

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany

“The Questions of Jesus”

Rev. Samuel A Trumbore March 1, 2009

Spoken and Silent Meditation

Where do we come from?
Who are we, where are we going?
In times of distress and trouble
questions rush to the lips.

Why me? Why must I suffer?
Why not me? Why must another suffer for me?
What must I avoid to be worthy?
What must I do to be loved?

Can the answers come straightforwardly
with yes or no?
Must we begin by defining our terms, asking
to whom we are asking or clarifying what we want?
Are there questions to ask of the question?
Or are there questions that have no answers
and should just be put aside?

So many questions.
And answers?
Ah, mystery.
Mystery
Life is a riddle and a mystery.

Sermon

Unitarian Universalists have a significant relationship with questions, and a humorous one with question marks. "How do you terrorize Unitarian Universalists?" goes the old joke. You burn a question mark on their lawn.

Lenny Bruce had a great modification of that joke, "I know my humor is outrageous when it makes the Unitarians so mad they burn a question mark on my front lawn." In episode 118 of the Simpsons, Homer angers the KKK who promptly burn a cross on the family's yard. Later, in an effort to placate the KKK, Homer angers the Unitarians who burn a huge question-mark into Homer's grass.

Jokes can tell us something important about ourselves by highlighting our values. Clearly Unitarian Universalists value asking questions.

Perhaps this is why I was strongly attracted to a book titled, "The Questions of Jesus," by Jesuit political activist Father John Dear. He spoke at General Assembly last June about peacemaking and nonviolence. In his presentation, he mentioned his book and talked enough about it, to get me to buy it after his presentation.

Now, I'd never thought about Jesus as an asker of questions. Father Dear hadn't either until just after the turn of the millennium. He participated in a weekend retreat led by a scholarly friend of his in the Nevada desert. The retreat was a preparation for a peace vigil at the nuclear weapons test site there. In a passing comment, the friend said that Jesus was referred to in the original Latin version of the Gospel of Mark, as "the great *Inter-rogator*," the One who asks questions." Stunned by the framing of Jesus as the great questioner, Dear vowed to go through the gospels and make a list of all the questions Jesus asks. When he finally got around to the task, he found 307 of them.

Associating Jesus with asking lots of questions immediately made me think of two great teaching traditions, the Socratic dialogue and Zen koan study. Socrates asked his students questions because he believed that they already knew the answers to his questions but didn't realize it. By replying to the question with hypotheses that could be examined for contradictions, false knowledge could be eliminated. This search for truth honed in on the students' assumptions, or axioms, which may be subconsciously driving their thinking. These assumptions could then be compared with one's beliefs for logical consistency and with real world evidence and human experience for confirmation.

Zen koans are stories or dialogues, arising out of the history and lore of Chan Buddhism, that have within them a question. I'm sure many of you have heard

of this one: "Two hands clap and there is a sound; what is the sound of one hand?" Many Zen students begin their meditation practice by pondering this question: "A monk asked the Zen master, 'Has a dog Buddha-nature or not?' The master answered: 'Mu or none.'" Koan study tends to confound the habit of discursive thought and can shock the mind into awareness.

We don't believe that Jesus was a follower Socrates or a Zen roshi. Yet both traditions had existed for hundreds of years before he was born. And ideas have a way of propagating themselves across diverse populations. More to the point though, Jesus probably discovered the value and power of asking questions first hand from his own tradition of Judaism.

Jews are a people of the book, the Torah, that gives them direction for how to live their lives and be in a covenanted relationship with God. To understand how to interpret the Torah, one must ask many questions of the text. Traditionally questions are asked of a Rabbi who then answers them from his (or her today) study of the text. The Talmud is a record of the questions rabbis have asked of the Torah for many, many years. Jews believe the process of asking questions is a key to opening up the greater truth locked in the text. One well-known Jewish-mother story chronicles this. When her daughter came home from school she didn't ask the child the usual question, "What did you learn today?" Instead, she asked, "What great and profound questions did you ask your teacher today?"

Rabbi Jesus turns the tables around. Instead of using the usual process of allowing people to ask questions and giving his answers, Jesus responded with his own questions. When he does give an answer, it is often cryptic, like a koan. Sometimes the question is a setup for a story or parable that answers the question ... but at the same time doesn't answer it. His parables usually don't translate into specific answers like, "do this and don't do that." They require interpretation. They require the hearer to add themselves and their interpretation to the story to find an answer. Jesus provides us with a way to find *living* answers not dead ones by including ourselves in the story. And that is probably why we're still talking about him after 2000 years.

In reading through Father Dear's groupings of some of these 307 questions, I realized engaging with these living questions would be a great way to approach the Christian holy season of Lent that began on Wednesday. Lent commemorates the 40 days Jesus spent in fasting and prayer in the desert before

beginning his ministry. I'd like to take advantage of the cultural synergy of Lent as a time for Unitarian Universalists to reflect on their lives, challenge their attachments and aversions, stimulate their generosity, and deepen their faith. I'll be offering a Lenten Bible Study class beginning this Tuesday and continuing through the six weeks before Easter. The content of the class will be engaging with some of Jesus' questions through study and personal reflection and asking our own questions of the Gospels.

In the time I have remaining, I'd like to engage several of Jesus' questions and demonstrate the value of this method of self-reflection. Although I have carefully crafted my answers so as to efficiently use my time, I'd like to report how much inspiration I've gained by spending time with these questions and how much I look forward to doing it in our class.

After feeding the five thousand, starting with just a few loaves and fishes, Luke records these questions:

And it happened that while Jesus was praying alone, the disciples were with Him, and He questioned them, saying, "Who do the people say that I am?"

They answered and said, "John the Baptist, and others say Elijah ; but others, that one of the prophets of old has risen again."

And He said to them, "But who do *you* say that I am?"

Peter responds that he is the Christ, but I suspect Jesus wasn't looking for a pat answer. I imagine Jesus wanting them to struggle with their answers. John the Baptist was a well known figure at the time. Elijah was a powerful prophet with magical powers, even the littlest child had heard of. The prophets of old calling the people back to their faith were integral to their Jewish identity. And everyone was waiting for the savior to redeem the people of Israel. Which one was he?

When I reflect on these questions, I identify with Jesus' question. I'm always asking myself, and our congregation, "What do the people say about my ministry?" Am I fulfilling their vision of ministry? Am I balancing the preaching, teaching, pasturing, administrating, and prophetic components of my

ministry effectively? As I am *called* by the congregation, as a whole, rather than *employed* by the Board of Trustees, I have no single boss to whom I report, yet I have *many* lines of accountability. I must decide, in consultation with the Board and trusted advisors, how to strike the balance.

But the deeper question is, "who do *you* say that I am?" In my relationship with each one of you, how do you interact with my ministry? How do you engage with me to excite your spirit and to inspire its growth and development? Will you let me support you when you are weak and weary? Will you permit me to challenge you and agitate you to encourage your growth and development?

In Matthew we find this dialogue:

And someone came to Jesus and said, "Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?"

And Jesus said to him, "Why are you asking *Me* about what is good? There is only One who is good; but if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments."

Then he said to Him, "Which ones ?" And Jesus said, "YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER ; YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY ; YOU SHALL NOT STEAL ; YOU SHALL NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS ;

HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER ; and YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF."

The young man said to Him, "All these things I have kept ; what am I still lacking?"

Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be *complete*, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven ; and come, follow Me."

But when the young man heard this statement, he went away grieving ; for he was one who owned much property.

"What am I still lacking?" Asks the rich young man. He should have stopped asking questions while he was ahead.

How I mourn for that young man who owned much property. As one who owns a half acre, along with my wife Philomena, in Altamont, as one who is trying to build some retirement savings for our old age and put a child through college, I know how he feels. He is doing everything he can to live a good life. Now Jesus puts the bar way too high for him ... and I suspect for most of us.

But the question of what is good still *remains* for us to ponder. I see Jesus challenging the young man to move from just following the rules, an external sense of how to be good, to finding his inner sense of what is good. I interpret the story this way: Jesus gives him a rule he can't follow as a challenge to his way of defining the good, the way many of us define the good, with an external rule. He fails the test. The astonished disciples ask Jesus if *anyone* can meet this test. Jesus answers cryptically, "With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

One more of Jesus' questions for you to ponder from Luke:

Jesus and His disciples got into a boat, and He said to them, "Let us go over to the other side of the lake." So they launched out.

But as they were sailing along He fell asleep; and a fierce gale of wind descended on the lake, and they began to be swamped and to be in danger.

They came to Jesus and woke Him up, saying, "Master, Master, we are perishing!" And He got up and rebuked the wind and the surging waves, and they stopped, and it became calm.

And He said to them, "Where is your faith?"

Jesus is a pretty flinty guy in this story. I don't know about you, but I've been out on stormy seas and they are indeed terrifying. Where is your faith? Give me a break Jesus!

Yet, what terror lurks in our hearts right now that prevents us from living and loving to our fullest potential? What storm are we trying to avoid? Where is your faith that will enable you to rebuke the winds and surging waves?

Let me say, for starters, that it takes a lot of faith to stand up here, face the potential storms of your criticisms and judgments and try to excite your spirit and inspire your growth and development each Sunday. It could be ignorance or delusion rather than faith that drives me, but I hope it's the latter.

So what faith do I draw on? I'll tell you what I *don't* draw on. I have no expectation of divine favor, protection or even inspiration. God may love me, but I don't expect anything in the way of a sign of support or reward.

I do, however, have great faith in the value of action. I enact an intense desire to participate meaningfully in life and support it's growth, development and evolution. Toward that end, I have great faith in the existence of resources greater than this body, this individual mind, this congregation, this community, and this nation, even this planet.

The key resources I speak of go far beyond material ones and are not available to the senses. I've observed that they can become available, most profoundly, when I let go and when I stop resisting and when I move into a relationship with life as-it-is rather than how-I-wish-it-to-be.

What I have found, exploring the non-material world, is an unconditional love and a sustaining joy. The only name that makes sense to me for that resource is the Spirit of Life. *That* is the core of my faith.

So how would you answer these questions? Who do *you* say that I am? What is good? Where is *your* faith?

I don't think Jesus wants to give us any answers to these questions. I think Jesus wants us to ask them deeply of ourselves. And when we do, as Emerson said in his journals, "When we have arrived at the question, the answer is already near."

Perhaps grappling with Jesus' questions could be our own Unitarian Universalist version of Christianity that honors our tradition of loving the questions and questioning the answers.

Let us not worship the questions however. Let us revere them for what they are, one of many paths toward what is beautiful, what is good and what is true.

Benediction

If you leave today with *more* questions
than you came in with, great!
The Gospels do **not** contain the answers you seek.
What Jesus left us *in* them
was a tenacious approach
to asking the big questions.

The only place we will discover those answers
are in our own hearts,
And *only* if we are willing
to seriously ask those questions of ourselves.

May we have the courage
to ask those questions.
May we have even more courage
to discover the answers.

Go in peace. Make peace. Be at peace.

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