

Sermon – The Risk of Asking
Sunday, September 20, 2015
Scripture: James 3:13-4:1, Mark 9:30-37
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Our first scripture reading is James 3:13-4:1. Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us that James' letter is theocentric, not Christo-centric. It is centered on God rather than Christ. Good Jew that James was, he did not build his argument on the mystery of his brother's death and resurrection. Rather he built it on the elemental faith in God that allowed his brother to live and die the way he did. James' appeal for wisdom has much in common with what contemporary English would refer to as **integrity**, the unity of thought and action. James demonstrates psychological insight in his recognition that disputes among us often stem from inner conflict. May God open our hearts and minds to the hearing and understanding of God's word as we open the pages of scripture together:

13 *Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. 14 But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. 15 Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. 16 For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. 17 But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. 18 And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace. 1 Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? Amen.*

Our second scripture reading is Mark 9:30-37. This interaction between Jesus and his disciples follows the encounter we read last week at Caesarea Philippi where they learned their Messiah would suffer and die and rise again. In the verses before this interaction Jesus healed a boy with a spirit that made him unable to speak and listen. Now it seems the disciples are finding it difficult to find their voices. Hear now God's holy word.

30 *They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; 31 for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." 32 But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him. 33 Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" 34 But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. 35 He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." 36 Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 37 "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."*

The title of the sermon: The Risk of Asking

The text: "But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him." Mark 9:32

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, we thank you for revealing the mystery of who you are in the life of Jesus. Give us the wisdom to accept what we hear and the courage to ask the difficult questions. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

As the author of Ecclesiastes affirms, *there is a time to keep silence and a time to speak* (Eccl. 3:7). Dr. H. B. Adams reflects on these times in *Feasting on the Word* (Year B, Volume 4, pg. 92,94):

There are many occasions when it is appropriate to speak: when we want to express an opinion on an important issue or deepen a relationship with another person; when we want to take our part in a social conversation or offer sympathy, encouragement and understanding to a friend in need.

There are also times to keep silence: when we really do not know what to say about an issue or what we have to say is unkind and full of vengeance; when we confront a mystery that is beyond our capacity to explain or there is such pain that any word is shallow and only a loving presence is necessary.

As we all would agree, it is not always easy to know whether it is a time to keep silence or a time to speak. Sometimes we talk too much and try to dominate a situation when we should be more open to the views and needs of others and sometimes we are silent when we should speak out in opposition to injustice or evil. Sometimes we speak when we do not really know what we are talking about and sometimes we hesitate when we could offer a word of comfort, support and insight.

As Mark describes the interaction between Jesus and his disciples in chapter 9, he indicates that twice the disciples were silent when they heard what Jesus was saying. Their first silence comes after Jesus again tells his disciples that he is going to be betrayed, and killed, and raised from the dead. *But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him* (v. 32). Why did the disciples not ask him to explain further? Each of us understands their hesitation. They had heard enough to get some idea of what he was talking about and did not want to believe what their ears were telling them. There are times when we are silent because we do not want to hear what we fear we might know is true... whether these questions are about those we love, our faith, the world in which we live or ourselves. It is easier to keep quiet, to pretend that we do not understand, than to ask and run the risk of hearing something we might not like.

W. H. Auden, regarded among the greatest poets of the 20th century, wrote in *The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Eclogue*, about the human tendency to resist asking questions:

*We would rather be ruined than changed.
We would rather die in our dread
Than climb the cross of the moment
And let our illusions die.*

Sometimes those illusions are about ourselves, our faith, the ones we love, and the world in which we live. Mark Twain, the 19th century American author and humorist, put it this way: *D'nial is more than a river in Egypt.*

Not to risk in asking questions can often have a greater consequence than facing the truth, even when it is unpleasant. Peter, the disciple who found his voice affirming Christ as the Messiah at Ceasarea Philippi, is the one who does not want to hear what Jesus had to say about his own suffering... the Via Delarosa... the way of sorrow Christ must journey as our Messiah. Surely Peter's refusal to probe more deeply into the meaning of Christ's suffering played a role in his own denial of Christ. Something he emphatically denied he would do and something he was poignantly reminded he did three times when the rooster crowed the morning of Christ's crucifixion. *And Peter went out and wept bitterly*, according to Luke.

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I have discovered along the way, whether in my own psychotherapy, spiritual direction or coaching that the risk of asking difficult questions about one's motivation and intention can shed light on one's inner world and provide the opportunity for change and redemption.

I have also learned along the way that argumentative people often have great conflict within and when I am feeling particularly argumentative myself, all is not well with my soul, as James articulates so well in his letter to the early Christians.

And although the disciples arguing about who among them would be the leader or the greatest is not particularly flattering, it is understandable in light of Christ's impending death. We all jockey for our position in life, especially as siblings growing up in a family, and competition is not a bad thing. In fact, healthy competition creates a dynamic team. President Abraham Lincoln was noted for gathering the brightest and the best within his administration... often men who did not share his point of view; a team of rivals. Being open to the questions our colleagues and friends risk asking makes us all better.

Questions pertaining to matters of faith are perhaps the most important. When we probe into the meaning of scripture within the context and culture it was written and when we offer perspective on church history (much of which is not pretty) we provide an opportunity for spiritual growth and understanding. As the church, we do a disservice if we do not welcome questions and do not encourage our children and youth to risk in asking.

My friends, we have a God whose understanding is unsearchable, the Creator of the ends of the earth. God does not faint or grow weary. God gives power to the weak and renews the strength of those who wait, who trust, who ask. We have a God who joined us in our humanity, who healed those who could not speak or hear and who held children in his arms. We have a God who walked the way of sorrow, absorbing hostilities that did not belong to him and who conquered death by dying on a cross.

If we want to be true to the gospel, if we want to be faithful to God's children, we must address suffering in our world. The church needs to provide resources that help us understand suffering and help alleviate suffering through intentional mission and community service. As people who lift high the cross and proclaim the love of Christ, we must do our part.

Not only is suffering at the heart of our faith, it is also at the heart of our shared humanity. If we risk in being human, in loving, in serving, in celebrating life; we will all know loss, disappointment and sorrow. This is part of the awe and wonder of being human and belonging to a God who shared our humanity. Because God walked this way, we can walk with courage and strength... and we can share in each other's suffering. We share, not with religious clichés that protect us from another's pain, but with compassion and understanding. In our sharing and the risk of asking, we discern the time to keep silence and the time to speak. By the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, may we do so with wisdom and integrity. Amen.