

OPENING:

In our Gospel reading, Jesus uses the familiar sequence of “3’s” to tell this famous story. Here it’s the “Levite, the priest, and the Samaritan passing by the wounded man” instead of “an Irishman, an Englishman and Scotsman walk into a bar...”

To get us started this morning, here’s another story that uses that three-fold pattern: *There was once a Baptist, a Roman Catholic and an Episcopalian standing at the pearly gates of heaven.*

Jesus was there to greet them and asked the three this question:

“WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?”

The Baptist answered first: “The Bible says that you are _____.”

But before he could finish, Jesus interrupted him:

“Stop right there, I asked who do YOU say that I am.”

So the Roman Catholic stepped up and tried to answer the question by saying:

“The Church says that you are _____.”

But again Jesus interrupted him:

“I asked who do YOU say that I am.”

Finally the Episcopalian was left. Jesus asked “Who do YOU say that I am?”

The Episcopalian cleared his throat and said:

“I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.”

Jesus took a step back, he was amazed:

“this from the ‘Frozen Chosen’ ... from a Mainline Protestant, from a denomination in decline... and here he gave the right answer.”

As Jesus was thinking that, suddenly, the Episcopalian chimed back in and interjected: “.....But on the other hand...”

QUESTIONS

The lawyerly manner with which the Episcopalian answered the question reminds me of the poor lawyer in our Gospel reading.

This religious expert is trying to get the right answer, trying to understand Jesus’ teachings, but ties himself in knots in the process.

We'd do well to pause for a moment right here and consider why we want the right answer so bad, and how we bypass the question itself.

How Jesus might have looked at questions and answers is revealed by this exchange:

The dialogue goes: the Rabbi gets a question from a student: "What is the meaning of life?"

The Rabbi responds: "With a question like that, who needs answering?"

I was once on a mission trip with a group of youth and, to pass the time while driving in rented vans for many hours, one youth had brought a book with questions numbered from 1 to 3000. He would ask people in the car to pick a number—say "37" and then you'd turn to page 37 where there would be a question like: "What is your favorite color and why?" These were all very fun.

Somehow, at some point, I got asked the following question:

"#450: What is the greatest of the seven deadly sins?"

I tried to answer immediately, hoping to sound authoritative. I said: "Historically, the greatest Sin is Pride, that's what Lucifer was guilty of, trying to be like God. That's what caused the Fall from heaven and grace....

Pride cometh before the Fall, says the Bible."¹

Pretty impressive, all while I was driving, but one youth did not buy it, and she said "Oh come on, tell us what *you* really believe, don't depend on something else. Tell us what *you* think."

That knocked me back and I wondered how I was going to get out of this one, hoping that someone would ask another question from that book of 3000 questions.

GOSPEL:

I share that story and the three-fold joke at the start because, although the story of the Good Samaritan is certainly about our ethical demands about who our neighbor is, and it's certainly about what we as a church can do to help out the least of those around us,

¹ Proverbs 16.18

The passage, as a whole, also forces us to take a step back. To let us look at how we ask questions, why we are so desperate for answers. To interrogate how we recognize Truth in our faith and in the world, and how we *then* can make a decision for right action.²

1st RESPONSE:

Let's look at how Jesus goes about answering the lawyer's questions.

Jesus first relies on Scripture, citations from the Torah, from Leviticus and

Deuteronomy: scripture that was so familiar, because Jews recited it every day.

The lawyer (like any good lawyer) would have known the answer to Jesus' question before he asked it.

The answer to the question "What must I do to inherit life?"

is: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your strength, with all your soul and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

But Jesus points to those words with a bit of a wink and a smile, as if to say:

"that's all you got to do, follow what Moses brought down from Sinai way back when."

It's that easy and it's that hard.

Jesus is holding up the inherent difficulty of the Law, with the same smile as when he told the young ruler to sell all his possessions, with the same wink as when he said it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.³

That is, he's trying to say it's impossible. The answer to the lawyer's question is that we simply can't do it, not by ourselves. He's trying to say that you are asking the wrong type of question, because inheritances are not earned or achieved, they are given by the grace of God.

The lawyer, though, needs more and is not satisfied with the tried and true Scriptural answer. Like my young inquisitor on that car-ride, the lawyer wants more than quotations.

2nd QUESTION:

Unlike me, Jesus was ready for this and is capable of answering it with this

² See the Collect for this Week.

³ Luke 18.25

remarkable story that we know as the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

We must be cautious, however, with this classic story because it's so dear to us.

Through the centuries, it's a long been an attempt of scholars to say who is who in a story. We are so quick to insert ourselves into the story, who stands in for the

Levite, the priest, the Samaritan, the innkeeper.

In other words, like the lawyer, we think that this story is about us, about how we can somehow pass the test, how we can work harder and better and stronger and faster. The lawyer is asking the equivalent question of "how many times must I go to the gym? How many noble causes do I need to reference on social media? How much virtue signaling must I do in this world so that I can make the cut?"⁴

We think we have to pass the test, keep trying to convince ourselves that we would be the Samaritan rather than the Levite or the priest. The good news is that Jesus already passed it for us.

CONCLUSION:

Like the lawyer, we are often asking the wrong questions, or trying to answer them in the wrong way.

And we will be just as stymied as him if we don't think that God is providing our salvation, rather than us earning it.

Through *his* teaching and very being, Jesus is upending our expectations, shattering the barriers of what we think is true or capable, rearranging the careful roles that we have established.

The lawyer tried to ask a question about eternal life, he got one about how to live in this world.

The lawyer tried to ask who a neighbor was, he got an answer about how it's not about defining those out there, but changing the nature of who you are.

In the end, Jesus has his own sequence of 3. His own way of asking questions and answering them.

He appeals to Scripture.

He tells a story.

Then he lives the story.

That's how Jesus answers questions, that's how God keeps asking questions to us.

AMEN

⁴ Mockingbird Podcast, *Same Old Song*, Episode Pentecost 4C (July 1, 2019)