

## Dumb Questions

It's an exchange I'm sure we've all heard. Most of us have probably participated in it, at least once in our lives. It goes like this – Student: “I've got a question but it's probably dumb.” Teacher: “Oh, there are no dumb questions.” We all recognize that, right? I've been a student long enough that I know I've prefaced more than a few queries with, “This may be a dumb question, but...” And I've been a teacher, a pastor, or a supervisor for enough years that I can't count how many times I've reassured a student, employee, or parishioner with, “There are no dumb questions.” That's what good teachers do, right? They reassure nervous students so that the pupil's anxiety level doesn't interfere with their learning. Half the battle of teaching, it seems to me, is convincing others that they can learn.

The reality, of course, is that there *are* dumb questions. When a good teacher has spent hours explaining the same concepts over and over to a group or an individual, giving various examples and stories aimed to illustrate the point, patiently fielding the same questions from different students in the same class or even from the same individual, that question, repeated for the umpteenth time, is a dumb question. It often reveals that the student who asks it hasn't been paying attention. Or it illuminates a basic difficulty in understanding – somehow the language the teacher is using isn't communicating to the student.

There can be various reasons for this. The teacher and the student may speak different languages. In our culture, in which America has been the recipient of immigrants from around the world since at least 1492, it's a very real possibility that a teacher may have in their classroom or a preacher may have in their congregation someone for whom English is not a first language. Sometimes, even when that newcomer seems fluent in their adopted language, nuances such as regional idioms can escape them. That's not a failure of attention or intelligence, although it's often mistaken as such. That's just a learning that hasn't happened yet.

Another possibility is that the teacher is using language in a way that the student either doesn't understand or doesn't expect. If the student is expecting a straightforward description of a process from a teacher and the teacher instead gives a metaphorical comparison between the process and some other commonly understood happening in the world, the student may be bewildered. If a naïve young thing asks an older, better read, love interest, “Do you love me?” and the party of the second part responds, “Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?” the party of the first part may retort, “What's the weather got to do with it?” Or the teacher may use a mode of expression that the student doesn't have enough experience to understand or which the student may simply not expect. I mean, y'all would *never* expect me to be sarcastic, right?

Language is a funny thing. Sometimes, even we mean to be clear in conversation, we later discover that all we've done is muddy the waters. There's a metaphor for you, by the way. And in the teacher/student interaction language can be particularly difficult. There are some things that any of us know so well that it can be very hard to communicate them to someone who's just learning about them. That's why one of the basic exercises in a public speaking or speech class is an explanatory speech in which one describes in excruciating detail how to do some everyday activity like tying one's shoes or making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. If you never took speech, try that exercise sometime with a small audience determined to play dumb. You'll gain a whole lot of respect for teachers.

## Dumb Questions

So, if language can be tricky when explaining the most quotidian details of life, consider how tricky it can be to discuss things which are ultimately inexplicable. Quantum mechanics and string theory come to mind but so do more everyday questions such as “when does life begin and when does it end?” or “what happens to us when we die?” or “what’s a soul?” We can draw some rough approximations to answer those questions but in reality they are still mysterious to doctors and scientists as well as to you and to me.

At the top of the list of those mysterious things in life is God and the ways of God. Here with me I’ve got a fairly substantial collection of writings from just two of the world’s vast assortment of religions and philosophies that have dealt with this question. I draw upon this collection every week in the time that you’ve given me to stand up here and talk to you but I’ve never run short of material. We could add to this volume all of the many other works treasured by our Jewish friends as being revelatory of God – the Mishnah, the Midrashim, and so forth – or those treasured by Christians through the ages – the work of the Church Fathers or later theologians such as Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, or Arminius, or moderns like Barth, Bonhoeffer, Moltmann, Teilhard, Tom Wright, and all the rest – and still we would not plumb the depths of understanding our Ineffable God.

I’m reading a book right now, in fact, by an Irish post-modern theologian named Dr. Peter Rollins, which is titled How (Not) to Speak of God. It’s what’s known by theologians as an apophatic theology: that is to say, Rollins begins with the idea that God can never be described by mortals and the best we can do is to say what God is not. It’s the equivalent of a saying from Eastern religions which my friend Fr. John Forman is fond of quoting: “The tao that can be spoken is not the true tao; nevertheless, we must speak.” Lest you think that apophatic theology, sometimes called the *via negativa* or Negative Way, is a recent, post-modern construction roughly grafted on to Christian theology, let me assure you that apophatic theology has a rich tradition in our faith, beginning with such noted theologians as Tertullian, Meister Eckhart, and many more. Rollins reminds current readers that ambiguity is very much a part of Christian faith. It’s one of the reasons that the mission statement for Good Shepherd Baptist Church since the 70s has included the statement, “We welcome the open sharing of a variety of viewpoints (including Biblical interpretations) and Christian expression...”

So, with that very long preamble, let’s take a quick look at our passage for the morning and see if we can decide whether the questions by the Pharisees and Jesus’ disciples fall under the heading “dumb question” or whether they had a right to be confused. The way Luke tells the story, once we grasp *his* idioms and share his context, can make it seem like Jesus’ audience was composed of numbskulls but we might want to rely more on our spiritual humility than on the two thousand years of second guessing we can draw on.

The passage begins with a question to Jesus from some Pharisees: “Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming...” On the one hand, this seems like a perfectly understandable question. The Pharisees were a respected group of religious leaders. They took the commands and statutes of Torah very seriously. They were determined to lead lives pleasing to God so that God’s kingdom *would* come and come soon. They were all too aware of the plight of the Jewish people – the exile they had endured, the domination by mighty empires, the current occupation by Rome. They wanted a country where they and their neighbors could live

## Dumb Questions

in peace and prosperity, in *shalom*, and they were doing everything they knew how to do to bring that future to pass. Whether they asked Jesus this question because they respected his ability to answer or whether they were being snarky, as they are sometimes portrayed, and trying to trip him up, at its heart, this was a question of vital importance to them.

On the other hand, by this point in Luke's telling of the Jesus story, Jesus has already spent a lot of time talking about the kingdom and what it looks like. The lectionary skips some things and I've preached some weeks out of passages besides the Gospel but if you look back in Luke, you'll see that Jesus has told parables of lost sheep and coins and sons, of banquets and mustard seeds and yeast, of fools and shrewd men... the list goes on and on. So, maybe Jesus could have been excused for saying to his interlocutors, "Have you guys not been paying attention?" But he doesn't. Instead, he probably drew a deep breath and tried again to break it down. "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you."

Even this seemingly simple explanation has left students of the Bible scratching their heads for twenty centuries. To begin with, the Greek preposition in the last sentence is ambiguous. Over the centuries, it has variously been translated "within," "among," and "in the midst of." I find this ambiguity delightful rather than troubling. If we take as our starting point the paradoxical understanding that the Kingdom is both now and not yet, then we can utilize all of these translations in a nuanced understanding of Jesus' response to the Pharisees. Did he indeed mean "the kingdom of God is within you?" Certainly our response to God's calling in our lives begins as a tiny seed within, something like that mustard seed that Jesus had spoken of and that we heard Meryl Baker-Garcia tell the children about just a couple of weeks ago. We might even say that it is always within us, we just need to realize it is there and pay attention to it. Or did Jesus mean, "the kingdom of God is among you" or "in the midst of you?" The "you" in this verse, by the way, is plural – the kingdom is among y'all. This makes the saying very similar to Jesus' words in Nazareth after he quotes Isaiah: "'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.' And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'" Since Jesus is in their midst, the inaugurated kingdom is as well. And so it continues, even today, since Jesus promised "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

What is clear is that Jesus' teaching here is not to run around looking for the kingdom. It is within us; it is among us. We don't have to wait for a sign to get about the business of the kingdom. We don't have to puzzle over the interpretation of Scripture and how external signs and events may or may not herald some positive catastrophe of God's presence. The kingdom of God is underway and it is up to us to get on the train.

Jesus uses slightly different metaphor to say this but the message is the same. When the crisis of realization comes in your life, when you wake up to the kingdom imperative, then act. Don't wait around. Some folks may be oblivious, just like they were in the days before the flood or in Sodom and Gomorrah before they were destroyed. Don't be like that. Don't look back in

## Dumb Questions

longing for your pre-enlightened life like Lot's wife. When you hear the call, act! Don't be left behind.

The disciples are just as confused as the Pharisees. "Where are we going? Where are we going to be left? Where are we going to be when this happens? What did you say?" It's tempting to think they've been too busy enjoying Jesus' correction of the Pharisees to actually hear the lesson. Jesus answers them, too, but this metaphor may be a little trickier for us. The old King James translation is, "Wheresoever the body *is*, thither will the eagles be gathered together." Huh? The NRSV is slightly more helpful: "Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather." Well, I did say *slightly*. Think about it this way: where do you see crows feasting on road kill? The answer is both, "everywhere" and "where there is road kill to be eaten." Crows eating something dead or something left behind are ubiquitous. But they can only eat when there is something to be eaten. The kingdom keeps coming to everyone when they are ready to receive it. It happens everywhere at every moment and at exactly the right time.

When we are good disciples or students of Jesus and have listened to and thought about and taken in his lessons about the kingdom, then we can understand that it has been fully revealed and yet keeps on gaining in realization. We can understand that it is in us and around us even when others cannot see it. Even when, sometimes, we cannot see it. We know that it comes right on time and that it's always been there. It's a joyful mystery. Christ is revealed in the simple, normal things that are found among us, like the sight of crows eating carrion, which is part of the God-ordained circle of life, or in the everyday breaking of bread, sitting down to a meal with friends and family.

Dumb questions? Yeah, maybe. But I ask them all the time. I'll bet you do, too. And when we get to thinking about it, the lessons of Jesus are simultaneously so simple and so profound; easy to understand and confusing as all get out. It's why we return to them again and again, why we come every month back to the table and say, "tell us that story again, you know, the one where Jesus served the bread and wine." It's just one of those stories that we have to keep hearing to keep learning about the kingdom. It's one of those things we do so that we can learn to pass his love around.

For the dumb questions and the profound answers, thanks be to God. Amen.