

September 25 A 2011

The hard questions run deep in our hearts and spirits.

It takes courage to ask them.

If you can even find words for them.

Why did grandma die?

Why can't I stop drinking?

How come I buy into significant relationships where the other controls me?

Why don't I have as much money as I want?

How come I have cancer?

Why do I often feel unloved?

How come mom has to lose her mental capacities?

How come I keep doing the same wrong thing over and over again?

I have heard your questions.

I have felt your heartache.

The Bible is full of questions.

The disciples asked Jesus questions.

Who is the greatest among us? (18:1)

What good deed do we have to do to receive eternal life? (19:16)

What sign are we to look for announcing Jesus' coming at the end of the age?

How often must I forgive? (18:21)

We left everything to follow you; what do we get? (19:27)

The Pharisees, Scribes, and religious leaders also asked questions of Jesus.

Why do your disciples break "the traditions"? (15:1-2)

What signs can you give us? (12:38; 16:1)

When is it appropriate to divorce? (19:2)

To whom should we pay taxes? (22:15-17)

By whose authority do you do the things you do? (21:23)

These questions are all revealing.

The questions are all self-serving.

Those who ask Jesus questions want to trap him, or impress him, or get something from him.

And to every pointed question Jesus offers an equally pointed answer, which reveals truth about the Kingdom, the King, and the Kingdom's subjects.

Jesus responded to the question about his authority with a question of his own: Was John the Baptist sent by God, or did he bring a purely human message?

The religious leaders did not know how to answer that question.

They could not live with the implications either answer would give.

We don't know, they said.

Well, neither will I answer your question, Jesus said.

After all, if they aren't going to believe the forerunner, how could they possibly believe the fulfiller.

If they are not willing to accept the precursor, what hope is there for accepting the Savior.

I will not answer your question, Jesus said.

But then, Jesus changed his mind and did.

His answer came in the form of a story, a usual practice for Jesus.

The parable set up a comparison of two sons.

A father asks his two sons to work in the family vineyard.

One son says he will do what his father asks, but doesn't.

He even calls his father "Sir!", but doesn't do what he is told to do.

The other son says no to his father; I will not work in the vineyard.

But then he has a change of heart.

He ends up going out into the vineyard and working, doing what his father asked of him.

Jesus asked, Which son did the will of the father?

The answer is clear.

Jesus took that story and immediately applied it.

He compared the religious leaders of his day with people who say "Yes, sir!"

But they don't actually carry it out.

They don't do what they are told to do.

But some who say "No" actually do what is asked.

The tax collectors, despised by the people, and the prostitutes, of very low status, they listen and obey.

They repent.

They turn to Jesus.

They see Jesus as the Savior of the world, and that makes all the difference for them.

They will go into the kingdom of God first.

When you hear this parable, you are forced to ask the question: *Which am I?*
 Am I the son who presents himself as obedient while running around and taking
 pride in my disobedience?
 Or am I the daughter who to all appearances is the "black sheep" but in the end
 does what is needed?
 Which am I? Which are you?

There is an accusation in the parable.
 Sometimes we claim to obey the Father and live by God's ways.
 We sing the right words: *Yes Lord, Yes Lord, Yes yes Lord.*
 We are official members—in good standing—of Gethsemane Lutheran Church.
 But then we don't live as Jesus would want us to live.
 We live without compassion.
 We are so preoccupied in meeting our needs that we don't have time, energy, or
 money to help others meet their needs.
 We buy into our culture's emphasis on consuming, rather than Christ's emphasis
 on caring.
 We look at the world through our myopic lenses and not through God's expansive
 eyes and loving heart.
 We don't love our Lord with all our heart and express that in all our actions.
 Our faith life so easily slips into what is convenient and serves us.
 That is the accusation in the parable of Jesus.
 Which am I?

But there is hope.
 Because God is gracious and good.
 Common in the Gospel of Matthew, the parable contains a reversal of
 expectations.
 Those who are seen as the opposite of a "good" believer, some who have failed to
 live in the right way, will be given entry into the kingdom of heaven first.
 There's our hope.
 Humbly...trusting God's mercy...depending on forgiveness, we turn once again to
 Jesus, our Lord and Savior.
 Once more, we ask what we truly need.
 We raise our questions, and the answers come from God. God's answers?
 Inclusion in the kingdom of God...forgiveness...salvation...resurrection...because
 Christ made it happen for us.

We are not deserving of any of it.
We receive it all as a gift.

In the parable, you and I are the naysayers who have a change of heart.
We are the disobedient son who repents and decides we must be obedient to the Father.
We must do what we are commanded to do.
We must be who we are called to be.
That is who we are.

We know the challenge:
To walk the walk.
To practice what we preach.
To sync our words and our actions.
To obey God.
To be disciples of Jesus.

And we know this:
Christ will lead us.
Christ will give us the strength that is needed.
Christ will be our hope.
Christ will be our peace.
Amidst the questions of life, he is our answer.
We turn to him in worship.
Amen.