

“Questions You Might Ask”

Acts 1:6-14

7th Sunday of Easter

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Some of you may have watched the ESPN docuseries, “The Last Dance,” that ended last Sunday.

It was billed as a depiction of the Chicago Bulls dynasty of the 1990s in the NBA. But at its heart, it was really a documentary about Michael Jordan.

Greatest basketball player in the world back then, no doubt about it. Especially fascinating was a scene at the end of the 7th episode in which Jordan is being asked about his competitive personality.

Jordan justifies how competitive he was, how hard he was on his teammates—because he wanted his team to be the best. “Was Michael a nice guy?” his former teammate B.J. Armstrong was asked. And Armstrong said...no.

Then at the very end of that episode, as Jordan is talking about his drive, his need to win no matter what—he starts to cry. And he asks that the recording be stopped.

It was a very revealing moment.

Michael Jordan spent his career pursuing the question:

What does it take to be the best?

What does it take to win at the highest level of basketball?

He found his answer to that question, but it cost him something, right?

And it turns out that Jesus does not want the question of when to be the GUIDING QUESTION for his disciples.

I got to thinking about that.

I don't know about you, but "when" has been on my mind a lot.

When will a vaccine be developed?

When will we no longer need to worry about the pandemic?

When can we worship together again in person, without worrying about whether we could be spreading a deadly disease, and without creating a service in which some of our members can attend, but it's not safe for all our members to attend?

When will the economy recover?

When will the tension...ease?

When will the fears...go away?

When, when, when, when, when...

I wonder if Jesus would say to us:

Stop fixating on this question of "When?"

Not that it's a bad question or the wrong question, but I think the question of WHEN—if it's our ONLY question—it suggests that we have some control that perhaps we do not truly have. If we know when, we can create a plan. If we know when, we can pretend that our real life, our true life, has just been momentarily interrupted.

Miroslav Volf, a professor and theologian at Yale, reminded his listeners in one of his recent podcasts that even though it FEELS like our lives have been interrupted, our lives are, in fact, continuing right now.

There is no PAUSE button in life.

There is no rewind, there is no fast forward.

We're being asked to live faithful lives not when things "return to normal," but in whatever conditions we find ourselves right now.¹

So if you're anything like me, and have gravitated toward WHEN recently, let me suggest other questions that Jesus might want us to ask:

Questions of WHAT:

What does a faithful life look like in the midst of a pandemic?

What does a generous life look like during this strange and unusual season in our lives?

Questions of HOW:

How do we faithfully live for others, when it's not safe to gather in the ways we're so used to doing?

How much are we willing to sacrifice if it will help prevent just one person from dying from this virus?

How do you respond to people who see the situation with the virus through a different lens than you do?

Or do you remember those words from Micah for today?

What does justice look like when the pandemic has exposed such gross inequities in our society?

What does kindness look like for you at this time?

¹ From the podcast, "For the Life of the World," in the April 4, 2020 episode, "The Culture of Fear".

What does walking humbling with God look like for you, when no one knows exactly what the future is going to hold?

Have you ever thought about the fact that it's not just our answers to life's questions that shape our lives. It's the very questions themselves...

As Rilke famously put it years ago:

“Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves...Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”²

As many of you know, our family used to live in Indiana.

We were about an hour from Indianapolis, and occasionally we'd go there for a bite to eat, maybe do a little shopping.

During our time there, I never visited Broadway United Methodist Church in Indianapolis. Had never even heard of it. But now I wish I had.

Broadway United Methodist Church has a fascinating story. Like so many mainline churches, it was once a LARGE CHURCH...2300 members back in the 1950s.

But then people moved to the suburbs, and the neighborhood declined, and you've heard this story: the church went down, down, down...by the mid 1990's, they were down to 75 worshippers each week.

² From *Letters to a Young Poet*, by Rainer Maria Rilke. This quotation is well-known and can be found through many sources on the Internet.

Broadway's pastor, Mike Mather, has had TWO STINTS as pastor at this church. The first time was in the late 1980s. And the question that he asked himself back then was simple:

“How can I help the people in this neighborhood?”

And Mike Mather went about answering his guiding question with GUSTO!

For example, he “retooled the church's summer youth program,” so that at one point it was serving 250 children a day—bringing them in “for Girl Scouts and basketball, away from the violence and drugs of Broadway's neighborhood.”

“We felt so good about it,” Mather said, “that I broke my arm patting myself on the back.”

But then something happened.

Over the course of 9 months, nine young men died violent deaths within a four-block radius of the church. And some of those young men had come through that great youth program at Broadway.

And Mather was left to wonder if his focus on helping people—
if it was the right focus, the correct question.

After being assigned to a different congregation by the bishop, Mather returned to Broadway in 2003.

THIS TIME, instead of asking how he would help the people of his neighborhood, he asked a different question:

How can we GET TO KNOW the people in our neighborhood?

Mather actually created a staff position at his church with this goal:

Go through the church's neighborhood
and GET TO KNOW the neighbors.

A "roving listener" is what Mather called this position.

The "roving listener" went around learning about the people who lived in the neighborhood not by asking what their problems were, and how the church could help solve their problems. Instead, the roving listener asked an entirely DIFFERENT question:

"What three things do you do well enough that you could teach others how to do it?"

It was the kind of question that made all the difference.

"Soon, the church was tapping into people who could repair cars, make quilts...and cook some of the best Mexican food Mather had ever eaten."

The upshot is that the church itself was resurrected.

It's become a place for FRIENDSHIPS with neighbors, where neighbors can get to know one another and make connections and some even found new jobs through the church, new meaning for their lives...

Two hundred folk attending worship every week.

But how to raise the numbers in worship was not that church's most important question.

How to be good neighbors...THAT was their guiding question.³

³ "Death and Resurrection in an Urban Church," by Robert King, at www.faithandleadership.com/death-and-resurrection-urban-church. The story is also told in Mike Mather's book, "Having Nothing, Possessing Everything: Finding Abundant Communities in Unexpected Places," Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2018.

Have you ever asked yourself what questions are your GUIDING QUESTIONS?

On any given day, I may ask myself:

“How can I solve such and such problem?”

“How can I work most efficiently today, so I don’t waste any time?”

“How can I make decisions that reduce my risk of failure?”

And then there’s the question of when...

when will we get back on track

to the world we knew three months ago?

But what if my impatience for that world to return, or my priority on EFFICIENCY, is a sign that I need to live more deeply in THIS world, and reexamine my guiding questions?

A while back, I read about a bus driver in Chicago.

One day years ago, her bus was filled at mid-day with people rushing to their next important appointment, but at one stop it was boarded by an elderly white woman who wasn’t sure how to use her transit card.

She inserted it upside down, then backwards.

While the other passengers became increasingly distressed by the delay, the DRIVER, a very pleasant African-American woman, patiently explained how to use the card.

“Here, honey, let me do it for you,”

The woman finally walked toward a seat, but then turned back.

“Are you sure it took only one fare from my card?”

“I heard it beep twice.”

“Yes I’m sure,” the driver answered.

“But I heard it beep twice—it took two fares.”

“No, honey, it only took one fare—it always beeps twice.”

“How do you know?” the woman demanded.

“Here, let me show you.

Come up here and look at the indicator.

There it is—your one fare.”

By this time, the stoplight had cycled from red to green twice.

Finally, they were underway.

At the NEXT stop, a man in a motorized chair pulled the cord. He was frail, and one could see the tubes from the oxygen tank that was helping him breathe.

“I’m on the way to the V.A. hospital and I’m going to need some help,” he announced.

Again, the driver responded graciously.

She helped him negotiate his motorized chair to the door,

told him how to position the chair for the mechanical lift,

asked him to adjust the position an inch or two,

and then activated the lift.

The process took a LONG time.

(Just like the telling of this story is taking a LONG TIME.)

You could sense the tension and impatience of the people on the bus.

The stoplight cycled a few more times and motorists honked.

The driver—unfazed—remained infinitely patient.
As one rider got off the bus, he thanked her for her kindness.⁴

As you go about your day today, here are some questions you might ask:

Number ONE:

What question do you think was guiding all the people who honked at that bus driver that day?

Number TWO:

What question do you think was guiding the bus driver's focus and energy and life that day?

Number THREE:

What question is guiding your focus and energy and life today?

Amen.

⁴ "City Scene: Riding a Chicago Bus Can Have It's Grace Filled Moments," by John M. Buchanan, in *The Christian Century*, May 15, 2007.