

SPBX – The Rev. Jamie Samilio January 15, 2017 -- God is love. Love is a verb. What we do matters!

In my own faith journey, and learning how to study theology, my professor, Dr. Walter Eversley always told us, “It is a privilege to do theology. And, if you are going to study theology, you must learn to love the questions.”

Today we find John the Baptist, upon seeing Jesus, proclaim for everyone to hear that Jesus is the Lamb of God, the Messiah. John makes it clear that he was an eyewitness to the Holy Spirit of God descending on Jesus – John was proclaiming that Jesus is the one, this is the guy!

In our Gospel today, *Jesus asks a question – a very important, significant question, *"What are you looking for?" [The Greek translates a little better into] "What are you seeking?" What do you need? It is a question worth wrestling with -- as individuals, as congregations, as a community – because our answers will have an impact on finding what we seek, and the path we will take to find it. What are you seeking? What does motivate you? What is that you really need, not just on the surface, but deep down into the core of your being? What are you looking for?*

In our post Christendom world, where we are asked what we are seeking, we often jump to answer, that we seek to be like Jesus. It is a good answer, until we really understand what it means to be like Jesus – world serving, not self-serving and loving everyone including our enemies. We need the Holy Spirit to remind us to love, as we serve others, and I for one need God’s grace to stay motivated to serve. Because as easy as people are to love, they are equally as easy to hate – motivation is key. How do you stay motivated?

Ah, the questions. One of my favorite authors is Robert Fulghum, and I preached here in June about his book in which he asked *The Great Mother Questions*. And, I want to ask these questions again in light of our Gospel today, where John tells us that Jesus is the Messiah. Let me remind you of the story.

Robert’s house in Seattle is next to an elementary school, and a high fence blocks his view of where children are picked up and dropped off on a daily basis, but he is close enough to overhear conversations. One morning, he heard a car door open, then slam shut, and a woman's voice came blasting over the fence: "BILLY! WHAT...ON...EARTH...HAVE...YOU...DONE?"

His own mother asked him the same questions, as did mine, and I venture to guess the person who raised you, asked you this question at one time or another as well. But, upon hearing the question this time, Robert changed the emphasis and asked himself the question, along with several others he had been asked in childhood. What on earth have you done? What in God’s name are you doing? What in the world will you think of next? Think about what the questions mean to you as individual Christians, and as members of this community of faith – especially the last one, and especially as the Vestry of St. Paul’s looks at its vision and mission statements. What in the world will you think of next?

Sheryl Paul is an International counselor for anxiety, and I read a recent blog she wrote concerning love relationships, especially concerning love between couples. I had read her blog several times in preparation for work I am doing with a couple getting married this summer.

Then it struck me -- A significant portion of Sheryl's work is dedicated to debunking our dysfunctional cultural myths about love. In many ways, the job of a priest is to debunk our cultural myths about religion, and our relationship with a loving God.

For many people, myths about religion and God live in our subconscious and are only awakened when we have an opportunity to encounter a real and loving God – in John's case, standing right before him. As long as people are chasing after the unattainable, perfect church and perfect God relationship, there's no risk of a real love relationship with God and, thus, no risk of vulnerability and loss, and thus no experience of real life. Subscribing to the myth that if we go to church we do not need to engage the world or God in any other way is short sighted. We can trot along somewhat happily following the myth about how going to church one hour a week is enough of a relationship with God. But once we are faced with hardships that come with being human and subject to the laws of nature, the myths of our expectations of God clash with our lived experience. Religious myths only look at worldly points of view, and play to our human frailties, and push our wants ahead of our needs. Myths replace our faith by playing into our fears. I went to church, something bad happened, God did not save me, God is not real. And then ask, "What did you expect?" "What did you want."

It seemed like such a simple question, didn't it? "What do you want? Ultimately, I think we all want to be loved, to feel safe, secure, and to have joy and peace in our hearts. The Rolling Stones said it best, "You can't always get what you want, but if you try, sometimes, you get what you need."

Love is primarily a verb, and to love God and one another is an active experience. Love is action. Love is commitment. Love is doing the right thing in God's name, even when you don't "feel" like it. Love is recognizing that loving relationships allow us room grow emotionally and spiritually and learn about the barriers that prevent us from loving others. *Alanis Morissette said in a brilliant interview with Piers Morgan, "Love, to me, is a verb. Love kicks in for real when things get hard... Love, for me, is when I don't feel very loving. It's an action."* Love affords us the opportunity for wholeness, and wholeness is what I think most of us want, that and balance.

The same is true of the church. Not everyone, including myself at times, views the church as a hotbed for hope and healing that affords us the opportunity for wholeness -- but it is. God is love. Love is a verb. What we do matters! How much we love each other, matters. When we are there for each other, it matters.

Love isn't only a feeling, it is a "knowing." Love is in place that lives beyond thoughts or feelings. You probably don't always have loving feelings for your family, friends, or God – especially when they do things we do not like -- but you know you love them. You know love when something deeper than thoughts or feelings draws you to God and others -- like a magnetic pull, when you long for peace, when you keep showing up in concrete, tangible ways, during difficult times when it's not easy. That

is real love and real engagement with God, each other, and the world. That is how you are like Jesus if you want to be like Jesus.

Love is grounded, honest, stable, and authentic. The deeper place inside of you knows that to commit to God and your church community is a loving choice, and so you act in loving ways even when you don't feel like it. Through those actions, you grow your capacity to love. If you want love in your life – give love away to others, because what we do matters.

It's time we change our world-view of our relationship with God, each other and the world. The church is the only institution that exists for those outside of it. We, the church insiders must be the hands and feet of Christ in this time and place, and it is up to us, to go, to do, to be the church. The Messiah has come. Follow His example. In the Gospel, the disciples want to know about the enduring, permanent, and the eternal, so they ask a question of Jesus, "Where are you staying?" But they are really asking, Where should we go to receive what you have to offer? Where can we be in the very presence of God? I want to know that, I think we all want to know that.

Theologian Jullianna Claassans says, *"If you want to know the word made flesh, come and see Jesus. If you want to know what love is like, come and see Jesus. If you want to experience God's glory, to be filled with bread that never perishes, to quench your thirst with living water, to be born again, to abide in love, to behold the light of the world, to experience the way, the truth, and the life, to enter into life everlasting, . . . if you want to know God, come and see Jesus."*[#]

Finally, in today's Gospel, Simon/Peter meets the Messiah face-to-face – I wonder what he was expecting? When we meet Jesus, face-to-face, what do we expect? Are you thinking, "When do I ever meet Jesus face-to face? Look around you, here, now. Whatever your do for others, you do for Jesus. Love the questions, because seeking of the answers, is the journey. God is love. Love is a verb. What we do matters! Amen

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*Some concepts and quotes in this sermon were taken from an online commentary.
https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3114
Audrey West

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^{**}Love is a Verb, Sheryl Paul International counselor for anxiety