



A Year to Question



A Sermon By
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September 20, 2015

Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

An audio version of this sermon is available at
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/2015-09-20-AAA.mp3>

Jeremiah 11:18-20
James 3:13-4:3, 24-29
Psalm 54
Mark 9:30-37

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The Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost
September 20, 2015

This year at Grace Church is the year of the Bible: a year in which we aspire to read the majority of the Bible from September through June. In addition to this ambition, I've challenged myself to another reading challenge. The challenge is this... Expand my pleasure reading to include new categories. I usually enjoy reading novels, fiction, and the latest who-done-it mysteries. But I've decided to embrace some new genres. The first book in my lineup is Warren Berger's *A More Beautiful Question*.

An expert on design thinking and innovation, Berger has studied hundreds of the world's leading innovators, designers, education leaders, creative thinkers, and red-hot start-ups (like Google, Netflix, and Airbnb). His purpose in studying these entities is to analyze how they ask game-changing questions to solve problems and create new possibilities. In *A More Beautiful Question*, Berger shares his expertise. His findings suggest that one of the most powerful forces for igniting change in our daily lives is a simple, under-appreciated tool - one that has been available to us since childhood. That tool is the power to question.

Berger's findings reveal that even though as children we start out asking hundreds of questions a day, questioning begins to take a backseat as kids enter school. Berger argues that in a culture devised to reward rote answers over challenging inquiry, questioning isn't always encouraged.

Questioning isn't only taking a backseat in the educational sphere; it's taking a hit in the workplace too. A culture survey referenced in the May 2007 issue of the *Harvard Business Review*, found that half the respondents felt it was not "safe to speak up" in their place of employment. 50% of us don't feel safe to speak our minds and raise questions within our places of business, the environment in which we spend the majority of our time.

Somewhere in our development we begin to question questioning, or at least reconsider the need to articulate our questions in front of others. This Berger would say, is a problem. He believes that questioning leads to innovation, can help us be more successful in our careers, and can spark change in our businesses and personal lives. I think that Berger's on to something here. And I would encourage us to apply his logic not only to our professional and personal lives, but to our faith lives too. Voicing and exploring difficult questions that we have about religion, scripture, and theology, has the potential to breathe new life into our faith journeys.

But asking those tough questions isn't always easy. Just look at our gospel today. It begins with Jesus revealing some pretty shocking news. He tells his disciples that he will be handed over to the authorities, killed, and will rise from the dead after three days. We're then told that the

disciples didn't understand what Jesus was saying and that they were afraid to ask him. This detail caught my attention.

It caught Saint Paul School of Theology's professor Amy Oden's attention too. In her commentary on Mark 9, she writes, "Why didn't the disciples just ask Jesus to explain? Maybe they didn't want to appear as confused as they were. Or, perhaps their distress at his revelation was so deep they were afraid to address it. Besides, the closer someone is to Jesus, the more they're supposed to know (about God, about prayer, about the Bible, about religious stuff), right?"

No one wants to look uninformed, confused, or clueless, not even the disciples! And even we modern day disciples sometimes withhold our toughest questions within our own church community. Sometimes we pretend we don't have hard questions. Yet the deepest mysteries of life elude us. Why do good people suffer? Why are humans so brutal to one another? Why does evil so frequently succeed? If God's own Son is betrayed and killed, then is no one is safe? Why did God set up a world like this? We all have questions about our faith. But, for one reason or another, we don't often share these questions. This is a dangerous mistake. We withhold our questions at our own peril.

The second half of today's gospel narrative reveals what happens to the disciples when they sidestep the real questions they are afraid to ask. When they don't just ask what they want to ask, they turn to arguing with each other, squabbling among themselves over petty issues of rank and status. When the disciples avoid asking hard questions, they focus instead on posturing about who is right.

How would this story be different if the disciples had asked Jesus their questions? What kind of conversation might have ensued between Jesus and the disciples? What kind of growth would it have created? How would our stories be different if we were to ask Jesus our questions? What kind of conversations might we pursue with Jesus? How would our life as disciples together be different as a result?

The good news is that Jesus welcomes us even when we do not understand and do not know. This scripture passage closes with Jesus embracing a child, a symbol of one who is not yet mature, who may not have all the answers, a symbol of curiosity. We need not fear our questions, our misunderstandings, or our confusion about matters of faith." Jesus welcomes us just where we are and he welcomes our questions.

Jesus welcomes our questions... and so does Grace Church. As I mentioned at the beginning of my sermon, this year at Grace is the Year of the Bible. It's a year to explore the Bible – its history as a sacred book, how it has developed over time, and its complex relationship to living traditions of belief, including our own. This is a year to explore the stories within the Bible – the stories that recount God's continuing actions among us and deep abiding love for us. And if ever there was a time to do it, this is a year to raise and explore questions. God can handle it. So let's embrace the power of questioning and see where God leads us. Amen.