insert. The first: Do you believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior? The second: Do you promise, by the grace of God, to be Christ's disciple, to follow in the way of our Savior, to resist evil, to show love and justice, and to witness to the work and word of Jesus Christ as best you are able? The third: Do you promise, according to the grace given you, to grow in the Christian faith and to be a faithful member of the church of Jesus Christ, to celebrate God's presence in your life, and to further the church's mission in all the world?

All three are the right questions. It has been said that "quality questions create a quality life." However, it is important not only to answer these questions in the affirmative today, but to ask and answer them again and again throughout your life's journey. Not only is it important for the members of this Confirmation Class to continue asking and answering these questions — it is crucial for all of us. These are questions to be lived day in and day out.

The right questions! In addition to those asked in the Rite of Confirmation, here are several more "right" questions that come from the Christian faith. These are questions to be asked and answered continually throughout your life.

Always ask, with every choice you are about to make: Will this choice lead me toward an inspiring future, or will it keep me in the past? Will this choice bring me long-term fulfillment, or will it bring me only short-term gratification? Will it increase the love of God and neighbor? Am I acting from my deepest ethical beliefs, or am I reacting in response to someone else's behavior? Another way to ask this is: Why should I let other people decide how I'm going to act?

Will this choice increase my love and energy for living and doing God's will, or will it rob me of my energy for life? Ask yourself in each situation: Am I primarily looking for what's right, or am I mostly looking for what's wrong?

Here's one more right question: Ask yourself every time you have to make a choice, Is this an act of faith, or is it an act of fear? Every important choice you make is being guided by one of two forces: either it is an act of faith, or it is an act of fear. When you ask this question — Is this an act of faith or an act of fear? — you are seeking support from your highest self, from the image of God in which you were created.

Faith is the foundation of your spiritual life. When you decide to act from faith rather than from fear, you are viewing the world from a higher perspective. When your actions are based on faith, you are choosing to put your ultimate trust in the goodness of God. Amen.