

Mark 9:30-37

Afraid to Ask

Questions, questions, and more questions. We live our lives with questions and asking questions. The questions start out simple and innocent, with things like, "Why is the sky blue?" or "Why does a dog chase its tail?" And we can give fun and informative answers to those kinds of things. The depth to which we go in how to answer will be dependent on the age and knowledge of the person asking. But maybe that's how answers are with all questions... we answer based on knowledge and understanding, our own that of the other people.

Now one cannot assume that there are answers to everything. There are reasons we have scientists, researchers, philosophers, and the like. In many ways each of us are those things based on what we need to learn, but there are people whose professions are for the very purpose of posing and trying to find answers to questions.

We encourage questions. There are unsourced quotes that have become part of our vernacular like "The person who asks a stupid question is a fool for a minute. The person who does not ask a stupid question is a fool for life." Or "The only stupid question is the one that is never asked." Questions feed our learning. It is the natural way for us to learn. Fire and the wheel happened because someone thought to ask can this be done. We are now asking questions about artificial intelligence and how that will impact our world. Our questioning has become pretty sophisticated.

Now, the scripture heard today can lead to many different conversations, topics, and questions, but the place where I landed was with verse 32, "They didn't know what Jesus was talking about, but were afraid to ask him about it."

Afraid to ask Jesus questions.

What is even more interesting is that this portion of scripture started out with the group setting out on a journey and "Jesus didn't want anyone to know their whereabouts, for he wanted to teach his disciples." The purpose of the journey was for teaching and yet the disciples were too afraid to ask questions.

Now we probably should give them a break as they had been witnesses to some pretty extraordinary moments. A few of them were present when Jesus was transfigured in front of their very eyes. The description, "His appearance changed from the inside out, right before their eyes. His clothes shimmered, glistening white, whiter than any bleach could make them." (Mark 9:3)

Not only that, but after this experience of Jesus' transfiguration, the disciples had watched Jesus command a demon out of the body of a man. Not to mention already having seen a number of other things that would be difficult to comprehend and reason. To top it off, on this "teaching trip" Jesus starts with the statement that, "The Son of Man is about to be betrayed to some people who want nothing to do with God. They will murder him. Three days after his murder, he will rise, alive."

Where the heck did that come from? So not the teaching on a serene and picturesque hillside moment that they may have been looking forward to. This was right out of left field. So maybe avoiding questions was easier than coping with answers to things they didn't understand. Avoidance the answer. In fact, they went into a conversation that had nothing to do with that statement. They landed on a conversation they could get their minds around. Who in fact was the greatest among them?

Now that is something all of us know about. Most of us have had the conversation as children of "my dad is better than your dad." Or replace that along the years with any other one-up-man-ship that you play. My whatever is better than your...(fill in the blank). Sometimes it is the spoken or unspoken "I am better than you." And if you think that you haven't thought that kind of thing, then you need to reflect - which is another kind of questioning. I can bet that each of us has looked at a certain someone and thought we were better than they are.

But I don't want to get sidetracked on that line of thinking, as relevant as it can be to this scripture as anything. What is the focus for us today is that they were too afraid to ask Jesus what he was talking about. And the sad fact is that though we know that learning comes through questions, so often we don't ask the questions. The even sadder thought is that the church of all places should be a safe place to ask questions and yet so often questions become muted or shut down. Somewhere along the line we started to believe that the church doesn't allow for questions and that is tragic!

Over time the church, not just this one, but church in general, lost its wonder and ability to be curious. Some point in church history we assumed that the priests and leaders had the answers and so we didn't even need to question. Some of the biggest pivot moments in the history of the church were when someone questioned what those in power were doing and why. Take the reformation for an example. Martin Luther was not looking to create Protestantism he was just asking questions and it got him excommunicated. So where in church history the thought that we should not question became ingrained. But, as we see in scripture, questions are hard in the face of unknowns and power.

Jesus came to serve but the disciples still saw him as a leader who was going to overthrow the Roman authorities and help them claim their religion back. They did not understand that truly the kingdom of God was something so different, so far from their experience and imagination that they could not conceive of it. And, no matter what

Jesus said or did, they could only comprehend it in light of their lived experience and the history of their people.

Yet they were able to imagine that Jesus was someone different. That is why they were following him. Him promised a new way of being in the world, even if they couldn't get their minds wrapped around it. But questions were still difficult. They could have simply said, "tell me more about that" or can you help us understand that more fully" yet they choose to move away from the difficult conversation and go to one more familiar.

It seems that is often the way, especially in this last decade but people can't seem to say to each other, "tell me more about that" or "I am curious about that." We like to think that somehow our lived experience is the only authentic one in the world. How we experience the world should become the world view for everyone. We tend not to ask, "Why?" Instead, we see power and politics, wealth and prestige as the conversation. One upping is observed in news and elections, and among families and friends.

How little we listen to and learn from one another. We have our opinions and care little of what another is experiencing or the why. Yet the church needs to ask the questions. We need to ask questions to learn, in order to reflect, to help us understand what we may be facing in the now and in the future. We need to ask questions in order to become wise and flexible in our thinking.

Through our learning and questions we can help each other get better answers through cooperation, suspending judgement, and rethinking what we thought we knew. Questions help each of us to see that, just like Jesus and the disciples, we are on a journey of learning...of discovery. We get to be curious.

There is the part in this scripture in which Jesus puts a child in the middle of the room and then cradling the little one in his arms says, "Whoever embraces one of these children as I do embraces me, and far more than me – God who sent me." Now this came after the discussion about who was the greatest, but I wonder if it also can point back to the fact that children are curious, unafraid to ask questions.

Also remember that in Jesus' time children were loved and cared for but they had no standing in society, they were not seen as having any wisdom, knowledge, or something to offer. So for Jesus to say, embrace a child, was to go against all the norms of thinking that surrounded the role of children in that society in that time and place.

So maybe we can let go of some of our know-it-all attitudes regarding life, the church...other people. It has been one of the hallmarks of our New Beginnings journey here at St. Andrew's. Our mantra is slowly permeating everything we do.... let's be curious about that!

It is leading us into new things or rethinking all that has been and changing it to help us be the church in our own time. But this is only part of being curious. We can be curious

about the church, about our faith, about ourselves, and most certainly about others, especially those who are very different from who we might think we are or they are.

Let's be curious together. Let's ask hard questions. Let's ask ones that we might think are stupid questions. Ask questions for clarification, for learning, for wisdom and so that we can grow in faith, love, and action.

Let's do it all without fear, welcoming each other's questions, and also what we can learn from each other and those God brings to us or we meet in our community or circles of contact.

Know that Jesus embraces our questions, but more so embraces us. We do it all in the name of the God of love, Jesus who has compassion, and the power of the Holy Spirit.