

Exodus 17: 1-7  
Philippians 2:1-13  
Matthew 21: 23-32

Authority and Trust  
September 28, 2014  
Mary R. Brownlow

There's a popular Christian song entitled, "Jesus is the Answer." The first verse starts, "If you have some questions in the corners of your mind"...and then the refrain (repeated many times for emphasis) goes on "Jesus is the answer for the world today...Above Him there's no other, Jesus is the way."

But there's a new book, written by Martin Copenhaver, the new President of Andover Newton Theological School, whose title is Jesus is the Question. And subtitled, *The 307 questions Jesus Asked, and the 3 He Answered*. Copenhaver combed through the Gospels and found those 307 questions, plus the 183 questions Jesus was asked by others. Copenhaver suggests that questions have a number of functions, including gathering information, inspiring people to discover something new, persuading people of something, stimulating thought, and...forging intimacy. So, whenever we come upon a question in Scripture, we might ask, not "What (or who) is the answer? but "What is the purpose of the question?"

Our reading from Exodus is full of questions. After a successful exodus from Egypt, the Hebrew people, led by Moses, are spending a lot of time out in the desert. Not surprisingly, they get thirsty and cranky and ask for water. There follows a conversation made up mostly of questions: Moses says, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord? The people say, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst? Moses says to God, "What shall I do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me!" Then the rock is struck, the water comes out, the place is named after the event...by a question! "Is the Lord among us or not?"

This little episode is partly about thirst in the desert, but it is also about authority and trust. The fledgling, wandering Hebrew community does not recognize Moses' authority as their leader – they bring him all their problems, repeatedly. They recognize the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as having authority – they have just been powerfully rescued from slavery and genocide and starvation. But they trust neither Moses nor God. Hence that last question, the one that lingers through the ages in the form of a place name: "Is the Lord among us or not?": an existential question, in many ways.

All kinds of people ask Jesus questions in Matthew's Gospel, and both their questions and their answers are revealing. Pharisees, scribes, chief priests and elders engage Jesus in dialogue, according to Matthew, so that they can trap Jesus into saying something really damning or illegal. They ask questions like, why do the disciples break the traditions of their elders, they ask about divorce, they ask about taxes, they ask about resurrection, and, today, they ask Jesus by whose authority he does the things he does. As if all that weren't enough, the disciples are always asking things like, who is the greatest among us, what good deed do we have to do to inherit eternal life, what is the sign that will signal the end of the age. And Peter never quits: "How often do I have to forgive? We left everything for you, so what is our reward?"

These are all revealing questions because they are leading questions, self-serving questions. The people who are asking want to trick Jesus, or make an impression, or get something out of him. And each time Jesus answers in an even more revealing, pointed way, revealing some piece of truth about the Kingdom of Heaven, often through a parable or a question of his own.

In today's Matthew passage, Jesus responds with both a question and a parable, seemingly leading the discussion to a completely new subject. The setting is the temple in Jerusalem, the timing in the few days between Palm Sunday and the crucifixion. Jesus has been healing and teaching up and down the long corridor of Galilee and Judea and has finally arrived in the holy city. The excitement and chaos of his triumphal entry has shown that he is a force to be reckoned with. So the Temple authorities come to him with a natural question: "By whose authority do you do these things?" In other words, do you have credentials, do you have a permit for this kind of behavior? By the way, they are pretty sure that the answer is, "No, he doesn't." They have standards to uphold, after all.

We might think that Jesus would answer, I am the Messiah, or I am the Son of God, or I have been healing people and that shows my power, or I have the power of character to confront the vast Roman Empire. But he says none of these things. He seems to change the subject with his question: "Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" He is reframing the question of authority so that the choice is not about what kind of credentials or position in the hierarchy a person holds, but the source of power, the source of inspiration. Human or divine? What they say about John will reveal their motivation for confronting Jesus.

Here it is their silence that is revealing. The religious authorities deliberate. Religious authorities are so good at that. ☺ If they acknowledge John as a divinely inspired preacher and baptizer, they condemn themselves for not believing and following him. If they say that he was acting on his own, John's many supporters may turn on them. Notice they never consider answering the question with any heartfelt statement of belief one way or another. They would rather look like idiots and say, "I don't know," than continue the dialogue. It is an evasive strategy that reveals a lot about them, but doesn't really work. Jesus declares that he can also take a pass on answering questions. But that doesn't mean he can't offer a parable. ☺

The parable sets up a comparison of two sons. One says he will go to work in the vineyard as his father requests, but doesn't, while the other refuses to do the work, but then changes his mind and does. What we need to remember is that parables pose questions to us, and it is often, where are you in this story? Which son (or daughter) am I? Am I the one who sounds dutiful which being disobedient, or am I the one who look like a black sheep or a loser but ends up changing and doing the task assigned? Which am I? Which are you? Oh, and by the way, where and what is the vineyard?

This parable not only has a question, it has an accusation. Much like the original question of the elders about authority, it's a set up. And we cannot jump to the conclusion that Jesus spoke only to the Jewish leaders of his time. That would be too easy for us. He speaks to pastors and deacons and church council members and passersby in the pew. Which am I? Which are we?

Then Jesus returns from the parable to John. He puts his cards on the table: "John came to you in the way of righteousness." John taught people so that they changed their minds. They changed their attitudes. They changed their lives. People who had no hope of acceptance by God

found themselves on a path to the Kingdom of God. The authorities, with a lot more to lose, could not accept, could not make this kind of turn-around, could not change. Or maybe they just couldn't stand the company they would have to mingle with on the path to the Kingdom of God. It is a motley crew. And so, the one who cried out in the wilderness, who was sent to prepare the way of the Lord, preaching repentance and transformation, went unrecognized and un-believed, and got himself executed. Some could change their minds – mostly tax collectors and prostitutes – and some couldn't. The crowd listens to Jesus and hears the question, which am I? Which will I be? It is more about trust than belief in authority. Listen to the last verses here as though we translate belief as trust, which is closer to the meaning of the original: "John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not trust him, but the tax collectors and prostitutes trusted him; and even after you saw it, you did not turn around and trust him."

A few decades later, the apostle Paul was in prison and wrote a letter to the little church in Philippi. He loved that church. They loved him. His letter shows a sort of paternal concern and tenderness that produces beautifully eloquent advice. He is a bit worried that people in Philippi are not getting along: there seems to be some kind of dissension in the community. You know, personalities, church structure, who's in charge: that sort of thing. Paul takes a pre-existing hymn to Christ and uses it as a teaching tool. It is a challenge to people to turn around, and get back on the path to the Kingdom of God.

Paul sets up his poetry piece with a flight of words to remind his readers of the power and trust inherent in their blessed community: encouragement, consolation, fellowship, affection, compassion, joy. If these things are important to them, then they have to imagine themselves as molding and melding their minds with the mind of Christ. They have to turn away from selfish ambition and empty conceit and turns towards an example of humility and giving. In spite of the many empathic and emotional words he uses to draw his listeners in, he makes it seem like a mental exercise, an effort of will, to make this turning, to repent and change.

The Christ Jesus of this hymn is not jockeying for position, not grasping for power. Incredible divine potential was paired in Jesus with an attitude, a mindset of giving. The poetry says he took on human form, which by comparison is like being a slave instead of being a ruler. Rather than claim authority, he claimed obedience. Rather than hold himself above human pain he entered into it fully. If we speak in metaphors of movement, the path of righteousness involves a descent before it becomes an ascent. It involves an emptying before one can be filled. And that requires a change of heart, remarkably like trust.

Jesus' parable is a challenge. It asks us how we will respond to the Gospel, the Good News, of his life: do we trust the authority demonstrated there enough to change our minds and our ways? Will we pretend obedience with our words or enact obedience with our lives? Jesus asks, but does not answer, which of the two did the will of the Father. By leaving his question unanswered and moving on to the tax collectors and prostitutes, Jesus suggests that doing God's will means a relationship between human and divine. Any self-important claims of human authority run up against God's expansive call to all people. But any denigration of our own or other's humanity cripples our ability to work in the world. We are fallible, changeable creatures trying to live with and love and heal and help other fallible changeable creatures. Maybe humility in this work is more effective than any claim of authority would be.

Jesus worked in human form, not with an appearance of blinding divine power and authority. He was doing the slow and hard and uncertain work of healing and teaching as one of us. In this was his life itself was teaching, an example of someone acting in partnership, in synchronicity with God.

And so, the probing questions, the paradoxical parables give us fuel for our search. They are clues on our pathway. They give us an opportunity to reflect on where we fit into the picture. They provoke change. They inspire humility and hope. And they lead us to ask questions of our own.

Every week and every day, I ask myself how I can live in partnership with a God who does not ask me to deny myself, but to become more fully human. We might call this “working out our salvation in fear and trembling, because God is at work in us.” That is how Paul described it. And it is clear from his letter that we do not work this out alone but in community. It is not personal salvation we are talking about but a communal lifting into grace.

So I invite you to consider how we might try to live all this out, with more questions. Where are our vineyards, our mission fields? The world cries out to us. Issues of domestic violence, provoked by NFL scandals. Issues of racial injustice and profiling, provoked by Ferguson. Issues of immigration, provoked by the flood of children crossing our southern borders. Issues of religious persecution and violence, provoked by ISIL. Issues of gun legislation, provoked by shootings in schools. I don't have all the questions and I don't have all the answers. But I rejoice to be in a community that thrives on the provoking questions and example of Jesus. I am glad to be here, sheltered by your encouragement, consolation, fellowship and compassion, which show me the mind and life of Christ every day. Amen.