

Q & A  
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From 1998 to 2007, there was a TV show called “Whose Line is It Anyway?,” which was an improvisational comedy. Four performers were given scenarios and guidelines and had to improvise lines and actions – it was pretty funny. One of their recurring sketches was “Questions Only,” in which they were given a situation, then had to carry on the conversation entirely in questions. One of the easiest ways to quickly respond is to say, “Well, why do you ask?” - but you can only do this so often. It’s kind of fun to try this game sometime, around the supper table.

Today’s Scripture readings were full of questions, and some of them could only be answered with another question. When Jesus speaks to the disciples or to Peter or to Saul, he starts with questions. And each of them might want to reply, “Well, why do you ask?”

The 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of the Gospel of John is a kind of epilogue to the book. We have already had the teachings and miracles and signs of Jesus’ ministry, culminating with his execution and resurrection. In the chapter before, he had appeared in Jerusalem to Mary Magdalene, to the disciples, and finally to Thomas. And the story there seems to end there with this statement “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God.” So, you would think we are all done. All the questions asked, all the answers given.

But some oral tradition kept on story-telling and then got written down, and curiously, this shows the disciples as heading back to Galilee, back to their work as fishermen on the Sea of Tiberias, as though nothing had happened. It’s odd. They have just had this mind-altering, life-changing experience of Jesus breathing the Holy Spirit onto them, **into** them, commissioning them for the work of reconciliation and peace. . .and the first thing they do is go fishing? But maybe it’s not so strange. Maybe there was some unfinished work of conversion still needed. And maybe that has to happen on their home turf, so to speak. Maybe Jesus has to get you where you live.

So there we are, back in Galilee, with at least 7 of the disciples, and Peter suggests some night-time fishing. Even though this is their profession, they are not successful at first. But as dawn breaks, a stranger calls to them from the shore. Who is this guy and why is he asking/telling them about their failure? That would be my first question. But those fishermen just followed his suggestion, and caught 153 - amongst the many particular details in this little story, is a very accurate fish-count—so 153 fish. And this leads to recognition, the beloved disciple’s cry, “It is the Lord!”

Another odd detail – Peter is so excited that he puts on his clothes, jumps in the water and swims to shore. He is such an impulsive guy. Or maybe he didn’t feel like dragging in the net full of fish. Or maybe, just maybe, he is still carrying the inner scars of his very particular denial of Jesus on the night of the Last Supper and arrest of Jesus. I say this because those very particular details of the scene point to a physical, almost visceral experience of memory. There was Jesus was sitting on

the shore by a charcoal fire. On the night that he had denied Jesus, some days before, Peter was warming his hands by a charcoal fire in the courtyard of the High Priest. With the smell of the charcoal in his nose, he responds to accusing questions about his association with the Jesus. Now, in this Galilean early morning, Jesus presides over breakfast, handing the disciples bread. At his last meal with the disciples, Jesus had been the host as well. In the sensory centers close to memory in Peter's brain, in the smell of charcoal and the gesture of sharing, Peter is brought back to that terrible night. And then, amazingly, he is given a breakfast of bread and fish, probably the closest they came in that time and place and profession to comfort food. Overjoyed, traumatized, confused and full. The Last Supper has been succeeded by a First Breakfast! In that frame of mind then, he hears Jesus' questions, another interrogation, a triplet of questions to match his triplet of denials.

Jesus calls him by his real name, formally, "Simon, son of John," rather than his nickname, "Peter." This is a serious moment. "Do you love me?" Simon Peter seems puzzled at first, then hurt. Of course Jesus knows the answer. Isn't it obvious? Peter just jumped out of a boat to meet him. Why does Jesus even ask? Finally, Peter exhales with a longer reply: "Lord, you know everything"- you know my failures and my devotion, you know my strengths and my weaknesses - "You know that I love you."

But we get the feeling that Jesus' question is really rhetorical in any case – it points beyond itself to something else – as do so many of his questions. In earlier chapters, Jesus had described himself as the Good Shepherd, the one who called and protected and tended his flock. So now, his is using the same language, but instead of describing himself, he is giving orders. He seems to be saying, "If you love me, you will imitate me." You will do what I would have done. Finally, he stops asking questions and is explicit, repeating the original call to the disciples: "Follow me."

Our story from the book of Acts also is a Q and A that leads to conversion: the famous Damascus road conversion of Paul. We had met this man, still carrying the Hebrew name of Saul, earlier in the book as a consenting observer, if not instigator, of the stoning of Stephen, a deacon of the early church. Saul, in his religious zeal, seems to have made it his personal vocation to wipe out the fledgling community of Christ's followers. This community that had already spread to foreign cities, like Damascus, and Saul was truly inspired by his faith to volunteer as the faith police. Unlike the placid fishermen of Galilee, this was a man on a mission, described as "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord." Maybe to match his passionate frame of mind, he has a blinding experience, not of a gentle shepherd or kind cook, but an auditory vision, a voice of pain and sorrow: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" And all Saul could do was ask a question in reply: "Who **are** you, Lord?"

This strange conversation was a conversion: the foremost persecutor of the church is converted into its greatest advocate and apologist and preacher, eventually traveling thousands of miles to spread the good news of God's love. It all started with the question he needed to hear: a question that followed him for his whole life and cast its shadow over it. Much later, he would describe himself as having been "a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man" and "the worst of sinners." But just as Peter was transformed by his interrogation by the risen Jesus, after his conversion Paul also was transformed, as he wrote: "forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward."

These stories offer us some thoughts about the implications of resurrection. We are forgiven. The past can actually fuel the future, not corrode it. We are invited to start over. We are loved, and our love is known completely. And, we have some work to do. This is Peter's story, and Saul/Paul's story and our story. When fear, anger, or shame holds us back, love calls us forward. When we are stuck, fishing on the wrong side of the boat, or pursuing a hateful feud, or wondering where to go next, Jesus appears with a question to help us start over. We cast our nets on the other side, we seek healing in Damascus, and we change our perspective in the light of the Resurrection.

So the question for us today might be – what question do we need to start over? Once we know what baggage we carry from the past, perhaps a question will be asked of us, throwing light on our future. What is the question that can only be answered by a changed and inspired life?

A long time ago, the prophet Micah asked the people of Judah a question that has been, over the centuries, that kind of spur to reflection and action. He asked, "With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high?" And the questions continue: should it be burnt offerings, a thousands rams to be sacrificed at the temple; should to be rivers of oil as a donation; should it be one's own child as a sacrifice? The prophet stops that flood of suggestions, rooted in the past, and asks one more, embedded in an answer, "What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and love mercy, and walk humbly with your God." In other words, God asks us questions with can only be answered by the way we live, which must be rooted in justice, mercy, and humility.

Each generation is confronted with new questions by God – which are really versions and new expressions of the very old questions we find in our Scriptures. Have you caught anything by fishing on that same old side of the boat? Do you love me? Why do you persecute me? – which, by the way, is what you are doing when you breathe threats and murder against your fellow human beings.

In our time, the questions might appear more pointed and harder to answer. You have not been successful on overcoming the racial divide in America, have you? Then look with open eyes at America's original sin of slavery and racism, because then you can fish on the other side of the boat, hear the story again, and move forward. You have not found new energy in the way your church seems to have changed, have you? Then take a look over here, on this is of the boat, and try out a second Sunday breakfast as a way to renew connections with your faith community. Do you love me? Then why don't your "deeply held religious beliefs" call you to serve all people, whether or not their family looks like yours? Do you love me? Then do not assume the worst of a stranger whom you do not know or understand – realize that the emerging American diversity is not a danger and a threat, but a gift and a blessing.

I continue to be moved and challenged by those questions of Jesus. The passage from the Gospel of John read today was also read at my ordination into Christian ministry, in this church, 18 years ago. Down through the years, those questions have continued to ring in my ears: "Have you caught any fish?" "Do you love me?" My answers may be no and yes. My answers should be, as long as I am called, as long as I hear the voice, a changed life, full of an awareness of the grace of God. Amen.