

Asking the Right Questions

Luke 20:27-38

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Carlyle Marney, Baptist preacher from the middle part of the 20th century, a scholar, ahead of his time in many ways, came to campus at Duke Divinity School. When a student said, *Dr. Marney, would you say a word or two about the resurrection of the dead?* Marney replied, *I will not discuss that with people like you.*

Why not? asked the student.

I don't discuss such matters with anyone under 30, Marney said. *Look at you, in the prime of life, potent – never have you known honest-to-God failure, hear-tburn, impotency, solid defeat, brick walls, mortality. So what can you know of a dark world which only makes sense if Christ is raised?*

There are questions that ought not to be asked except by those who are famished for an answer. When some Sadducees ask Jesus about the resurrection, they are not really hungry for an answer. They've gone to Jesus for a little theological Ping-Pong.

[Paul Duke, "Transfigured Relations," *The Christian Century*, October 25, 1995]

Three times one group or another went after Jesus in chapter 20. Three different times here in this chapter they went after Jesus.

First, (starting with verse 1) when Jesus was teaching in the temple, the chief priests and the scribes and elders approached Jesus and said, *By what authority are you doing these things? Who is it who gave you this authority?*

Jesus was encroaching on their territory. And so they questioned his authority, his authorization to teach and heal the way he had been doing. The Sanhedrin was responsible for ordaining rabbis, and Jesus hadn't gotten their seal of approval.

Next, the Pharisees took their shot at Jesus. Starting in verse 20, the Pharisees made plans to trap Jesus in saying something wrong. They approached Jesus with a question guaranteed to make somebody mad no matter how he answered it.

Teacher, they said, *we know that you are an honest man and that you teach the truth about God's way. You are not afraid of what other people think about you, because you pay no attention to who they are. So tell us what you think. Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?*

As Max Lucado says, chances are that when a man slaps you on the back he wants you to cough up something. This is no exception. The Pharisees are hoping to flatter Jesus into answering their question and getting himself into trouble—if he says not to pay taxes, he angers the Romans; if he says it is right to pay taxes, he angers the Jews who resented the Roman rule.

Finally, we come to the third encounter, our text for today, verses 27-38. First it was the chief priests, scribes, and elders. Then came the Pharisees. Now, for the third challenger, we have the Sadducees.

The Sadducees were the aristocrats of Jerusalem. They were conservative in their beliefs, but they were not religious fundamentalists or zealots. Their mission was to preserve the Jewish way of life as they understood it, and they were willing to cooperate with the Roman authorities for the sake of their own interests.

The Sadducees approach Jesus with a “what if” scenario. You can read the long version in Luke 20:27-38.

The short version is this: What if a man who has seven brothers dies, and his wife marries one of his brothers and he dies so she marries another brother blah, blah, blah, blah, yada, yada, yada. In heaven, whose husband will the woman be?

These Sadducees, learned aristocrats, finally get their encounter with Jesus. This is their moment—this is their opportunity. They’ve got Jesus right there. They can ask him anything. They can ask him about any of the great and profound issues of life.

And this is what they say: *Teacher, if seven brothers die in succession and each marries the same woman, one after another, to whom is she married in heaven?*

That’s their question? Of all the great issues and concerns in the world, that’s their question? Here they are before the Christ, and this is the best they can do: a question about some obscure, unlikely, hypo-thetical scenario?

I wonder: do we sometimes use our complicated questions to keep Jesus at arm’s length? Do we major on the minor questions to keep from truly encountering God?

Fred Craddock—preacher, emeritus professor at Emory University’s school of theology—tells of his younger years as a brash young Bible scholar. He had just finished reading Albert Schweitzer’s *Quest For The Historical Jesus*.

Albert Schweitzer of course was a theologian and musician and served as a doctor in Africa. He wasn’t a doctor until he felt God’s call to go to Africa and serve as a doctor there.

Here he was – an extraordinarily gifted organist, writer, Biblical scholar, and teacher – a person God was clearly using to do a lot of good in the world. But in the back of his mind, Schweitzer believed that when he reached the age of 30, he would be called into some kind of service which would more directly engage those in need. He tentatively explored various avenues as he neared that moment, but kept his mind open to God’s call.

When he happened on an article from a missionary in the Congo decrying the lack of medical doctors, he knew the call had come. No matter that he was not a doctor. No matter that he had never been to Africa. And so, against all logic, Schweitzer at age 30 enrolled in medical school so that he might follow Christ to Africa.

So Fred Craddock as a college student had read Schweitzer’s book, *Quest for the Historical Jesus*, and found it, in his twenty-year old judgment, lacking in wisdom. He didn’t care for it. He marked up the book as he read. Made notes in the margins. Raised questions. Challenged ideas.

Then one day, Fred read in the Knoxville News Sentinel that Schweitzer was going to be in Cleveland, Ohio to present a

dedication concert for a new organ at a big church up there. According to the announcement, Dr. Schweitzer would remain afterwards in the fellowship hall for conversation.

So Craddock bought a Greyhound bus ticket, and – book in hand – went up to Cleveland. He wrote out his list of questions on a separate page, along with references to the pages in the suspect book, and he was ready to do religious battle.

Well, Fred got there and heard the concert. Then he rushed down to the fellowship hall where he was the first to arrive. He got a seat in the very front row. He pulled out his papers and organized his notes.

Schweitzer played a wonderful organ concert. But Craddock – the twenty-year old zealot - was ready to take him on, sitting there with his notes. Well, after a while, Albert Schweitzer came in to the fellowship hall—shaggy hair, big white moustache, stooped over, and 75-years old. Schweitzer thanked everybody for coming.

You've been very warm and hospitable to me. I thank you for it, and wish I could stay longer among you, but I must get back to Africa. I must get back because my people there are poor, and sick, and hungry, and dying, and I have to go. We have a medical station there at Lambarene. If there's anyone here in this room who has the love of Jesus, would you be prompted by that love to go with me and help?

Fred Craddock says he looked down at his sheet of questions and theological arguments. They seemed so absolutely stupid, he realized, in the context of Schweitzer's life and mission and

ministry. And, Craddock says, *I learned, again, what it means to be Christian, and had hopes that I could be that someday.*

Do we focus on the minor questions sometimes to keep Jesus at arm's length, to keep from having a real encounter with God and what God might say to us?

It's clear in the gospels that Jesus has no time for those who merely want to play games. He has no patience with those who merely want to trick him or to use him to prove how smart or righteous or perfect they are. Usually those who waste his time don't come off very well. In fact, after this exchange with the Sadducees, Luke writes, *They no longer dared to ask him another question.*

It's not, though, that Jesus doesn't like questions. It's not that Jesus doesn't have time for questions. Jesus always has time for questions that are real, for questions that are honest and open and genuine.

In fact, the honest questions deep in our hearts are what lead us to be in relationship to him. Jesus always has time for questions like that.

Can you heal my child? I have a demon that torments me and I can find no rest. Can you help me?

I have lost my way. Can you bring me back?

No one will come near me, because they say I am unclean. Do you love someone like me?

When people offer these kinds of questions, real questions, to Jesus, the answer he gives is himself.

When the Sadducees or the Pharisees ask Jesus their trick questions, they usually get parables: stories that will puzzle their minds and invite them to look at the world in a new way.

But when people bring Jesus their deepest yearnings, he doesn't just give them answers; he engages them. When genuine people come to him with genuine questions, he often doesn't say anything, but he touches them, he connects with them, he relates to them. He invites people to journey with him.

The Latin root of the word "question" means "to seek." It's where we get the word "quest." To ask a real question is to enter on a journey, to begin a quest; it's to begin traveling with Jesus.

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Jesus gets exasperated with the Sadducees because they aren't wanting to begin a quest, to begin a journey. They just want to play games and stay right where they are. They aren't right or wrong; they are just wasting their life asking the wrong questions.

One of this church's greatest strengths, I think, is your willingness to ask the real questions, the important questions and your unwillingness to get drawn into the silly trick questions and games—to get into divisive debates over unimportant questions. And I want to commend you for that. I'm so grateful for that.

And I want to encourage you to keep it up.

Keep on refusing to find a small territory and become obsessed with it.

Keep on refusing to ask only trivial questions and trick questions.

Let that be a hallmark of our church.

Let that be a defining characteristic of our church.

Let people be attracted to our church because of that. Let people who have been burned by religious gotcha games in other places find a safe home here.

So don't stake your claim to trivial territory.

Build the kingdom of God.

Jesus told the Sadducees in response to their question that God is the God of the living, not of the dead. Jesus demonstrated that the Sadducees are so preoccupied with the details of the levirate marriage system and defending their turf, that they are incapable of contemplating something radically new—the miracle of resurrection.

What happens when we get ourselves all wrapped up in the minor matters is that we lose sight of glory of God, we lose sight of the transcendence of God, we lose sight of the abundant life that God offers, we lose sight of the major point of what we're really doing as Christians and as the church.

I'm reminded of Robert Fulgham's story about when a traveler from Italy came to the French town of Chartres to see the great church that was being built there. Arriving at the end of the day, he went to the site just as the workmen were leaving for home.

He asked one man, covered with dust, what he did there. The man replied that he was a stonemason. He spent his days carving rocks.

Another man, when asked, said he was a glassblower who spent his days making slabs of colored glass.

Still another workman replied that he was a blacksmith who pounded iron for a living.

Wandering into the deepening gloom of the unfinished edifice, the traveler came upon an older woman, armed with a broom, sweeping up the stone chips and wood shavings and glass shards from the day's work.

What are you doing? he asked.

The woman paused, leaning on her broom, and looking up toward the high arches, replied. *Me? I'm building a cathedral for the glory of almighty God.*

What are you doing? Are you staking claim to inconsequential territory or are you building the kingdom of God?

What kind of questions are you asking? Are they small questions? Petty questions? If, in the end, it turns out that you were right about all of these issues and questions and theological minutiae, what will you have won? Is there a prize given out in heaven for the one who was right the most?

What are we doing? We are busy people. This is a busy church. There is a lot going on. It's good to stop and think

about what we are really doing. We're not carving rocks. We're not making slabs of colored glass. We're not pounding iron. We are building a cathedral for the glory of almighty God.

And when it comes to that point in your life when you have known honest-to-God failure, heart-burn, solid defeat, brick walls, mortality, when you know, as I do that there is a broken heart in every pew, it's not religious trivial pursuit you need.

Having the right answers to the wrong questions isn't going to help you. You better have something else.

One of the lessons we learn from this scripture text today is that there are questions that ought not to be asked except by those who are famished for an answer. And when it comes that time in your life where you are starving for an answer, you better know what are the important questions to ask, and you better know that the world makes sense because Christ was raised.

And these lives we live are not meaningless or trivial or small or inconsequential. We are building a cathedral for the glory of almighty God.

If you want to major on the minor questions, there are lots of places you can do that.

Here, let's build a cathedral for the glory of almighty God.

Let's ask the deep questions, let's ask the honest questions, let's ask the important questions, let's ask the real questions.