

“Questions”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
St. Francis Day – 6 & 7 October 2018
Matthew 11:25-30

If you’ve ever spent any time with a small child, you’ve been on the receiving end of a barrage of questions. Their curiosity is endless as they try to make sense of the world around them. “Why is the sky blue? How does it rain? Where is God?” Those are the fun ones. Then there’s stuff like, “Why do I have to brush my teeth? What does the tooth fairy do with all those teeth? If all these teeth are going to fall out, then why do I have to brush my teeth?” And you have to admit that there’s a certain logic to that.

Sometimes, we get creative. “The tooth fairy doesn’t pay you for bad teeth.” That actually worked for me, though not for long. And when we’re tired or distracted, we resort to “you’ll understand when you’re older,” or “because I said so,” because four-year-olds aren’t ready to learn how the gases in the atmosphere reflect and refract light, which makes it look blue. They’re not ready to understand evaporation, condensation, and precipitation. Someday they will learn those things, but in the meantime, we explain as best we can or make something up, like “Emma, the sky’s blue because that’s God’s favorite color.”

And who knows? Maybe that’s true. Maybe God made light and our atmosphere in just the right way so that on a clear day the sky’s a beautiful robin’s egg blue, because that’s His favorite color. We just don’t know, and that’s why we need to pay careful attention to questions children ask and pause before we answer, because when we do, it helps us see through a child’s eyes, and to a certain extent we recover for a moment what we may have lost over the years – the sense of awe and wonder at the glory of God’s creation. A child’s simple question is an

invitation to revisit those very basic yet profound questions to which we think we already have all the answers.

I think that's what Jesus had in mind when he thanked God, "because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants." He doesn't mean that only babies get the Gospel, and he's not being anti-intellectual either. That verse is often misinterpreted that way, but Jesus had a nimble mind, spoke articulately, and escaped every theological trap set for him. And those traps were set by people who knew how. They were wicked smart, well-educated, and Jesus still outwitted them every single time because he knew his stuff and had a mind as sharp as a razor.

Forgive me for this little tangent about anti-intellectualism, but it's infected our culture like flesh-eating bacteria. Too many people take pride in their ignorance, shamelessly substitute opinion for fact, and insist that faith and reason are incompatible, when the opposite is true. You don't have to check your brain at the church's door. God gave us this three-pound ball of mush for a purpose, so let's use it, or we're just a bunch of ingrates. Now back to the main event.

Jesus prayed what he prayed about "the wise and the intelligent" because he'd been in constant battle with people who doubted him and who criticized him in the pickiest of ways, because they thought they knew it all – at least everything worth knowing. When Jesus referred to them as "the wise and the intelligent," he was being ironic. He contradicted their ideas about how the world worked, and nobody likes that. It's uncomfortable. You have to think, and that takes hard work, and if you come to the conclusion that you've had it wrong all along, you feel a little foolish for a while, though it does get better with time.

For us to approach Jesus with any hope of learning from him, we need to be humble like little children, who know that they don't know and take great joy in asking questions without

shame or fear. We need to be humble like little children, who take for granted the fact that they depend entirely on someone else for their survival. We must confess our reliance on God, because without Him we would literally be nothing. We would not be.

As clever or intuitive as we may be, no matter how hard we study, we need to hold our answers with a loose grip, ready to let them go when necessary, because we worship a God whose mystery will never be fully fathomed, a God who reveals more and more of Himself each and every day we walk the Way of faith in Jesus. A person with a childlike mind can receive Jesus with fewer assumptions and less presumption. A childlike mind – what Zen Buddhism calls beginners’ mind – is much fonder of questions than answers.

Back in college, I read a transcript of an interview with a professor from the University of Chicago named David Tracy. Just as with other disciplines, like medicine or law, theology has lots of specialists, and Dr. Tracy was a renowned expert on Foundational Theology, which – as you may have guessed – seeks to understand what theology is and how it’s done. So naturally, the interviewer’s first question was, “What is theology?” It’s been 26 years since I taped that article to my dorm room wall, and I’ll never forget what he said. “Theology is not the pursuit of ever better answers, but the desire to find ever better questions.”

It’s like food and your body, or software and your computer. The outputs will only be as good as the inputs. Eat junk food, you’ll feel rotten. Stick buggy software into your laptop, and have fun with that. Ask flawed questions, you get flimsy answers. That’s why we need to keep asking questions. We need to practice. They say that to master a musical instrument, someone must practice 10,000 hours. We need to work our way toward better and better questions by asking 10,000 of them. Ask like an awe-struck child so full of curiosity that she stares at an

anthill wondering why ants are so small, and why do they live underground, and how can they carry things as big as they are.

This attitude, this perspective, is what drove St. Francis away from a very promising, lucrative life as a merchant and into the woods where he preached to animals: to birds and squirrels and deer. Even today, after centuries of venerating him, it's weird. Back then, people thought he was crazy. Why bother? What a waste. But there's much more to Francis than this idyllic image that adorns so many bird baths.

He married Lady Poverty, dispossessed himself of everything, and wandered around sharing the story of faith wherever the Spirit sent him. He depended on the kindness of strangers to keep him alive, because he trusted that if God wanted him to live, then God would inspire people to help him. And if God wanted him to starve, then Francis was ready to die. Nowadays, we'd call a person like that a crackpot or a bum, but since this all happened 1,000 years ago, we're OK calling Francis a saint.

And the most fascinating thing about Francis' journey is that it began with a major false start. He was a young man with no sense of purpose, didn't know what to do with his life, except he knew he didn't want to go into the family business. So he prayed for guidance. He asked the question, and God answered, "Build my church." Now there was an old dilapidated chapel in the woods nearby, and the walls had collapsed, as the story goes. Stone by stone Francis worked to restore the building, to give it integrity and strength and beauty again so that it could serve as a sacred space, a shelter for those weary of the world. But something seemed off. He got little fulfillment from the work and wondered what he'd do after he completed it.

So Francis prayed some more, kept asking God questions, and one day, somehow, he received what he needed, a clarification that God wasn't asking him to do something. God was

asking him to be someone who could revitalize the Church with a new way of spreading the Gospel. God was asking Francis to become someone that could restore integrity and strength and curiosity to a Church that thought it had all the answers, right down to how many angels could dance on the head of a pin.

This is where Francis gets a little less romantic and lot more scary, because if we truly revere his life and ministry and want to celebrate his witness to Jesus' love, then that means we as Church need to ask God questions, as Francis did, about our purpose. We need to ask how we can serve the Gospel with greater integrity. How can we inspire people who aren't interested in this whole God-thing to give it a go for a few weeks? How do we generate more excitement and enthusiasm around being the people of God, a people called and motivated to do gracious things? We need to ask, "Aren't there better questions than the ones Father Michael is asking right now?" To which I say, "Yes, definitely yes."

When it comes to God, all of us are children. There's so much we don't know, and the only way to grow in faith is to ask openly, brazenly – again and again. Just like a little child who sees the whole creation with fresh eyes, fascinated and full of awe and wonder and questions. Amen.