

When Doctrine Gets in the Way of Faith

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*Preached at Lower Merion Baptist Church
Sunday, April 24, 2005; Bryn Mawr, PA*

John 14:1-4

“Fides Quaerens Intellectum”

“It’s the questions that drive us.” This is a contemporary quotation made immortal by pop culture, and by the truth and profundity of the statement. The statement from the movie *The Matrix* made by Morphous to Neo points to a truth of human culture; we ask a lot of questions. We wonder, we muse, and we scratch our heads in a curious gesture and ask, “Why.” We are full of questions. Have you ever watched a movie with a small child? Five minutes of the movie will not pass before a question is asked about a character, the plot, the scenery, and everything evenly slightly related to the movie. We are full of questions. We question politician’s motives, their speech, their funding and actions (or lack of). We question the reliability of the construction of a bridge, the fairness of a price, and freshness of the fruit. We are full of questions.

Sometimes our questions come from what the Jewish mystic Abraham Heschel calls, “a sense of wonder.” These are the questions you would find in a child, deriving from a moment of amazement, a profound sense of awe, and a respect for the entire natural created world. Many scientists are driven by the questions of wonder in trying to understand the complexity of creation. For example, the questions the genetic makeup of humanity may derive out of respect for the complexity one finds in life itself. We are full of questions.

Other questions come from a sense of doubt and disbelief. There is a polemic, mistrust, and a cynicism embedded in these questions. “Did you *really* clean your room?” “Can you *really* close the deficit?” “Are you *really* going to keep this sermon brief?” Not emerging from a sense of wonder and awe, these are questions that portray our sense of reality and skepticism. These are questions that can keep us grounded, and protected; these are also questions, which come from a lack of trust and a lack of belief.

Questions of wonder, questions of cynicism, we are full of questions. One of my favorite examples of questions comes from Abraham before God. (Genesis 18:22-33) God has decided that the cities and the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah were evil and needed to be destroyed. Yet Abraham went before God and asked, “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? ... Far be it from you to do such a thing!” And the Lord says, “If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole city.” And then Abraham says, “What if there are only 45” to which God relents. And this continues all the way to ten. This is an almost comical example of questioning, when we consider the bold act of directly confronting God’s divine judgment and justice. We are full of questions that can plague us, overwhelm us, and control our entire life. Perhaps we can hear the words found in Thornton Wilder’s play *The Skin of Our Teeth*, which claims, “My advice to you is not to inquire why or wither, but just enjoy your ice cream while it’s on your plate...” But such a philosophy of life seems unattainable as we question the flavor of ice cream, if it is free, and if we can have seconds. We wonder and we doubt and we live with our questions. It is the questions that drive us, and we are full of questions.

The scripture today is addressing a different set of questions, ones that point deeper than just questions of wonder or of cynicism. These are questions of faith, questions of life, and questions of purpose. Maybe, at first glance you can’t see the depth and profundity of the questions. Maybe at first glance you just see questions about heaven, questions about the identity of Jesus and the way to salvation. Maybe you read this passage and you can hear a seminary professor using this text to explain the subtle difference between the terms homousian, and homoousian when considering the nature of Christ. Maybe you read this passage and you yourself begin to draft theories about the complexity of heaven’s geography. Different rooms for different folks, and different folks with different strokes will live in

different rooms (so there is hope for peace in heaven). Theologians have a tendency to take the joy, excitement and wonder out of faith, and maybe you can see that happening in this passage. We tend to formulate complex doctrines and theories, which can get in the way of our basic belief. Remember when the Sadducees approached Jesus and asked about a woman married seven times, wondering whom her husband would be in heaven? That is a prime example of doctrine getting in the way of faith. It keeps us theologians employed to complicate matters, trivialize thoughts, and alienate laypeople. It puts a wall around our basic faith, making belief almost unattainable. Yet as theologians complicate matters professionally, we all have the ability to miss the main issues on our own, without the help of the ivory tower thinker. Even the disciples muddled Christ's words with their questions. The biblical scholar Gail O'Day suggests that Thomas was thinking about an actual road concerning to "way" to the Father's house when he asked Christ for directions. C.K. Barrett suggests that Phillip was looking for a natural Father rather than the supernatural, missing Christ's suggestion that the divine is both Christ and God. Both disciples allowed the questions on the fore of their minds to complicate and confuse the words and the message of Christ. Our questions can lead us down the wrong path as we try to force the divine into concepts with which we are comfortable and with which we feel safe. It is very easy to let doctrine suggested in this passage get in the way of faith.

Yet this is not a passage about distracting doctrine, but reaches to the core of our faith. Hear the words of Jesus: "do not let your hearts be troubled." Remember what it means to be troubled. Jesus was troubled at Lazarus' death; he shook emotionally, he wept, and shouted with grief. Today the words of Jesus suggest that disciples are experiencing similar emotions. Do not let your hearts be troubled. The disciples are not just musing over questions of heaven and God, but are wrecked by their questions. The questions are driving them, challenging them, and maybe even scaring them. What if they were wrong to follow Jesus? What if they made the wrong decision, and the Pharisees and the Sadducees were right? What if the persecution they had to endure was for naught; the abandonment of families, the suffering and the rejection. What if they endured this shift in beliefs, the trauma and turmoil for nothing? These are questions that fall heavy on the hearts and minds of the early Christians. These are questions of life, faith, and belief. Is Jesus worth living for? Is Jesus worth dying for? How can we complicate this question? How can a theologian muddle this life and purpose question that is on the hearts of the disciples, the hearts of the early Christians, and our hearts as well? These are questions of faith. Is faith in Christ worth it? Will life be gained through Christ? Stay sharp to this passage; stay sharp to the answers, and the questioning spirit. For this passage does not address questions of wonder or cynicism. Those are the question for doctrine. This passage addresses the questions, which will trouble our hearts, questions of life, purpose, and faith.

As we read this passage with such questions on our minds ask yourself, where do these questions come from? What is it that truly troubles our hearts? What causes us to stir up enough courage to question our own Lord and Savior? In the movie, *Steel Magnolias*, M'Lynn, played by Sally Fields is burying her daughter Shelby who died young, leaving a young child. M'Lynn's friend Annelle, played by Daryl Hannah, tries to comfort M'Lynn by saying, "Shelby is with her King now." M'Lynn responds with an explosion of anger, shouting "I understand that in my head, but would someone please explain it to my heart!" The pain on her heart is the source of her true and deepest questions. It is an anxiety, a need to trust, and a need for relationship that drives our questions. A need to know "why?" The psychologist Dr. Dan Goleib (who has a show on WHYY) once said that the opposite of faith is anxiety, and I think that is the source of our deepest and most profound questions. We are anxious about our faith, so we ask a lot of questions. Here we gather with the disciples before us, here we sit before Jesus, and we think what we have been asked to sacrifice for the sake of this movement. We think about the lost time, the frustration, the aggravation, the toil, and wonder if we are truly living. We think of past Christians who have given their lives, martyrs and saints, missionaries and church builders, evangelists and people like you and me. We think about the sacrifice they made and ask, "Was it worth it?" Ask Christ now if this is worth it. Ask Christ now if there is some reward – a room or a view of God, because with the anxiety on our hearts, the questions become more real.

We are asked to give our lives to Christ – how far do we need to go, and can we trust Christ? That is the crux, isn't it? Can we trust Christ? Can we trust Christ with our hopes, with our dreams, and with our very lives? This anxiety drives our questions and our pursuits to find answers. Christ calls for our whole, entire life – do we do it. Have we given Christ everything, or do we hide behind the doctrine, the questions of Phillip and Thomas? Can we trust Christ enough to give him everything, or are we going to

hide behind quibbled answers of “it depends?” The questions become valuable, they become real, and they become timeless when we consider their source – living, and the challenge of Christ in our lives. The questions of the disciples, the questions of the early Christians become our questions when we all name the anxiety and the fear of trusting Jesus completely in all of our lives.

In response to our questions, Christ offers to calm us, and then reaches out a hand. Christ calls us to sooth our troubled hearts – everything will be all right. Christ calls us to calm our fears and to tell us that everything will work out. And then Christ tells us what to do, trust that he is the way. Christ is the way, and we are called to live that way. Live in the way Christ lives; trust that the way Christ shows is the way to truth and life. This way is like the Hebrew word for way, “Derek” which means a way of wisdom and holiness. This way is the way that Abraham went when he left his home and followed God. It is the way Abraham went when he trusted God and brought Isaac to be sacrificed. It is the way Moses went when he listened to the voice coming from the burning bush and led his people out of Egypt. It is the way David walked when he faced the giant Goliath. This is the way that is focused on God that is in relationship with God, which is true to God.

Do you see what Jesus is calling us to do? Jesus is calling us to trust God, and keep our eyes to God. This is the faith that Martin Luther calls a total trust in God’s graciousness, and a total orientation to the confidence and loyalty of God. Our questions of anxiety can find peace, as we trust God. And then Christ tells us and shows us how to stay orientated to God – through him. This is the power of the incarnation, that in Christ we know God. It is through Christ that we know the truth of God. It is through Christ that we experience the life that God offers. “No one can see God and live,” be we can follow and walk with and live in Christ; God incarnate, God in the flesh. The great preacher and early Christian John Chrysostom said, “He who speaks thus, showed that he so modeled His words so as to bring them to the faith, for He walks in their hearts.” Through Christ we can know what it means to trust that God is with us, because through Christ God is with us. Christ assures us that God has a place for us. Christ assures us that God will be with us. Christ assures us that we will never be alone – can we hear his words and believe in them? Can we take that plunge off the cliff and trust, and have faith in Christ? Can we know that all of the sacrifice, all of the turmoil and all of the persecution are worth it? Can we trust that the way of Christ is truth and life – that only through living the way will we truly live? Let go of your anxiety, let go of your questions, if only for a moment, and take Christ’s hand. Take his hand and let him lead you to the path of hope, the path of peace, and the path that leads to God. Oh, Christ is calling us, soothing our anxiety, and offering the answer to our deepest questions of trust – that we can trust Christ.

Trust Christ by following Christ. It is not a doctrine, a creed or a statement of faith, which we are called to hold, but relationship. Christ looks at our anxiety, Christ hears our questions and calls us to know him, follow him, and love him. We are called to be in a relationship with Christ and to live that relationship. This is the way, which Christ calls us to live, and Christ invites us to live in that way. There is an old phrase used in the church, *fides quaerens intellectum* that means “faith seeking understanding.” And that is the way we are called to walk. Have faith first, believe first, follow Jesus first, and understanding will happen. Don’t worry about going to heaven, about exclusionary salvation, about the divine nature of Christ – follow him, have faith in him, trust him, and understanding will happen. Start each day dedicating it to Christ – don’t question how, just trust that Christ will be with you. This will lead to the wisdom of God, the mercy of God, and the peace of God – through having faith in Christ.

Trusting in your relationship with Christ will also affect your relationships with others. When you get two or three people who say, “I don’t know what I believe, but I know that I love the Lord,” then you have a very powerful church. Think about those relationships when you talk with each other about following Jesus. Think about the conversation when each person can share what it is like to trust and love the Lord. This isn’t a church focused on doctrinal purity, on Biblical interpretation or on creedal statement – it is a church focused on trusting Jesus – on walking the way of Jesus and allowing the understanding to happen. Don’t let doctrine get in the way of your faith. Don’t let someone bar your relationship with Christ through a doctrinal purity and litmus test. Trust in your relationship with Christ, and know that that is enough. Don’t let your hearts be troubled – Christ is with you, guiding you, preparing the way for you, and loving you. Have faith in Christ and everything else will follow.

AMEN