Sunday, June 11, 2006
WHAT'S YOUR QUESTION?
John 3:1-10,16

Human beings are question-asking creatures. 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 throughout your life. Every major advance in human history has come about because someone was not afraid to ask the right question. Why does the apple fall from the tree? Asking that question led to the discovery of the law of gravity.

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

In one of Sherlock Holmes's cases, his assistant Dr. Watson assumed that a certain dog was not important in the case because it did not appear to have done anything. Sherlock Holmes took the opposite point of view and asked why the dog didn't bark. From that question — why the dog didn't bark when it should have — Holmes gained a clue that helped solve the case.

The Bible is filled with good questions. "Am I my brother's keeper?" is found in the book of Genesis when God asked Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" The implied answer is, "Yes, you are to be your brother's keeper." The question, "What does God require of you?" is found in the prophet Micah. The answer: "To do justice, practice kindness, and walk humbly with your God." Here's another good question from the Bible: "What does it profit a person if they gain the whole world and lose their own soul?"

In the gospel stories about Jesus, people were continually coming to him and asking questions. One person asked, "Which is the greatest commandment?" Another asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Peter asked, "How many times must I forgive someone who has wronged me; as many as seven times?" Another person said to Jesus, "Our faith teaches 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?"

When Jesus met a blind man who wanted to be healed, he was asked, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Pontius Pilate asked Jesus, "What is truth?" If you could meet Jesus today in person, what question would you ask? In the Bible story read earlier, a man named Nicodemus came to Jesus in the night to ask some questions. I'll return to that in a moment.

But first, note that Jesus also asked questions of his followers. One day, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am? What are you hearing?" Then he asked them the same question, "Who do you say that I am?" Another time, a man came to him to be healed of his infirmity, and before Jesus did anything, he asked the man, "Do you want to be healed?"

There are questions that do not always generate satisfying answers. Here's an example. Two young women were driving to a Christian youth rally and had a terrible auto accident. One of them was killed, the other survived. The question arises, why did one live and the other die? Someone said to the parents, "God was watching over the one who survived." However, this

answer leads to more troubling questions. Was God not watching over the one who was killed as well as the one who lived? Is God in the business of selective providence?

It's natural to ask questions like: Why do I have cancer? Why do bad things happen to good people? Why do good things happen to bad people? Why is there so much evil in the world? Why is there so much good in the world? Not every question has a satisfying answer. Sometimes you have to live with the question.

It's also important to phrase the question in the right way if you are going to obtain accurate and useful information. Frequently, follow-up questions are necessary. For example, from time to time polls are taken with the question, "Do you believe in God?" The result is often reported that over 90% of the people living in the United States believe in God. Personally, I don't really care how many people say they believe in God. That's useless information unless follow-up questions are also asked: "What kind of God do you believe in? How does your belief in God affect the way you live? Are you more compassionate? Are you a more giving and forgiving person? Are you willing to love your enemies as Jesus taught? Do you treat others as you would have them treat you?"

Now let's return to Nicodemus and his questions and see what can be learned from his encounter with Jesus. Who was Nicodemus? You can assume he was comparatively wealthy, an aristocrat, who belonged to one of the distinguished old Jerusalem families. To be a Pharisee meant you were part of that religious group within the Jewish tradition whose members had pledged themselves to spend their lives observing every detail of the sacred law.

Although some of the stories in the gospels portray the Pharisees as being opposed to Jesus, they were the finest people, the most morally upright and respected in that tradition. The word "Pharisee" means "the separated one," and that describes Nicodemus — a man who separated himself from the world's pleasures in order to lead a life of exemplary devotion and goodness. The story says that he was a ruler of the Jews, which implies that he held a seat in the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court of seventy members. The Sanhedrin was responsible for safeguarding religious orthodoxy and had religious jurisdiction over every Jew in the world.

I suspect Jesus was surprised to have this pillar of the establishment come to see him in secret. Most of his followers were fishermen and other common people with little social standing in the community.

One way to discover how such stories as this one speak to you is to determine how Nicodemus represents you. Here are some of the ways he is like you and me. First of all, he was a solid, respectable citizen who believed he had a solid ethical foundation. But now and then, he sensed a need for a stronger spiritual connection. Have you felt this? Maybe? Maybe not?

There are many intelligent, charming, decent people who most of the time feel no need of deepening their spiritual life. They think of religion as a crutch, and they don't need any help. Their motto is, "God helps those who help themselves." They regard religious faith as a kind of ambulance, the church as an emergency room or hospital, and Jesus as a physician of last resort to whom they turn in crisis or old age. In the meantime, they can take care of themselves.

Such people are by no means anti-religious. They think of the ambulance service as a good thing. They want the best ambulance service and emergency room and doctor available if and when they need it. They might even contribute to the upkeep of the hospital and honor it with their presence on certain occasions.

Even within the church, you can find people like Nicodemus. He represents those who have inherited the Christian faith and have never had a reason to doubt it. Yet at certain times, like Nicodemus, they sense within their lives a spiritual vacuum — something is missing. There is no spark, no vitality in their faith. They are looking for something more when they are willing to admit it.

Second, there are many people today like Nicodemus in the way they approach Jesus. He came secretly. He didn't want others to know there was an emptiness in his life. He didn't want to appear too eager. In his opening statement to Jesus, notice he used the pronoun "we" instead of "I." He didn't want to appear too personally vulnerable. He said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God." I think he was being cautious, lest he become too personally involved and have his life changed.

This was in contrast to others who admitted their spiritual needs openly and without hesitation. Sick people tried to touch him. Others in the crowds shouted for help in an attempt to get his attention. There's that story about four men who brought their friend on a stretcher, and in order to get him to Jesus, they had to go on a roof and take it apart so they could let him down into the room where Jesus was.

Third, many people today are like Nicodemus in that they are not sure what they are searching for. Nicodemus wanted to ask Jesus important questions, but he didn't quite know how to express them. He was like many people who come to counselors, knowing they have a problem but unable to communicate or focus on what the problem is. They know something is missing in their life but are unable to pinpoint it.

Many people come to worship services like this one because they sense something is missing in their lives, but they are not sure what it is. They know there is a deeper spiritual side to life, but aren't sure how to find it.

What was Nicodemus looking for? What were his questions? Perhaps he had heard Jesus teach and had come away persuaded that this young carpenter had a unique and compelling relationship with God, a magnetic spiritual quality, and he wanted something like that. Following all the religious laws, important as that was, had not brought him the inner peace he sought.

In their conversation, Jesus helped him focus on the right issues. Jesus said, "I tell you, unless one is born from above, he cannot see the Kingdom of God." At first, Nicodemus misunderstood what Jesus was saying. He asked, "How can an individual be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Jesus was talking about a spiritual birth so that Nicodemus could begin to experience the loving energy in his own life and all around him. Notice especially that Jesus never implied that Nicodemus was outside the realm of God. He said, "Unless you are born from above, you cannot see the realm of God." He was saying, "You are already in God's loving care. You are already part of it, but you don't see it. God's love is all around you, but you are blind to it."

This is the only reported incident in the teachings of Jesus where he used the metaphor “born from above” or “born again.” When other individuals came to Jesus with their questions on how to more deeply experience the presence of God, he gave different answers. To some, he said simply, “Follow me.” To another person, he said, “If you want to experience the presence of God at work in your life, sell all you have and give the money to the poor, and come follow me.” To another person seeking spiritual direction, Jesus told the story of the good Samaritan and said, “Go and love other people and be a neighbor to them in the same way as the Samaritan loved and helped the injured Jew in the ditch by the side of the road.”

I see and hear a lot of people who pride themselves on being “born again” Christians, but not very many who claim to be “sell all you have and give to the poor” Christians, or even “good Samaritan” Christians.

Jesus was a superb spiritual counselor. When someone came to him with a question about how to more deeply experience the presence of God, he first pointed out the barriers in that person’s life which had to be removed.

What’s your most burning question at this stage in your life? In addition to your own, I hope you will continue to ask such questions as: Does the way I’m living my life increase among people the love of God and neighbor? Will the choices I am making bring me long-term fulfillment or only short-term satisfaction? Am I doing justice, practicing kindness, and walking humbly with my God? Amen.