

Is There A Right Answer? – based on Matthew 16:13-20
Aspen Community UMC
August 24, 2008
Aspen Community UMC

Page 1 of 6

(The gospel lesson involves a question and an answer.
Questions and answers are popular right now as we prepare for the presidential election.
Jesus' question to the disciples encouraged Peter to explore the mystery of the presence of God.
It made a difference in Peter's life and it does in ours.)

A little over a week ago, a well-known American pastor interviewed the presumptive Presidential candidates at his mega-church in California. Sometimes some religious people want - or think they want answers - to questions - more answers than might be forthcoming in media interviews or presidential debates.

Many of the questions were good questions.

Some questions had little to do with how qualified a candidate might be for the office - at least in my view.

The fact that we had these interviews in one of the largest churches in the nation, says to me that we are not as different as people were in first century Judea.

Why would I say this? I say it because I hear an urge to locate God in the process – to somehow find divine favor – through right answers.

And thereby assure ourselves of something – which is not to let God be God - but to manage our anxieties by placing the Godly characteristics we know and like into the highest office of the land.

It's not that I am terribly critical – it's just a theological reflection on the interviews and why they happen.

The candidates did quite well, I think, for they are both formidable.

Some of their answers were similar; some showed clear contrasts.

Even so, there was to me a sense that – even though there was great variety in the content of the questions – it was really an interview so that the listeners could decide which candidate was the best Christian.

For a segment of the Christian religious population, there are litmus tests for this.

As if we are voting for America's favorite Christian - who then will be given the keys to the kingdom – so to speak.

I say that in jest, but remember, it seems to be in our nature
to want divine assurance of the future.

The Jews wanted it in the days when Jesus and his disciples were at work.
And, many find it important to be assured that a candidate for the highest office in our land
knows the same Christian God in the same way as the listeners do.

The New Testament reading is about a question and an answer.

§

At that time the king and the priestly class, the religious leaders, were pretty closely aligned.
People clearly wanted a political leader, and Jesus had no plans to fill that role.

We want a political leader – but we may still be looking for that messiah.

Jesus asked the disciples a question – in Caesarea Philippi –
of all places - with its temple to Caesar Augustus.

“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”

The term “son of man” is used widely, and in the gospels
it is something of a pronoun, like “someone” or “I”.

We can't say for sure - but let's take it to mean
“Who do people say that I am?” “What are people saying?”

So, they talked about what people are saying:

Some say Jesus is John the Baptist who Herod had beheaded not long ago -
coming back to haunt him. That was a scary thought.

Remember, John had been terribly critical of Herod,
and he called for people to change their ways.

Some thought Jesus was a reincarnation of John.

Others thought Jesus was Elijah. Elijah was remembered as a worker of miracles,
who went to heaven in a chariot and was expected to return.

He was a kind of messiah figure himself.

Some said Jesus could be Jeremiah.
Jeremiah had been very critical of religious leaders in Jerusalem.
He predicted the destruction of the temple.
Jeremiah was sometimes known as the broken hearted prophet.
But he was another big personality in Hebrew history.

§

Who do people say that I am?
Then he gets more personal and asks the disciples,
“What about you?” - “Who do you think?”
It was not a question just for Peter, although it is Peter’s answers that is famous.

Peter says, “You are the messiah.”
The words Messiah and Christ mean the same thing.
One is Hebrew and one is Greek, meaning the anointed one. Remember, kings were anointed.

“You are the messiah, the son of the living God.”
Jesus tells him that knowing this is a gift of faith rather than reason.
not something to figure out rationally – but something we realize.
Upon you I will build my *ekklesia* – or community of believers.

There is a play on words with the name Peter, or *Petros*, and the word rock, *Petra*.

Scripture often referred to God as a rock.
I had a teacher in Jerusalem several years ago who suggested
that Jesus may have also referred to Peter as *rocky*.
Of course, we will not know. We can presume that Peter
is both stable as a *rock*, and/or Peter is a little thick headed, or *rocky*.
And that may be true for a lot of us.

So, “Who do people say I am?” was a good question.
But, it was not the most important question.

Who do you say I am?

Who do you - who do I - who do we say he is?

And, of course, there is no right answer.

But it is the more important question.

Whatever our answers are - it is not so important what we say
as what we do - what is reflected in our lives -
our comfort with life – our willingness to step boldly into the future –
with an assurance that we are deeply loved beyond what we know –
our recognition of the need for forgiveness -
our commitment to justice -
our care for those who were important to Jesus –

§

Peter probably had a moment of realizing the closeness of God.
Perhaps he became suddenly aware of the miracle or mystery of being alive.
The masters, the enlightened ones from all spiritual traditions, will tell us
that not having to know the answers - is a leap in spiritual growth.
Not all of the disciples had answers that day.

Someone said that part of a commitment to living in the mystery
much of the time means learning to become comfortable -
swimming in a sea of questions -
rather than standing rigidly on islands of concrete beliefs.

It is about becoming more comfortable
with things that are beyond our capacity to know without absolute certainty.¹

Have you ever noticed how when you read a novel, especially a mystery novel,
you actually enjoy not knowing how it will turn out?
But in our lives, we seem to have a greater need to know how it is going to end,
and we worry and we suffer, and sometimes it consumes much of our time.
We want to control how things are going to turn out. We want answers.

Is There A Right Answer? – based on Matthew 16:13-20
Aspen Community UMC
August 24, 2008
Aspen Community UMC

Page 5 of 6

Answers are good – but they do not always exist.

§

Perhaps we could look at it this way:

We are born into this mystery of creation – let's call it from a divine essence.
We are given a body to rattle around in, and then we go back into the divine essence.

The space between those two points is what we call life.

If we think we have to know the whys and hows of everything -
we are generally not very happy. We are lead by fear and insecurity.

Some things are beyond our capacity to know with certainty -
or as one candidate replied to a theological question. "That is beyond my pay grade."

Surely we are here to learn more and more about what or who God is.
And surely when we participate in communities like this church we come to
a deeper expression of who and what God is.

We are not likely to elect it - or legislate it.

We will need to live it.

So, even as "rocky" as Peter can be at times,
And the disciples in their silence -
Let them be our model today, for stepping into the wonder of it all.

Faith is a pathway we walk on.

The disciples didn't have all the answers, but they knew enough, and it carried them a long way.

Peter encountered the mystery and expressed it in his own words.

What might be the words for today – your words for today?

In this church we talk about the unconditional love of God for all persons
that we know through Jesus. We want to reflect it in our lives.

Is There A Right Answer? – based on Matthew 16:13-20
Aspen Community UMC
August 24, 2008
Aspen Community UMC

Page 6 of 6

We want to take seriously our role as advocates for people who are oppressed.

We want to take seriously the care of this world and its creatures.

We want to take seriously being advocates for justice.

And we want to take seriously being peacemakers.

When we encounter the mystery – like Peter and the disciples -
there is for each of us – a response and a role.

They are not all the same.

We will talk more about this in the next few weeks
as we determine our mission and our goals for the year.

In the meantime if this is your church
(or if you are visiting this church and you will go home to your own worship community),
consider your answer to the question. Who is he – in your life
How God is present in your life?
And what does it mean?

¹ Dr. Jordan Paul as referenced by Dennis Merritt Jones in *101 Ways to Practice Purpose in Your Life: The Art of Being*. P. 257.