

The Questions You Ask

Exodus 17: 1-7

Matthew 21: 23-32

Oct 25, 2020

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Exodus 17: 1-7

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?" But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." The Lord said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

Matthew 21: 23-32

When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

"What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

Mr. Whitson taught sixth-grade science. On the first day of class, he gave the class a lecture about a creature called the cattywampus, an ill-adapted nocturnal animal that was wiped out during the Ice Age. He passed around a skull as he talked. The students diligently took notes and later they had a quiz.

When Mr. Whitson returned the quizzes, everyone was shocked. There was a big red X through each and every answer on each piece of paper. All of them had failed. There had to be some mistake! They all began to quarrel with the teacher that they had written down exactly what he had said.

Mr. Whitson explained that he had made up all the stuff about the cattywampus. Indeed there had never even been such an animal. The information in the notes, and so on the quiz, was therefore, incorrect. Did they really expect credit for incorrect answers? Needless to say, the class was outraged. What kind of test was this? And what kind of teacher?

Mr. Whitson told the class that they should have figured it out. After all, at the very moment he was passing around the cattywampus skull--which had actually been a cat's skull-- he had been telling them that no trace of the animal remained. He had described its amazing night vision, the color of its fur and any number of other facts he couldn't have known if no trace of this extinct animal remained. He had given the animal a ridiculous name, and yet they had not become suspicious. The zeroes on the papers were recorded in his grade book, and they remained there.

Mr. Whitson said he hoped they would learn something from this experience. This was never intended to be a lesson about an extinct animal, but rather a lesson on the importance of asking questions, of delving into the depths of a topic, of exploring the answers that are given for accuracy and knowledge. He told the class to not let their minds go to sleep.

What a powerful life lesson, and a wonderful teacher in Mr. Whitson! Had I been a student in his class I don't think I would have felt that way at the time, but he did give the class a tremendous gift. A good teacher, a good leader, does not give the answers as much as point the way. What appeared to be a lesson for a single quiz became a lesson that was lifelong. This story first became public in 2014, and is from the memory of someone who had been in that classroom in 1990. Had the cattywampus been an actual extinct animal the class probably would have forgotten all about it by that weekend.

I love this story, and hope that it means something to you as well. We can easily imagine a room full of 6th graders diligently taking notes, answering the quiz questions, and then their anger and surprise at the twist. We can imagine this for 6th graders, for college students, and honestly, for adults of any age.

We can get so caught up in what we are hearing from so many different sources that we don't stop often enough, long enough, to think about what it is we are hearing. We can fear appearing weak or stupid, so we don't ask the questions that really want to be asked. We can feel overwhelmed and confused, so are not sure sometimes how to ask our questions, or even what to ask. We all have deep questions that burn away in us, we want insight, understanding and answers, even if that sometimes means living into the mystery. The big questions of life meaning and purpose, of what we truly—deep down—believe about God, about evil, about death, about injustice, about faith, about polarizing social issues, can gnaw at us.

Remember what Mr. Whitson would tell us, that we must ask questions, and to not let our minds go to sleep. We must not mistake a cat for a cattywampus.

The truth is that our questions are important, valid and blessed, and so much so that the questions we ask ourselves are at least as important as the answers we come up with. What we ask reveals quite a bit about us and for us.

Our questions can reveal our insecurities, our anxieties, our doubts and our fears, just as they did for the thirsty Israelites who were camped at Rephidim. Joyfully freed from the bondage and oppression in Egypt, God's newly chosen people had praised God as they began their journey to the Promised Land. Then suddenly water, the most basic element of life, could not be found. Anxiety, fear and anger welled up from their dehydration and became a loud, longing question, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" Their question went straight to the heart of their need. They did not gently ask if there

might be water soon. They questioned Moses leadership just as much as they questioned God's presence and mercy. They had placed their faith, hopes, trust and expectations in Moses and in God, yet reality was shattering all of that. Their question led God to send Moses to strike the rock at Horeb so that fresh water would flow, quenching their physical thirst as much as their spiritual and emotional thirst, while renewing their confidence. God answered their question by bringing life sustaining water out of something that appeared lifeless.

Doesn't this make you wonder why the people waited so long before they complained and begged for water in the belief that they would all be killed by thirst? Did it perhaps seem weak, impatient or disrespectful to ask a question until the question became an overpowering cry for their need?

Yet we do the same. We don't want to disturb someone, or seem critical, so we let our concerns, our questions, build up until they overflow with emotion. Asking questions communicates our values just as much as our needs, and the quality of our lives can depend on the questions we ask.

"Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" The thirsty Israelites asked the fundamental question that we all have: In our timeless thirst for living water we ask if God is with us or not. How can we be certain that God is with us, near us, listening to us, and among us? Is God with us or not? It is indeed a fundamental question of faith that the faithful have asked since the beginning.

Asking questions that lead to further questions will point to better answers, and make us more open as Matthew's Gospel tells us. In the midst of his authority being questioned by the temple leaders, Jesus asked a question that was an unanswerable riddle for them, "Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" The temple leaders huddled with whispered questions of their own, weighing the two choices yet choosing neither. Jesus' first question then led to another that again had an either/or choice about the two sons being asked to work in their father's vineyard. One said no, yet worked anyway. The other said yes, but did not work. Only one obeyed their father. "What do you think?"

"What do you think?" Jesus asks that question of us as well, encouraging us to explore the big questions of life meaning and purpose, of what we truly—deep down—believe about God, about evil, about death, about injustice, about faith, about polarizing social issues. Our questions lead us to discover what we really believe, how we really feel, what we value, and ultimately how we will respond and act.

Some of these questions will be answered differently over time, as new insights and life experiences come along. Some questions may just remain elusive, but there is value in asking, as poet and novelist Rainer Maria Rilke advised, "Be patient toward all that is unresolved in your heart... Try to love the questions themselves... Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given because you would not be able to live them — and the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answers." Amen.