

Proverbs 31:10-31
Psalm 1
James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a
Mark 9:30-37

Proper 20B
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Questions Are Our Friends

Oh what a very human passage we hear from Mark today. It's unusual for this gospel writer to be so intent on feelings. Mark's is the fast-paced gospel, where everything happens immediately, and stories get straight to the point. But today's passage lingers over so many feelings – vulnerability, kindness, anger, pride, fear. And all because Jesus had taken his disciples away from the crowds in order to teach them about his suffering, death and resurrection. They did not understand what was going on. But their response isn't to puzzle over the problem or to ask clarifying questions. Quite the contrary. The disciples didn't understand why Jesus had to suffer and die, and that made them afraid. So afraid, in fact that they couldn't ask questions... and they certainly couldn't contemplate the future Jesus was describing for them, a future without him.

I know what it feels like to be afraid to ask questions. Sometimes we won't ask questions because we think we should know the answer, or at least know much more than we do. Sometimes we won't ask questions because we feel like we'll be exposed in ways we don't want to be, or that we'll be embarrassed. And sometimes we won't ask questions, especially the big, important life questions, because we think being faithful means we shouldn't have questions or doubts about big things. Especially when the big things are about God. Just last Sunday, we heard Jesus ask the disciples a very big question "Who do you say that I am?" And as soon as Peter gave the right answer, naming Jesus as the Messiah, their whole world began to unravel. That big question opened the way for Jesus to begin teaching the disciples that he would suffer at human hands, be killed and in three days, rise again. It's no wonder they didn't ask questions the second time round. I don't think I'd be asking questions either.

But I can't help thinking about what would have happened if the disciples had allowed their fears and doubts to rise up in them, and had asked Jesus the questions that were on their hearts?

"What are you saying?"

"What does that mean?"

"How long can you stay with us?"

"What will happen to your stories and your teachings?"

"How can you leave us?"

"What will happen to us?"

"Why do you have to die?"

But they didn't ask. Instead they distracted themselves with the more weighty issue of who among them was the greatest. Being afraid doesn't necessarily bring out the best in us.

We need always to remember that questions are our friends. They are not a measure of ignorance nor are they a measure of some inherent deficiency. Questions are signs of engagement and curiosity and the desire to learn and to explore. Questions open us up to possibilities that might never have been imagined had we not wondered. When we're afraid, we shut down and hold on to small certainties. One has to be brave to ask big questions. Brave doesn't mean we're not afraid... sometimes brave means being afraid and doing it anyway. Most all of us have situations or even whole chapters of our lives when we aren't sure about God. But I have come to understand that my questions somehow deepen my relationship with God. My times of doubt are the very times when God's promises matter more than ever, because there is nothing for me to do but to trust in those promises.

I think we often doubt God when the unthinkable happens – when a child dies, when a marriage is lost, when a scary diagnosis is received, when the things we thought were constant, come undone. And yet these are the times when we desperately need God's promises to be true. And our desire for God's promises, even in the midst of our doubts, is what holds us in relationship with God. I am mindful of how often we encounter doubt in the gospels. And of how often we encounter doubt in our own lives. Yet God is so generous, so insistent on remaining in relationship with us that time and again the doubters through their doubting come ever more deeply into relationship with God. Because when we doubt, when we are brave enough to ask questions, we are engaging and wrestling and wondering – with our faith, with our lives, and with God.

What are the big questions for you? Are they places you are afraid to go? Sometimes we don't even need the answers. Sometimes all we need are the questions.

1. If we learn from our mistakes, why are we so afraid to make mistakes?
2. Is the life I want out of reach, or have I just become so stiff that I can't stretch quite far enough?
3. If a friend spoke to me the way I sometimes speak to myself, how long would that person be my friend?
4. If life really is short, why do we do so many things that don't matter, and not do so many things that do?
5. If you looked deep into the heart of your enemy, what do you think you would find that is different from what is in your own heart?
6. On any given day, what does the way you live your life say is important?
7. What do you do with the bulk of your money?
8. What have you done that you are proud of, and how does that inform your life?
9. What have you done that you are not at all proud of, and how does that inform your life?
10. What have you given up on?
11. How short would your life have to be in order to start living differently today?

Questions are our friends. Not because they are easy or comfortable, but because they open our hearts to the truth of ourselves, and take us straight to the place where God lives in us.

If the disciples had asked those big questions they were afraid to ask, surely they would have had a clearer understanding of the connection between Jesus's suffering, dying and rising, and their lives as his disciples, pouring out God's love in the world. Jesus was killed by power hungry, power filled people who were threatened by his power – the power that is love. Their power, the kind of power that crushes some people and gets others to the top, the power that insists on domination and oppression, on winners and losers, on haves and have nots... that kind of power turns to mush in the face of love.

Jesus knew he was going to die. He knew he needed to prepare the disciples to continue God's work in the world. And he knew his suffering at human hands would be overcome by God's great story of the life and love that never dies, God's story of resurrection. Jesus' suffering and death at human hands, and his resurrection at God's hands show us that the kind of power that crushes and even kills people is POWERLESS in the face of love. And by God's grace, we present day disciples can be the Body of Christ, the face of love, in our place and time. St Teresa of Avila said it best...

Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours; yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion looks out on the world, yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good, and yours are the hands with which he is to bless us now.

May your hands, the hands that receive Christ at this holy table today, be the hands that feed, the hands that heal, the hands that welcome, the hands that bless, on this day and all the days to come. Amen.