Sunday, August 3, 2003
THE RIGHT QUESTIONS
John 6:24-27

Human beings are question-asking creatures. Small children, at an early age, are continually asking, “Who am I? Who are you? What is the world like?” You will ask these same questions in a variety of ways throughout your life. You have a built-in natural curiosity because you are created in God’s image. Every major advance in human history has come about because someone asked the right question. Why does the apple fall from the tree? Asking that question led to the discovery of gravity.

Sometimes, asking the right question can mean looking at the problem from a different perspective. One of the most effective medical discoveries of all time came about when Edward Jenner shifted the question from why people get smallpox to why people who work in dairies had less likelihood of getting smallpox. From that discovery — that harmless cowpox gave protection against deadly smallpox — came vaccination.

In one of Sherlock Holmes’ cases, his assistant Dr. Watson pointed out that a certain dog was of no importance to the case because it did not appear to have done anything. Sherlock Holmes took the opposite point of view and maintained that the fact that the dog had not barked was of the utmost significance. That realization solved the case.

Another problem to be aware of is that even when you are asking the right question, you can be in too much of a hurry and accept inadequate answers too quickly. Also, it’s not as easy as it seems to ask the right questions. Good questions are underrated in today’s culture because they do not always generate simple and easy-to-understand answers. In addition, it’s difficult to admit that some of life’s fundamental questions may not have satisfying answers, may not have answers yet, or may never have adequate answers in this lifetime.

Two young women were driving to a Christian youth rally and had a terrible auto accident. One of them was killed, the other lived. Why? Someone said to the parents, “God was watching over the one who survived.” However, this answer leads to even bigger unanswered questions. Was God not watching over the one who was killed as well as the one who survived? Is God in the selective providence business? Would God break up a family that way?

It’s natural to ask questions like, why do I have cancer? Why do bad things happen to good people? You want to know because not knowing is unsettling. These are good questions. You should ask them, but that does not mean you will get an immediate answer or that you should accept the first simple answer someone offers. Sometimes you have to live with the question for a long time.

I’m sure you’ve seen signs along the highway or on a bumper sticker that proclaim, “Christ is the answer.” Whenever I see such statements, my response is, if Christ is the answer, what is the question? Answers cannot precede questions and still be meaningful. Years ago, on the Tonight Show, when Johnny Carson was the host, he periodically did a comedy sketch called “The Question Man.” It was based on the premise that there are a lot of “answers” floating around, but nobody knows the question, and then Carson would supply the question. It was a funny routine.

When you ask a question, people will sometimes give you the answer they think you want to hear, rather than the obvious answer. A minister called the children to the front of the church for yet another children's sermon. He began by saying, "I am thinking of something that is brown, has a bushy tail, and every fall gathers acorns for itself. What am I thinking of?" After a long silence, a young child spoke up, "I'm sure the right answer is Jesus, but it sure sounds like a squirrel to me."

It's also possible that there can be more than one right answer to a question. A physics professor asked on an exam, "How would you calculate the height of a building using a barometer?" One bright student knew the right answer that the professor expected. Instead, he gave several other answers, which were technically correct. He said that he would find the person who was in charge of building maintenance and say to him, "Here is a fine barometer. I will give it to you if you tell me the height of this building." Another answer he offered was this: "I would take the barometer and walk up the stairs from the ground floor to the top floor and mark off on the wall with the barometer to discover how tall the building was in barometer lengths."

Sometimes the Bible is described as the book which has "all the answers." It does have a lot of answers, but that is because it first asks, in its many stories and teachings, some of life's biggest and most difficult questions — the right questions. Some of these right questions are ones that people asked Jesus, and other right questions are those that Jesus asked the people around him.

Here are a few examples of the right questions found in the Bible. "Who is my neighbor?" The person who asked that question knew he was supposed to love God with all his heart, soul, and mind, but he still needed to ask the right question, "Who is my neighbor?" The answer Jesus gave in the story of the Good Samaritan is that neighbors are not only the persons who live in your area but any child of God in need. That answer has astounding implications. If it's any child of God, then you could correctly say, as people die from AIDS in Africa, "There goes the neighborhood."

"Am I my brother's keeper?" That question occurs early in the book of Genesis when God asked Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" In that story, Cain had killed Abel. "Whither shall I go from thy spirit?" That question is asked by the Psalmist, but it is a universal question. The answer is that you can never escape from God. "What does God require of you?" is another universal religious question posed by the prophet Micah. The answer: "To do justice, practice kindness, and walk humbly with your God."

Here's another good question from the Bible. Jesus asked, "What does it profit a person if he or she gains the whole world and loses his or her own soul?" That's the question Howard Hughes also asked on his deathbed, and it is the right question in this world of affluence and poverty.

In 1923, eight of the world's wealthiest men met at the Edgewater Beach Hotel in Chicago. At that time, they controlled more money than was in the U.S. Treasury. Twenty-five years later, here is what happened to seven of them:

- Charles Schwab, president of the largest independent steel company, died broke.
- Arthur Cutten, the greatest wheat speculator, died overseas, insolvent.
- Richard Whitney, president of the New York Stock Exchange, died after his release from Sing Sing.

- Albert Fall, a member of the President's Cabinet, was pardoned from prison to die at home.
- Jesse Livermore, the greatest bear on Wall Street, committed suicide.
- Leon Fraser, President of the Bank of International Settlements, committed suicide.
- Ivan Krueger, head of the world's greatest monopoly, committed suicide.

The book of Ecclesiastes is filled with right questions. Here's one example: "What does a person gain by all of the toil at which he toils under the sun?" There is not a single one of you who, at the end of the day, has not wondered from time to time what difference you have made and whether or not your labor counted for anything. I look at the hundreds and hundreds of sermons in my office and think, what will my children do with all of these? The answer is, they will eventually throw them away.

Some of the right questions which Jesus suggested you ask of yourself were not first heard in question form. In the story from John's gospel, some people were searching for Jesus, and when they found him, Jesus knew there was a deeper question hidden beneath the obvious one. So he answered — and I'm paraphrasing—"You have asked this question, and you are looking for me because I fed all those people who were hungry, and you want me to tell you how you can do that so you can get rich." Then he added, "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life."

The implied right question for them and for you and for me is: what is your purpose for living? Is your main goal acquiring more and more stuff? Are you laboring for the food that perishes? That's the right kind of "destination check."

In years past, when boarding an airplane for a flight was easier because there were no security checkpoints, it was common practice for the flight attendant to say, "Before we close the door so we can push away from the gate, this is a destination check. You are on United flight #689, and its destination is Chicago's O'Hare Airport. If that is not your destination, now is the time to exit this airplane." A traveler boarded a plane in Seattle. The flight attendant gave the usual destination check announcement. The traveler did not listen carefully and landed in Auckland, New Zealand. He wanted to go to Oakland, California.

There was also a man who caught the wrong bus. This passenger, according to a newspaper story, boarded a bus with the full intention and desire of going to Detroit from New York City. But when, at the end of a long trip, he came to his destination, he found himself not in Detroit, but in Kansas City. He caught the wrong bus.

All people need "destination checks" for their lives on a regular basis. You need to ask, "In your life's journey, are you headed for the destination you desire — the destination that best fulfills your potential and God's purpose for you as you understand it?"

There are people who do not even know their destination, or if they did know it, they have forgotten. Oliver Wendell Holmes told of the time he couldn't find his ticket after he was aboard a train and it was underway. The conductor watched him fumble through his pockets almost desperately. "You don't need your ticket, Mr. Holmes," said the conductor. "I know who you are. You'll probably find it later, and then it will be OK if you mail it to the Pennsylvania Railroad Co. with a note of explanation." Holmes scowled and said, "The problem isn't the ticket, sir, the problem is, where am I going?"

Where am I going? What am I doing with my life? Am I laboring for the food that perishes or for the food that endures for eternal life? Those are always the right questions.

Some of your dreams and expectations — even if you attain them — aren't worth very much. They have no lasting power. There are those who spend all their time and energy working for goals that perish. Then they lose either way. If they succeed in fulfilling their dream, it perishes quickly, and they are disappointed. If they don't get it, they are very disappointed.

There are people who have no dreams or goals at all, no destination in mind. They don't ask the right questions ever. During the school year, I often drive by the Lincoln High School parking lot in the mornings after classes have started, and I know the classes are in session. In the afternoons, right after school has let out or before the school day has officially ended, I see young people in all sorts of dress. Some of them are going to be late for school and don't care, and in the afternoon, others have left school early. They are standing around with seemingly nothing to do. I wonder if they have any destination in mind for their lives? Will some of them be forever drifting from one thing to another? Will they be laboring for the food that perishes?

I hope you are asking the right questions. Some of them, mentioned in this sermon and coming from the Christian faith, are: Who is my neighbor? Am I my brother's keeper? What does God require of you? What does it profit a person if he gains the whole world and loses his soul? Are you laboring for food that perishes or for food that endures eternally? Amen.