

Living the Questions

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Psalm 24:1-6

¹ The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it, ² for he has founded it on the seas and established it on the rivers. ³ Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? ⁴ Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false and do not swear deceitfully. ⁵ They will receive blessing from the Lord and vindication from the God of their salvation. ⁶ Such is the company of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob.

Acts 11:1-18

¹ Now the apostles and the brothers and sisters who were in Judea heard that the gentiles had also accepted the word of God. ² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers[a] criticized him, ³ saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" ⁴ Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, ⁵ "I was in the city of

Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners, and it came close to me.⁶ As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air.⁷ I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’⁸ But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord, for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’⁹ But a second time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’¹⁰ This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven.¹¹ At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were.¹² The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us.[b] These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house.¹³ He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; ¹⁴ he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.’¹⁵ And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning.¹⁶ And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’¹⁷ If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?”¹⁸ When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, “Then God has given even to the gentiles the repentance that leads to life.”

It was 35 years ago this spring that I was confirmed as an eighth grader in my home congregation in Pittsburgh. That fact nearly broke the brains of this year’s Confirmation class when I shared it with them a few weeks ago. It is hard to wrap your head around things that happened way back in the late 1900s, as they like to say.

There is not much that I remember from my own Confirmation or my own Confirmation Sunday. Really, it is only two things, and they were both questions.

The first is a question I remember asking of my Confirmation teacher. It was one of those activities that a generation or two later we still employ, where students are encouraged to reflect on big picture concepts of scripture and faith and to push themselves to be curious.

I was rather proud at the time of my question, and am still proud of my 14 year old self for coming up with it. I asked my teacher why, when they - all of the adults in my life, especially in the church, keep telling us how important youth and young people are in this world, how these are the formative and essential moments that will shape our lives in the world - why then is scripture entirely silent on Jesus' experiences as teenager.

I am confident the only response I received was - "Great question!"

I don't really remember exactly what was behind my question at the time - was I trying to catch the church in some low-grade hypocrisy, was I just curious, or maybe was I just a normal (by which I mean messy) 14 year old trying to figure out how I was supposed to relate to a guy who lived two thousand years ago.

The other question I remember was one that was asked of us at the Session examination dinner that was held each year for Confirmation families, where students would read the statements of faith they had written as a

capstone project and then were asked questions about faith and scripture by the Elders.

One of the most respected elders in the church stood up and asked us our opinion on the use of inclusive language for God. I remember responding - “I am not sure that I know what that is, but if you explain it, I am sure that I will have an opinion.” And she talked with us about how when we use exclusively male language for God, like Father, that it limits who God is and that by using a balance of masculine, and feminine and non-gendered language for God that we don’t limit our understanding of the fullness of God in whose image we are all created.

This was not something we had talked about in our class. So I answered on the fly that it made total sense for people to use language for God that made them comfortable. Then I went on to describe every wonderful thing that I personally associated with the image of a Father, as my own Father beamed from across the room. I am pretty sure my dad and I are the only people who remember that question and answer from my confirmation examination.

But what is remarkable about that question being put in front of us as Confirmation students, is that it is within the realm of possibility that that very same night the men and women, the theologians, biblical scholars, clergy and elders who worked for years to write what would become our Presbyterian Brief Statement of Faith, were also sitting at a dinner together talking about what it will mean for them to put forward the very first confessional document - affirmation of faith - in our tradition that used inclusive language for God.

The words have become so familiar and the concept so mainstream for us now, that it is hard to remember how groundbreaking that question was at the time and these words were as well- *Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home, God is faithful still. (Brief Statement of Faith)*

It didn't matter that we were just in the 8th grade and brand new to adult membership in the church - that Elder wanted to know our thoughts on one of the most controversial questions in the church at that time.

For me as a pastor Confirmation is built for moments exactly like that one - because Confirmation is all about teaching young people both how the church has asked and answered questions in the past and how the church asks and answers questions today, so that they can become comfortable asking and finding answers to what will be a lifetime of questions they encounter in their own faith.

Our New Testament text for this morning from the Acts of the Apostles provides exactly this kind of lesson, because it is all about the very first big question put before the very first community of Christians - Who is included in the church?

Peter has returned to Jerusalem, and he himself is being examined by the Elders of the church there and is asked to account for himself and the rumors that he has been associating with Gentiles, and even worse than that, traveling and eating with them and even worse than that, baptizing them. In answer to their questions, Peter tells them the story of what happened to him while in the ancient port city of Joppa told to us in the previous chapter of the Book of Acts.

That Cornelius, a Gentile and a Roman centurion, was praying and offering alms to God when he experienced a vision of an angel of God instructing him to send his servants to find Peter and bring him back to Caesarea to visit his home. Meanwhile, at the same time, Peter himself is led by the spirit to the house of Simon the Tanner, and when Peter goes up to the roof of that house to be in prayer, he too experiences a vision. A large sheet descending from heaven, filled with all kinds of animals, clean and unclean. As he hears an audible voice say, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." Peter refuses—he has never eaten anything unclean, never broken the kosher laws, in his life, and the voice replies, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane," and that this repeats three times. And indeed the men from Cornelius come and find Peter, and moved by the holy spirit, he travels with them the 35 miles to Caesarea, and upon entering Cornelius' home, finds collected there a whole congregation, essentially of faithful Gentiles, eager to meet and speak with him.

Peter shares his own vision with them, and his interpretation of it, pointing out that while it was unlawful for a Jew to associate with, visit with, and eat with a Gentile, that God has given him now a message for the church, that it is not Peter's work to decide what is holy and not holy - that is only the work of God. Then Peter goes on to deliver a sermon to this gathered community, telling them of the Good news of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And then something happens that some scholars refer to as a second Pentecost, where the Holy Spirit descends upon all of these Gentile believers. People who up until now were considered unequivocally outside of the church. Peter asks his fellow Jewish companions an essential

question to help them discern the way forward in this pivotal moment. “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the holy spirit, just as we have?” The answer was a clear no, and they were all baptized.

And at the end of his telling of this remarkable and paradigm-shifting tale to the Elders of Jerusalem, Peter turns and asks them a similar question. He asks his fellow Elders who are anxious about the church changing, anxious about the rules changing, anxious about the future changing, “Who am I, who are we, to hinder God?” And the church was never the same again.

This past year, our Confirmation students have asked their own questions, even as they have learned about this kind of biblical and historical questions that have come before the church in the past 2,000 years. Their questions reminded me quite a bit of the ones I used to ask, and some I still ask: How do we know that the Bible is true? Why do we worship a God who seems to have done some pretty horrible things, like kill all humankind in a flood? Why isn’t there any archeological or physical evidence to be found from the life of Jesus of Nazareth? What happens to us and our salvation if we doubt or stop believing - does God take it away?

These are great questions. And that, in fact, is how I often answered them.

But I will add my own great question to theirs, and it is one that I have heard numerous adults ask as well - why doesn’t God still speak to us, tell us what to do, how to act, how to change, in a clear audible voice, like God did with Peter?

That is a good question.

The church has answered questions in both similar and different ways since the earliest days of the first apostles and the first congregation in Jerusalem. Similar in that we listen - maybe not just with our ears - for the movement of the Holy Spirit.

We pay attention to our lived experiences of God especially in relationships with one another. We tell and retell one another the story of the Good News of Jesus Christ, trying to understand how that story can still be relevant for us today. We reflect on the ways that the church has acted or decided not to act in the past. We learn from our mistakes and are inspired by the legacy of the faithful who have passed the church of this moment down to each of us.

This is the work of the whole church – to ask and answer questions. When we have stopped doing that, we have stopped growing, we have stopped being relevant to the world around us, we have stopped being guided by the movement of the Holy Spirit.

In one of our last Confirmation classes, I recounted that story of the Elder who asked me about inclusive language at the moment of my own Confirmation. We asked them to consider what some of the big questions are for the church for this church today - you likely won't be surprised that they sounded a lot like the questions that Peter asked in Jerusalem - questions about who is included, who is welcome in our church today.

So on this confirmation Sunday, yes, these young people will stand up before you and declare their faith, but they will also be declaring their commitment to joining the rest of us in asking and seeking answers to the

questions of faith and life, questions of community and culture, questions of public engagement and personal piety - all of the questions that are before us all in this moment. I encourage you to listen to their questions, to consider their answers, to share your questions with them, and to recommit yourselves in this particular moment to the work of asking and answering questions. To remember that this church becomes something new today, not simply because their names are added to the rolls, but because their questions are the ones that will shape this church, not just in the future but today.

Amen.