Sunday November 7, 2004

RELEVANT AND IRRELEVANT QUESTIONS

Luke 20:27-38

Some questions people ask are relevant and appropriate, others are irrelevant and inappropriate. Relevant questions are those which are asked for the purpose of gaining new knowledge or additional information that will aid you in your day to day living and make your life more meaningful. Irrelevant questions are asked in order to embarrass or trap someone. Not all questions deserve an answer. Not all questions have an answer.

Last week I heard a sports reporter ask a football coach a "what if" question about one of his football players who had recently been reinstated by the coach as a member of the team. The reporter

asked, “What if this player gets in trouble again? What would you do?” The coach was polite and answered, “I don’t know what I would do until I know the specifics of the situation.”

I wonder what would have happened if the coach had smiled at the reporter and then said, “I usually don’t answer theoretical ‘what if’ 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 want me to do?”

It’s very difficult to know how to reply to theoretical or what if questions which appear to be irrelevant. It’s easy to think later that you wished that you had

given a different answer. I admire people who can reply in a creative way on the spot to inappropriate questions. Years ago a brash young seminary student asked Reinhold Niebuhr, a well known theologian, "Are you saved?" Niebuhr quickly replied, "From sin, yes! From impertinence, no!"

Dr. Carlyle Marney, who died some years ago was a very sensitive, loving minister. He was also a creative theologian and scholar in addition to being a popular speaker on university and college campuses. One time when he was visiting a college campus and had finished his prepared speech, a student said, "Dr. Marney, would you say a word or two about the resurrection of the dead and life after death?" Dr. Marney smiled and

replied gently, “I will not discuss that with people like you.” “Why not?” asked the young man. “I don’t discuss such matters with anyone under thirty,” Marney said. “Look at you, in the prime of life, potent, never have you probably known honest-to-God failure, heartburn, impotency. So what do you know of a dark world which only makes sense if Christ is raised?”

According to the gospel stories, Jesus was often asked irrelevant or impertinent questions. In the story read earlier from the Gospel of Luke, some Sadducees asked Jesus a complicated question about what happens in life after death. It was meant to be a trick question. They hoped he would say something he would later regret. They had

come to him for a little theological ping-pong. They had no personal investment in the question. Their aim was to embarrass, to argue, to try to force Jesus into stating a point of view that would strengthen their opposition to his popularity. 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 life after death.

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

They had posed their question in terms of a hypothetical woman, married to a succession of seven brothers. Each of the seven had died before his wife became pregnant so it was the duty of the next brother to marry her so that the family line would hopefully continue. Then the woman who had been the wife of each of the seven brothers died before she had any children. Their question was: in the life after death, whose wife will this woman be? I am convinced the ones who asked this question thought it was funny.

In addition to the insincerity of their question, its wording betrayed them. The question could've been posed to ask whether people will recognize one another in the life after death, or whether you

will continue to be in a caring relationship with those you cared for in this life?

Instead the question really was whose property will this woman be in the afterlife? It was a question of ownership. To whom will she belong? Which brother's rights will be protected? The question is more legal than theological. What property rights are preserved in the afterlife? The question is not all that different from asking if the zoning rules you have in this world are the same in the afterlife?

The question was based on the assumption that life with God after death is a continuation in every respect of the life you have here and now. Although Jesus gave no specifics about life after

death, he let the Sadducees know that it is not the same as life here and now. Everything will be changed.

None of the categories you use to arrange life as you now experience it will be relevant. Life with God after this life is not anything like your earthly existence and therefore questions of marital arrangements or property rights cannot be answered by using models of the life in this world.

In this life, marriage and having children are necessary if human life is to continue. The fact that all of us die makes this so. However in the life to come, according to Jesus, there is no death. You are all creatures of God so marriage and having

children are not necessary. This possessing of people, one by the other will be finished. All relationships will be changed. All will be transformed. Transformed into what? If Jesus knows, he doesn't tell you. The only hint he gives in this story in Luke's gospel is that you will be like angels and be children of God. He strongly implies here and in other places in the Bible that's all you 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 asked about was a real person, and what if she took the risk one day of asking Jesus after all of her seven husbands had died, 'It was Eli I loved: will we be together in

the life after death?' Or, 'Lord, they all treated me badly, am I free of them in the next life? I hope so.' Or, 'Lord, I loved all seven like crazy, can I have them all in heaven?' I like to think Jesus would say to her, "Your life after this life will be better than anything you can imagine. That's all I can tell you and it's enough."

No one knows what life after this life will be. You are left in wonderful ignorance and that's good news. That's the first main point that Jesus is making in his answer. Whatever life after death is, it is completely different than what you have known and completely different from anything you can imagine.

The second main point which is equally important is this. The emphasis throughout the Bible and especially from the life and teachings of Jesus is that you are not to worry about the afterlife because it can keep you from living your life fully and lovingly in the here and now. The question you should be asking every day is: are you loving God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and are you loving your neighbor as yourself? Are you being compassionate as God is compassionate? Then the afterlife will take care of itself.

According to Jesus, most of the questions you have about the afterlife are not only irrelevant but they lead you into self-centeredness and are based on the wrong assumptions. In the sermon on the

mount Jesus said, “Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.” One of the best short summaries of Jesus’ teachings is made up of these three statements and each contains three words. Life is good. Be happy now. Let it go.

What then are some additional relevant questions you need to be asking about your life in the present? Here’s one example from a Bible story.

When Moses had a life changing experience of the presence of God in which God told him that he had been chosen to lead his people out of bondage, 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." God answered, "You are right. You cannot do it alone. I will be with you."

It's always good to ask if God is going to be with you in what you believe 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 could be reluctant as was Moses.

Here are several additional relevant questions to ask. However before I mention them, here's an amazing statistic I recently discovered. Beginning eight years ago in 1996, every eight seconds and continuing on for ten or more years, someone in the United States will turn fifty.

Although it's difficult to define mid-life, most of you would agree that it's sometime between 40 and 55, and it's within that age span that most people begin a period of self-assessment which hopefully causes you to ask some very relevant questions. It's a time of evaluation, of taking inventory of your failures and accomplishments and of planning for the remainder of your life as best you can.

Mid-life can be, to use one person's metaphor, like half time in an athletic event, a time when you can ask, "Am I moving from success to significance?" "Am I making a living or making a life?" Is the purpose for which you are living a good purpose? These are very relevant questions.

You can also use the metaphor of unpacking and re-packing your bags for the rest of your life's journey. You need to consider all that you are carrying with you on your journey to determine if it is truly what you need for the rest of the journey. You could be carrying excess baggage which is only wearing you down.

Unpacking means taking a long hard look at what you are carrying with you and why. It is examining your possessions, your responsibilities, your relationships, your worries and even the hurts from others that you have found difficult to forgive. What can you leave behind to make your load easier to carry? This kind of unpacking and re-packing is central in the teachings of Jesus.

Not only does Jesus encourage you to ask yourself and others relevant questions, but he implies that every day God has some relevant questions for you. God is always asking, “Are you making good use of what I have given you? Are you fulfilling your God-given potential?” And one day when your life on this earth comes to an end, will it be able to be said of you? “The world is a little better off because you lived.” Amen.