

“Questions, Questions, Questions ...”
John 9:1-41

The lady of the house was stark-naked and just about to step into the shower when the doorbell rang. She hollered, "Who is it?" He shouted back, "It's the blind man." She figured it was safe, so she opened the door. He looked at her in shock and finally he asked, "Where do you want me to hang these blinds, lady?"

That humorous story was told by Ann Landers as an encouragement to ask the right questions. It is important to ask the right questions, because if you ask the wrong question you will get the wrong answer every time. The gospel lesson of the healing of the blind man is told in several scenes, and each scene centers around the asking of questions, lots of questions, different kinds of questions.

When Jesus saw the man who had been born blind the disciples asked him who had sinned to cause this man's blindness. In that time it was commonly accepted that disabilities and all kinds of misfortune and illness were retribution for some kind of sin, something that had been done wrong. In fact, usually it was assumed that the person affected was the guilty party so the disciples' question which opened the possibility that it was the man's parents was an advance of some sort, but Jesus refused to be a part of the blame game.

We like to think that we are more progressive than that but we are also adept at the same kind of thinking, for its effect is to avoid taking any kind of personal responsibility for our response to other's suffering. We like to ask "Why?" We want to know the diagnosis. We want an explanation. When we know then we can be assured that we are still in control. It has become very fashionable among many people, even people of faith, to blame the condition of the poor upon the poor; their circumstances are obviously because they have failed to show personal responsibility. We blame the oppression of the oppressed upon the oppressed. It is safer that way. It means that we can feel comfortable in not doing anything. It means that we don't have to change.

But Jesus has nothing to do with that kind of thinking. Jesus remained focused in all he did and in all he taught on bringing glory to God. It's not even that he fixed everything and everyone because he didn't. Jesus did not deliver us from the frailty and the finiteness of human life but he brought salvation and healing so that in every circumstance we might be aligned in relationship to God.

We are most truly aligned to God when we are most powerless and when we are most inclined to surrender to God's initiative of love toward us. When Jesus says that God's works will be revealed it is another way of saying that if you want to find out who someone is, one way to do that is to look at what they do. Take a look at what they do and the quality of what they do. Much will be revealed about them. That is what Jesus is saying when he talks about working the works of him who sent me. Jesus kneels down and spits on the ground and using his hands to

work his saliva into the dirt he makes mud, he engages in the work of creation. He is not afraid to get his hands dirty.

Up until this point what had the blind man done? Nothing. He was completely passive. The only thing he had done was to not run away. This week as I studied this passage a number of commentators talked about how this passage is an illustration of faith in Christ, but when I actually read the passage I could find no mention of faith at all. There are many other stores of healings where the faith of the person being healed is central, but not this one. The central attribute of the man born blind was his willingness.

The man is willing to have Jesus cover his eyes with mud. He did not resist and he did not run away. He was willing and his willingness continued when Jesus gave him the instruction to go and wash in the pool of Siloam which John helpfully points out to us means “sent.” In order for someone to be “sent” they must be willing. It was through the man’s willingness that he received his sight.

There follows a series of scenes where this man who is seeing for the first time in his life gets all kinds of questions. Questions, questions, questions. I bet this man had never had so many questions in his life. The only question he had had to deal with so far was the question of blame, “Why has this happened to you? What have you done?” and the only response that he had had to give was to beg, to ask for mercy, but in his healing all of this began to change.

At first his neighbors ask Who is this? They are used to seeing a beggar. They needed him to be a beggar. He was the one to receive their mercy; he received their alms so they could feel good about themselves, but here this man was walking around. He looked like the same man but he couldn’t be because “once a beggar always a beggar.” The neighbors wanted to know what had happened and the man told them about a “man called Jesus.” That was all the man knew. He knew his name. He didn’t know anything more about him and he didn’t know where he was.

This was upsetting to their world so they brought him to the religious authorities. The question of “Sabbath” was raised. There are a lot of Sabbath controversies in the gospels. Jesus was always getting in trouble for breaking the rules of the Sabbath. You might think that he didn’t really believe that keeping the Sabbath was that important, but that is far from true. Jesus is the Sabbath. In the Ten Commandments the Sabbath is the most important gift that God has given us. The observance of Sabbath is central to our characters because it is where we most consistently say YES to God’s ongoing creation in us. It is where, as a regular rhythm in our lives we exercise our willingness to surrender to what God wants to do in our lives.

The authorities were more concerned with the rules about Sabbath than about Sabbath. The man dutifully repeats what Jesus had done to him. There was a

division of opinion. How could someone who seems to break the rules be of God? They could not come to agreement so they asked the man what he thought. It is really possible that this was the first time in this man's life that his opinion had been asked. He said, "I think he is a prophet." And no one listened. They were too busy trying to work out their own anxieties and preserve their own sense of being in control.

In the next scene the whole community is involved. The two cousins of skepticism and cynicism were running high amongst the people. After all, how could you take the word of a man who had been blind all his life? What could he know? He was unsettling the order of the community, so they called for the parents of the man.

The parents are central to this healing story because they reveal the what is the central risk and the central issue in who Jesus is and what Jesus reveals about the nature of God. The parents are not stupid. They have eyes to see and ears to hear and they are well acquainted with how this community works. They have born the brunt of burdensome questions about their son his entire life. They know what it is like to be the object of suspicion. Just because their son has received his sight does not mean the suspicion has gone away. What is at issue here is the real potential of exclusion and the risk of being ostracized and shunned.

If the parents witness to the healing of their son they risk being thrown out of the community, and they are not willing to do that. They are very guarded in their response. They no longer claim their son, "Ask him; he is of age. He will answer for himself." They could have been a witness but they remained silent. They knew what was at stake, and they did what was needed to preserve their standing in the community. They did so at the expense of their relationship with their son.

Again the man is brought to answer questions. He is prompted by saying, "Give glory to God!" What is assumed in all of this controversy is that the glory of God and the work of God which reveals the character of God can only be revealed by separating our selves from God. God is holy. We are sinful and that separation must be maintained at all costs. It ignores the revelation that "God so loved the world that he came". It seeks to preserve the status quo and resists the work of God because the work of God is the same as the salvation of God. It is restore relationship by witnessing to the reality that God is present and that God's desire is to be in relationship everywhere God is present, and that relationship is God's desire to express love to us and within us and to use us to express God's love. That love is God's character.

But all that is too much for us as it was too much for those entrusted with the life of this community. They called for the man a second time and asked him the same questions all over again. This formerly blind man is growing in his

willingness, but at the same time the community is calcifying in its stubbornness. The man formerly blind asks them why they want to hear the same answers all over again. He asks the question of willingness, "Do you also want to become his disciples?" At that question everyone there reviled him. The conversation goes downhill from there and this man, who has just received his sight after a life of blindness is thrown out of the community.

Jesus heard about this, and at that point again Jesus takes the initiative. Jesus goes. Jesus finds the man. He asks him if he is willing to believe in the Son of Man. That is not just a title. It means that In Jesus God reveals to us what it truly means to be human. The man asks a question that is different than any other question so far. It is different because it is asked with an attitude of willingness. The question itself is not that much different from the questions of the authorities and the community but in the attitude behind the question everything is different" "Who is he, sir? Tell me so that I may believe in him."

Jesus replies, "The one speaking with you is him." This man, ostracized by the authorities, reviled by the community, unclaimed by his parents, says "Lord, I believe." He may be by himself, but he will never be alone again.

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