

QUESTIONS CHILDREN ASK

Questions from the Floor II (first sermon in the series)

Matthew 18:1-5

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Prayer: In the midst of the sweltering heat outside, dear God, send your cool refreshing Spirit to comfort us, discomfort us, engage us, inspire us, and startle us with the Good News of your Son, Jesus Christ. In whose name we pray, Amen.

“Be patient with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions as though they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language,” the poet Rilke wrote to a young poet. “Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far into the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.”

We’ve often said that at Idlewild, the questions are often more important than the answers. Your questions keep us clergy on our toes, and so for the next few weeks, we will be dealing with questions you have asked. This morning, I have chosen to respond to questions children have asked me in any number of settings over the past year or so. Some were submitted by the children’s church school classes when I asked for questions; some were asked at Vacation Bible School; others have been asked when I have had the opportunity to talk with a child one on one. But there is no doubt that most of these questions are not “kid” questions, but are universal, and are essential questions about our faith that we have all asked.

So let’s give it a go. [11:00 service]: I’ve asked three children to assist me with these questions: Lillian Scott, Ellie Stewart, and Matthew Stroud.

1. Will my dog go to heaven?

As a dog-lover who has had to put down several beloved dogs when they were dying, and now lives with three cats, it is a question that has not escaped me. My answer starts, of course, with God the Creator, a God of overflowing love, goodness, and beauty which is reflected in the whole family of creation. When God says of any creature, whether human or nonhuman, that it is “good” or “very good,” it is not simply a matter of moral goodness or behavior. The creature also has an inherent goodness and beauty—a beauty that reflects God, who is Beauty itself. Surely the Creator would not suddenly stop loving and caring for the creatures God had put into existence with so much care.

And if God put all those creatures in the Garden of Eden, paradise, so that all lived together happily before the fall in peace and harmony in the presence of a loving God, wouldn’t the same God not want to exclude them from the *final* paradise?

Think of the role that non-human creatures have in God's salvation history. Animals on the ark were saved along with Noah and his family. It was a dove that assisted in God's plan to save the whole family of creation by bringing back good news of dry land. For those of you who know the story of Jonah, there is not just a whale that gives Jonah a little time to think about his life and his calling to save the people of Ninevah. At the very end, when Jonah sits under a bush sulking because God's love was just a bit too broad and all-encompassing for him, (God just up and forgave the whole city!), it was a *worm* that attacked the bush which led the narrow-minded Jonah to a better understanding of the inclusive nature of God's saving love. Even a donkey played a major role in salvation, as Jesus rode into the city of Jerusalem, fulfilling the words of the prophet.

Then at the very end of scripture in those bold, hope-filled words where we get a vision borrowed from Isaiah of what awaits us in heaven: "Lo, I am about to create new heavens and a new earth ... no longer shall the sound of weeping be heard there, or the sound of crying ... The wolf and the lamb shall graze alike, and the lion shall eat hay like an ox." (Isaiah 65:17, 25a) It becomes obvious that God's saving love includes the whole family of creation, not only the human beings.

So it is my belief that in "the new creation," or "the new heaven and new earth," God will walk side by side with all of us. The wolf shall be the guest of the lamb, the fox will live with the rabbit, and we humans will be the happy companions and loving caregivers of our dogs and cats.

2. What do you do in heaven?

I'll deal a bit more with this next week, but the short answer is "I don't know." Scripture tells us that we will sing God's praises, and talks about us eating at a big banquet table that God will prepare for us in the kingdom of heaven. I imagine a time of joyful reunion—where we are with God face-to-face, and where we are reunited with those we love and are held in God's loving arms. So I don't know what we'll do there, but I do believe whatever we will be doing will bring us joy—more joy than we have ever known!

3. What is hell like?

I'll let Casey answer that in a few weeks!

4. Did Jesus actually have to learn to talk?

I think this question gets to one of the great mysteries of the faith. For example, how do Jesus' divine and human natures fit together? I think what this child was actually asking was "If Jesus was divine, wouldn't Jesus already know how to talk?" The simple answer is that Jesus was born an infant like everyone here. He was helpless as a child who over time learned to crawl, walk, and yes, talk, like every other child.

When Jesus was 12 and stayed behind in the temple, (scaring his poor parents to death when they couldn't find him!) he taught and amazed the elders in the temple, not because of some

superhuman knowledge, but rather that he had a confidence and faith rarely found in a young boy of 12. If there is one verse that helps us answer this question, it is Luke 2: 52. “And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, in divine and human favor.” This stresses that he learned and developed just like every other young person grows and learns as they get older.

It is very, very hard to hold together both parts of the equation: “fully human, fully divine,” but it is important that we try. Some tend to stress the divinity of Christ and downplay his humanity, leading to a God far removed from the pain and suffering and joy that we experience. Some stress the humanity of Christ and down play the divine, leaving humanity without an intimate relationship with the Divine. I like the way one theologian put it: Christ is a window to God, and a mirror of our own humanity.”

But it is important to realize that Jesus was fully like us, experiencing hunger and tiredness, needing sleep, enjoying fellowship and laughter, wondering and worrying as well as hoping and trusting, just like us. He lived a life of joy and sadness, laughter and tears, so that we humans might truly trust in Christ who knows, intimately, what it means to walk on this earth.

5. What is your favorite part of the church?

It’s hard to beat this sanctuary, in all its beauty and grandeur and majesty and holiness.

However, more recently my favorite part has been the garth, that beautiful courtyard that surrounds this grand old building. Sit there and the sounds of the city reverberate, reminding us of our mission right here in the heart of the city. Look up and see the tower and all 12 of those gargoyles that George Awsumb carved up there, each representing a different vocation, reminding us that whatever we do in life, we are all called to the same ministry, to serve God. I love the dogwoods and azaleas and all the plants that Jane Feild has so lovingly nurtured. I will sit out there (though not when it is 110 degrees!) and just listen to Peggy McClure or Dave Caudill play the carillon at 4:00 every week-day.

But the thing I like the most about it is the new columbarium. I look down at the names and say a little prayer for each of their lives and for their families, thanking God for the love they had for this church, and it reminds me that we are standing upon the shoulders of a great cloud of witnesses; or, in the words of an African proverb, we are drinking from wells that we did not ourselves dig. And I think of how they have joined the great communion of saints who have lived their lives in faith. Then I look forward to the glad heavenly reunion with them. “Inspirational” might be too sappy a word to describe those feelings, but I’ll use it anyway.

6. Why do you have a beard?

Now this indeed is one of the great theological questions of all time, and it was asked by a four year old!. One summer many, many years ago I worked as the director of a church camp in North Carolina. If the old mountain men who were my ancestors there, or a rugged Texan who was my great grandfather, Pleasant Lafayette Montgomery, all had beards, why not save a few minutes each day and just let it grow?

All was well until I met Patti and we started getting very serious about each other. My aunt told her, “Never marry a man until you’ve seen his face.” So I shaved. Her first response was “How long will it take to grow back?” And I’ve had it for 33 years!

But there is a lesson here. When I went to a small town in eastern North Carolina for my internship, some folks didn’t cotton to my beard so much. As a matter of fact, on my first Sunday when I was teaching the youth group, I asked them what the biggest issues were around town, thinking that might lead to a discussion on faith and who-knows-what. After a little silence one person said “The only thing people are talking about around here is your beard!”

I found that some people pre-judged me because of what I looked like on the outside, rather than looking to see what is in my heart, and a few never made an effort to get to know me. As I said, there is a lesson for us all in that, regardless of our age. “Don’t judge a book by its cover.” It’s what’s inside that is important.

7. Who made God?

When do the easy questions start? I suppose the short answer to this question is to lean on our understanding of God as eternal and find appropriate scripture verses: “... the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come ...” (Rev. 1:8) Or to hear the words of God in scripture: “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” (Rev. 22:13) Well, if God is eternal, God always was. The best answer I can give is: No one made God. God just is.

But let me take it a little deeper. We understand our world through our experiences. And a lot of times we use our own experiences to try to understand God. We were, after all, created in God’s image. But we have to remember that we can’t contain the whole of God within our experiences. God was not created in our image after all. We are creatures. God is creator. While we might know things about ourselves through our knowledge of God—that we are relational, good, creative—we limit God when we try to know the whole of God through ourselves, or even through creation. We put on God the limitation of a finite creation. We think that God’s origins must be like ours because as creatures we know that we had to come from somewhere.

But God is creator, not created. And so, while the answer to this question may point us more toward mystery than understanding, it can be an opportunity to celebrate the wholly otherness of God even as we celebrate the immanence of God with us through Jesus Christ.

8. Why aren’t dinosaurs mentioned in the Bible?

I’ll let Casey handle that one in a few weeks. One more.

9. Why do we have to come to church?

Talk about an eternal question! I love the answer Anne Lamott gave when she was asked why she made her son Sam, a strapping, active 13 year old go to church when none of his friends do. They live in California! “Because I outweigh him by 75 pounds!” But then she goes on to say

that she wants to give him what she found in church, which is to say a path and a little light to see by. When people in community pray or practice their faith, she says, they are part of something beautiful.

So we can ask:

Why do we have to go to the dentist? To make sure we have healthy teeth.

Why do we have to go to the doctor? To make sure we have healthy bodies.

Why do we have to go to school? To learn and help our minds grow.

Why do we have to go to church? To learn and experience the most important thing that a person can ever learn: that we are loved by God just as we are; that in those Old Testament lessons we see how God stayed with us, even when we messed up, and how God can use imperfect people like us to build a more loving world; that in those stories we tell about Jesus we see what that love looks like. We see compassion. We see mercy. We see forgiveness. We see grace. That in coming to the Table we hope that compassion, mercy, forgiveness and grace become a part of us.

It probably won't surprise you to know that that's a question I often asked as a child, for our family was there whenever the church doors were open. And as I got a little older I asked it more and more, especially when I felt that those stodgy old members were more interested in their place in Richmond on Monument Avenue between the Jeb Stuart and Robert E. Lee monuments than they were about serving the neighborhood outside their doors.

But over time I have developed a deeper appreciation for what that community gave me. I don't remember a whole lot of what we covered in Sunday school, but until my dying day I will remember how Mr. Appich and Mrs. Summers and Mrs. Ramsey and Mr. Nochta and all those other Sunday school teachers welcomed me and cared for me and knew me by name. (And they didn't even bring doughnuts for us to eat like some of your teachers!) I remember how Mr. Schutt (our Ted Gibboney) helped me develop a love for music in the church. I remember how Mrs. Parish prepared some Brunswick stew for our family when my mother had surgery. I remember how they gathered around my friend and neighbor Frank when his father died suddenly.

I could go on and on and on with this question, for it is one of the most important of all these questions. Suffice it to say, I hope to see you next Sunday on Rally Day!

Amen.

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