

Sermon: An Open Question
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt
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Text: Matthew 16:13-20

He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?'

Matthew 16:15

To mark the start of the new academic year, we are launching today a seven-week sermon series. The series will be centered around the theme of *Living the Questions*.

We have borrowed that phrase from the German novelist and poet, Rainer Maria Rilke.

In this country, Rilke is perhaps best known as the author of a slim little volume called, *Letters to a Young Poet*, which is just that -- a collection of ten letters Rilke wrote to a young poet who sought Rilke's counsel about how to help him make sense of his young life through his art.

Within this famous collection of letters, one passage stands out above all the others. It is not scripture, but for reasons I'll explain in more detail in just a moment, it feels like it could be:

"Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a . . . foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer."

Live the questions now. For those of you just starting your college career, I would suggest that this idea lies very close to the central purpose of a liberal arts education.

And I hope you'll take Rilke's charge seriously: Live the questions. Explore every idea out there.

What does it mean to be human? How can we harness market forces and new technologies to mitigate climate change? What was Captain Ahab really chasing as he pursued that great white whale? What does white privilege mean, and, if you're white, how do you participate in it -- and how do you stop it?

Explore all the questions, and don't hold back. Dive fearlessly into the bottomless ocean of human thought.

And then explore what these questions mean for you, for that is a necessary part of discerning what you are meant to do with your one wild and precious life, to borrow Mary Oliver's wonderful phrase.

Now, for those of us who've been around the block a few times, who've enjoyed a few more trips around the sun, let me immediately add that this process of learning and inquiry does not need to stop, indeed, it should not stop, just because our college years are growing steadily more distant in our rear view mirror.

Because if you stop asking what your life means, if you stop asking who you are becoming, or what God may be calling you to be, or to do you, if you stop asking those questions, your life is at risk of becoming fossilized.

Your understanding of God and of the world, your understanding of yourself and your place in the world, can easily become trapped in a specific set of assumptions that may or may not still be true.

I say all of this today, at the start of this new academic year, in part because of the existential value of living and exploring life's biggest and best questions.

The quest for answers is as important as the answers themselves. Because the journey of discovery that follows will inevitably take us to places we've never been before, thus making more of us, as individuals and as a human community.

As a faith leader, I also say this today, from this pulpit, because I believe asking big questions, and sometimes hard questions, is part of an authentic spiritual practice.

It took me a long time to come to this view, because in the sweet little Evangelical Free Church in which I grew up, questions had very little value.

Which is to say that in the church of my childhood, the Bible was understood to be chiefly about answers. All you had to do was read it, and apply what you'd learned, and, voilà, you were set for life.

Which was fine until my youth group leader's twelve year-old daughter dropped dead on the playground from a brain aneurysm.

It was fine until my family lost everything in a catastrophic flood.

It was fine until I went to Haiti on a mission trip as a nineteen-year-old and discovered that the faith I had been taught to that point was a house of cards.

Which is to say, this answer-based approach to faith was fine until life started to clobber me over the head with questions that did not fit any answers I could easily find in the Bible.

How could Janna have died? She was twelve years old. She loved Jesus and she was a vibrant and healthy young girl! I don't understand!

How could this have happened to my family? We're good Christian people! But overnight we lost everything we owned in a fearsome torrent of rising flood waters. I don't understand!"

Why are all these children on the streets of Port-au-Prince hungry? And why do all the church people who are here with me on this mission trip appear to care more about saving the souls of these kids than about feeding them because, in case you hadn't noticed, they're hungry! I don't understand!"

In terms of my own spiritual practice, asking those questions was the hardest and best thing I ever did. Hardest, because, first the questions almost killed my faith. And best because asking them, and then earnestly seeking answers, made my faith bigger and stronger, in the end, and much more suited to coping with life as we know it, in all its heartbreaking and bewildering complexity.

But even more to the point, I finally realized that even in the Bible itself, it's the questions that drive the story forward.

Who shall I say sent me? Moses says to God in response to the astonishing news that Yahweh now wants this unknown sheep herder to take on the most powerful leader on earth, equipped only with a shepherd's staff.

Where is this child that has been born king of the Jews? ask the wise men searching for Jesus, in the first words of human speech in the New Testament.

How can this be? Mary asks Gabriel, when the mighty archangel discloses to this simple peasant girl the role she will play in a story that will soon change the world.

In scripture, as in life, it's questions, not answers, that drive the story forward. Which brings us to our text for today.

"Who do people say that I am?" Jesus asks his disciples.

Well, they reply, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

It's a non-committal answer, and Jesus will have none of it, so he presses them. "Yes, but who do *you* say that I am?"

They have followed their wonder-working teacher for nearly three years now. They've heard everything he's said, watched everything he's done. Now he wants to know if they've come to any conclusions about what it all means.

But of the twelve disciples to whom he addresses the question, only one of them, Peter, answers: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

The silence of the other eleven disciples tells me that the issue of faith and identity, even the identity of Jesus, is not a given. It's not necessarily settled or obvious. To find answers takes searching and inquiry, thinking and asking.

Whether you're a student about to begin your college experience, or whether you're a regular attender here, whether you're brand new to faith, or have been practicing it for years, whether you've graduated from seminary with a Master of Divinity degree, or whether organized religion is not really your thing, wherever

you may stand on the religious continuum, I hope you'll give this question some thought as you continue on your life journey:

Who is this man, Jesus? Who do other people say that he is? Who do you say that he is?

For the disciples, the answer was not necessarily obvious, even with Jesus standing right in front of them.

Today the question has become stupendously more difficult, in no small part because we can no longer trust the church to shed helpful or faithful light on this question.

In our time, a variety of very powerful and very prominent church leaders have closed the book on this Jesus. This is ironic because, as Evangelical pastors, they claim to take the Bible seriously.

But from their position of privilege, they have effectively taken the Bible and wrapped it in a red, white and blue burial shroud, allowing them to ignore scripture's most obvious teachings even as they collude with the civic authorities to pursue their openly partisan agenda.

For them, it's okay for our elected leaders to lock young, innocent immigrant children in cages, so long as those same elected leaders promise to make it okay to say Merry Christmas.

For them, it's okay for our elected officials to discriminate against black people and brown people, against poor people and Muslim people, to detain immigrants and turn back refugees, to celebrate and enable white supremacists, so long as these same officials appoint their preferred candidate to the Supreme Court.

It's a grotesque abuse of religious authority and it is happening in plain sight.

Which is perhaps why on Friday, Colbert I. King, an opinion writer for the Washington Post published a piece in which he asked his own important question:

“What, pray tell, will Americans be hearing from the pulpit this weekend? What will be the message of the morning?”¹

The question was prompted by the events of this week. And so Mr. King elaborated:

“Will religious leaders, credited with high moral standing, address the matter of a president who lies, disrespects cherished institutions and now stands accused by a subordinate in a court of law of having directed the subordinate to break a federal law?”

It’s an important question. And one which I believe is fair game to address it from the pulpit because it is not first an ideological question. It’s not just a question with grave political consequences, though those are certainly implied.

It’s a question rooted in several of the Bible’s most foundational moral teachings, and it touches on some of our most cherished ethical principles as Americans:

Thou shalt not lie. Thou shalt not bear false witness. Thou shalt not commit adultery. Thou shalt not steal, even if the item in question is a presidential election.

“Many congregants,” King continued, “eager to receive spiritual guidance about dealing with such issues, will be looking to the pulpit for answers.”

If you worship here regularly then you know that we have periodically addressed such questions from this pulpit for the last eighteen months. We are not new to this.

So Mr. King may be disappointed to know that I am not going to address those questions here today.

What I am going to do instead is respond to Jesus’s question for myself. Who do I say Jesus is?

¹ From *Can pulpits across the nation stand for Trump?*, Washington Post, August 24, 2018.

Well, when I remove the red, white and blue shroud in which the Bible is so often wrapped, and I open it up and read it for myself, I find, first, a Jesus who was himself a refugee.

I read about how when Jesus was still an infant, his mother and father fled their home country to escape the violent impulses of the deranged emperor who ruled over Judea--in exactly the same way parents from Guatemala and Honduras and others are fleeing their countries.

So I suspect if Jesus were to somehow appear in our world today, you would find him roving from one ICE detention center to the next, working to liberate the good people being held there.

And then moving on to dismantle the cages in which the children of these same people are being held.

Because that's what love does. Love does not seek to dominate or subjugate or incarcerate. Love seeks to liberate, to liberate the captive and to let the oppressed go free.

Come December, I suspect we would find that the Jesus of scripture would not give two figs whether or not we say Merry Christmas or Happy Holidays.

What he would care about is whether we show kindness and patience to the beleaguered clerk in Walmart, and whether we show compassion to the homeless man shivering on the street as we then make our way over to Cheddars to grab some hot soup.

Because after all Christmas is that moment when love itself became Incarnate, and that's what love does, and love is patient and kind and generous. Love does not insist on its own way, and it particular does not insist you say "Merry Christmas" to people who may not celebrate the holidays in the way you do.

And in case any of us are at risk of become too smug about all this, if Jesus were to appear right here in this sanctuary today, he might re-tell a story he first told a long time ago, updating it for our time, about how there was once a man, walking to the Ingles in Swannanoa, who was jumped by a gang of thugs. They beat him and took his wallet, making off with his last six dollars, and leaving him to die by the side of the road.

And how an Episcopalian priest first passed him by, in a hurry to celebrate the Eucharist over at Highland Farms. And then a progressive Presbyterian minister on his way to a luncheon with other ministers in Black Mountain and Swannanoa didn't even slow down when he saw the man lying there in a heap, dirtied and bloodied on the side of the road. Because this devout man, this champion of human rights, didn't want to be late for lunch.

And how it was a man in a big pick-up truck, wearing a red MAGA hat who finally stopped, and picked the man up, literally, picked him up, and put him carefully in the back seat of his double-cab and drove the wounded man straight to the ER and stayed with him there until he had been treated and cared for, and then paid his bill before driving him back to home, stopping first at Ingles to pick up a bag of groceries.

Because that's what love does. And love is waaaay too big to fit into our tiny little ideological categories.

Then, finally after this service, I suspect the Jesus of scripture would join us for lunch, first taking care that everyone was fed, and then making sure that we welcomed everyone to our table: even those who doubt him, even those who deny him, even those who might someday betray him.

Because that's what love does.

That, in short, is my answer to Jesus's question, who do you say that I am?

But the bigger question is who do you say that he is?

I very much hope, that in the year to come, we can live and explore that question together.

Amen?