

Third Sunday of Advent, December 11, 2022
 “Asking Questions” (Matthew 11:2-11)

It was thirty years ago when I made the decision to attend seminary. As this news began to spread, I received a phone call from an old friend who wanted to verify that it was true. When I assured her it was, she replied, *Someone asked me if I had heard you were going to be a pastor. And I said, ‘Are you talking about the same Craig Sigmon I know?’* You see, I was not only her friend, but I had been her supervisor on two occasions. She had a certain image of me based on our former relationships, and obviously that image did not fit with ordination.

Has this ever happened to you? Have you been surprised that other people’s perception of you did not match your own self-perception? It opens our eyes a bit, doesn’t it? But we all do the same thing. When thinking of others, we tend to focus on one image, or event, or relationship and block out the others. Consider two former presidents as examples. Richard Nixon will be remembered not for the effectiveness of his presidency, but for his involvement in Watergate. And Bill Clinton will always be remembered for the Monica Lewinsky scandal.

We do this to Biblical characters, too. We remember Peter’s denial of Jesus, but sometimes forget his powerful preaching. We remember David’s affair with Bathsheba, but don’t always remember his courage and leadership in other instances. Sometimes, however, the opposite is true. Sometimes we remember the good moments of a person’s life and forget the bad ones. In either case, we should realize that we all are very complex. Therefore, what we perceive or remember about people should not be based on one moment or event in their lives. We should not judge the whole person based on a tiny part of their personhood.

We shouldn’t do that to Biblical characters either. Look at John the Baptist. What do we remember about him? We recall him preaching out in the wilderness, calling people to repent of their sin and to prepare themselves for the coming kingdom of God. We recall his clothing of camel’s hair and his diet of locusts and wild honey. We remember how he challenged the Pharisees and Sadducees, calling them a “brood of vipers.” Most of all, we remember him as baptizing Jesus – the one whose sandals he was not worthy to untie – and acknowledging him as the promised Messiah.

These recollections give us a wonderful picture of John the Baptist: confident, courageous, intense, and enthusiastic; the voice that prepared the way for the Messiah. Any other description would be difficult to recognize. But then we see John in our text from Matthew this morning. It shows John in a light so different that we would almost swear it is not the same person.

John is in prison, but there is a question on his lips – one we might find hard to believe that he is asking. John wants to know about the identity of Jesus. Of all people, we thought that, at this point, John the Baptist knew more about Jesus than anybody. But here he is, sending his disciples to ask Jesus, *Are you the one who is to come, or should we wait for another?* What happened to his decisiveness, his certainty? Does he not know for sure that Jesus is the Messiah?

It could be that sitting in a dark and damp prison cell, living with rats and eating bad food, has dulled John’s memory to the point that he can no longer see that Jesus is the Messiah. That could

be one explanation. Or does this moment of questioning come from somewhere else? We've all had times where we were decisive and sure, and other times when we've experienced doubt and uncertainty. It is no different with John.

Again, he is in prison. He knows there is the possibility that he will never see freedom again. This, for him, may be a time to look back, tie up loose ends, and reflect on how he has spent his life. We've all been there or have seen others at such a place – in old age, at mid-life, when facing a serious illness, when beginning a new career, or even at the start of a New Year. These are times when we may look back over our lives and wonder if a certain decision was best or a certain choice was appropriate. In general, we pause to wonder *what if*.

Earlier, John had had strong convictions that Jesus was the one. Maybe he is now doubting those convictions. If Jesus was really the Messiah who had come to free the prisoners, then why was God's prophet stuck in jail? If the Son of God had arrived to pour out his Spirit on the faithful and to rain fire on the wicked, why hadn't he done it already? So, if Jesus is not the Messiah, maybe John wants a chance to look elsewhere. Or maybe Jesus is so different from what John expected, that John wonders if he really can be the promised one. For whatever reason, John asks the question, *Are you the one, or should we wait for another?*

John is struggling with who Jesus is. Many times, we, too, struggle with matters of life and faith. We, too, ask questions.

What would Jesus think about...(pick an issue)?

If Christ came to save the world, why is there so much wrong with it?

Is one sin greater than another in God's eyes?

Why do bad things happen to good people?

Why did my loved one have to die?

We've all had such questions about how the divine interacts with the temporal. Perhaps we've even felt guilty about asking such questions. Perhaps our churches make us feel guilty about asking them. *We'll tell you all you need to know*, they say. *Pay attention to the sermons, come to Sunday School and Bible studies, learn the doctrines and teachings of the denomination and that's all you'll need for a healthy life of faith.* But for most of us, coming to trust and have faith in Christ is a process that takes place over time as we struggle with certain issues. Pat answers simply will not do; they are empty and inadequate. We have to sort through our options and make discoveries on our own. And what we will find is that our discoveries won't always be the same as those of our parents, teachers and pastors. We need the freedom to ask questions and arrive at answers that may be different from those given to us by others. Without that freedom, we do not grow in our own understanding of anything.

Most of us here have been the parents of school age children at some point in our lives. Remember how they would come for help on a homework problem? And remember how tempting it was just to say, *This is the answer?* But if we tried that, it would many times generate more questions: *Why is that the answer? Why do you work the problem that way instead of this way? Why is that the formula you use? How can I be sure this is correct?* Becoming frustrated with the questions, we'd say, *Because that's just the way it's done, now write down the answer.*

But hooray for the student who keeps questioning, for only through the questioning process can true understanding come. And hooray for the Christian who keeps asking questions, because that is the way to grow in one's faith. Here's an example. Until we struggle with the question, *Why does God love me?* we can't answer the question, *How does God call me to love my neighbor?*

Questions aren't bad, but not allowing them to be asked is. Questions help us explore and understand important matters. And even if someone else already has the very same answer, it's still worth the journey for us to come to the answer on our own. Simply making someone else's answer our own does not allow us to grow and expand our minds. It's like our children's homework. We can give them the answer and get them a good homework grade, but will they have enough understanding to pass the test?

So, when we look at the sure and confident John in his moment of uncertainty and hear the question he asks, we shouldn't be disturbed. We should not be disturbed by other people's questions either, or feel guilty for asking them ourselves. Instead, let us give thanks that our faith is still alive enough to ask questions and that we haven't given into the notion that we've heard it all before.

The question before us today is this: *Is Jesus the one?* We, who continue to prepare our hearts for the arrival of the Christ Child, should find ourselves asking the question. At some point in the past, all of us here have acknowledged that he is the one. But that was just the first step on a journey that lasts a lifetime. We still need to ask the question as a sign that we are open to the growth and the new life God wills for all of us. It is not until we ask – and ask over and over again – that we realize what it means when we say Jesus is the one.

When John asks the question, Jesus sends a return message to help his cousin see more clearly and understand more deeply. *Look what do you see? The blind see again, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the sick are strengthened, the dead are raised, and the poor hear the good news.* The answer to John's question is right there in front of him. It is in the healings and the proclamation of the good news Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God is at work in the world. The evidence is all around him, but John needs to see and hear it again.

And Jesus is not frustrated by John's question. He isn't irritated that he must respond to a question to which John should already have the answer. Jesus understands that doubt is part of the human condition. He lovingly and patiently provides what John needs in his moment of uncertainty and helps make firm John's belief that Jesus is, in fact, the one.

When doubts assail us and our faith is shaken, when we question if Jesus is Lord, may there be someone (like Jesus was for John) to open our eyes again and remind us of how God is at work, someone to help dispel our uncertainty so that we may confidently profess that Jesus is the one. Perhaps, even better, are the opportunities we might have to be that person for others who are struggling and asking questions. May we point them to the Savior of the world so that they, too, may confidently say, *Jesus is the one!* Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.