
ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

The average human being makes more than 1,700 decisions every day.

- Even if we're not aware of it, we make these decisions on the basis of questions we ask:
 - "What do I feel like eating?"
 - "What should I wear today based on what I have to do?"
 - "How should I respond in this situation?"
- We all are actually very good at asking questions.
 - But it's important that we learn to ask the right questions.

This is particularly true when it comes to Bible study.

- Asking the right questions will lead us to dig in deeper, to probe for more answers, and to seek to better understand.

Today's Gospel gives us a chance to think about the questions we ask.

- The Good Samaritan is perhaps the best known of all the parables that JESUS told.
 - There is even a law today in the United States that bears its name.

In the Gospel reading we have a lawyer—and that would be a religious lawyer who is concerned with keeping the laws of the Temple—who tries to test JESUS.

- "*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*"
 - Did you notice how JESUS turned the tables on him?
 - The lawyer asks a question and ends up being the one who has to give all the answers.
 - But we're focusing on questions today, so the most important question that is asked is also the most important for us: "*Who is my neighbor?*"

To help answer that question, JESUS tells the story of a man who is robbed, beaten, and left for dead.

- Two men come by and leave him as he is.
 - A priest and a Levite.
 - Today, that would be the pastor and the council president.
- A third man comes by, but stops to help.
 - We're told that he is a Samaritan, which means he is a half-breed of Jewish and Assyrian heritage.
 - When the Assyrians conquered Israel, many Jews were taken into captivity and married these other people.
 - Though the Samaritans worshiped the same GOD as the Israelites, they were hated by the Jews who saw themselves as pure-bloods.
 - If you're a Harry Potter fan, the Samaritans would be mud-bloods.
 - Who would JESUS use in place of the Samaritan if HE told this story today?
 - Well, it depends on your prejudices: blacks, Latinos, Asians, Arabs, homosexuals, the homeless, Republicans, Democrats?
 - Well, in the story, this hated Samaritan is the one who saves the man's life—at his own expense, no less—
 - and that leads back to the question, "Who is my neighbor?"

When we study a parable—any parable—from the Bible, there are three questions that we should be asking.

- The answers to all three aren't in every parable, but they are there in most.

- 1) The first parable question is, “Who is GOD in the story?”
 - In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, GOD is the father.
 - In the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard, GOD is the owner.
 - But in this parable, there isn’t a figure who represents GOD.
- 2) The second question to ask is, “Who am I?” or “Who are we in the story?”
 - Sometimes in this parable, we might find ourselves relating more to the man who was robbed.
 - But more likely we will see that we are the ones who come down the road and must decide how we will respond to the man who was in need.
- 3) The third question when studying parables is, “What is GOD saying to me or to us?”
 - In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, JESUS asks the all-important question:
 - “Who was neighbor to the man who was robbed?”
 - Notice that the young lawyer replies, “The one who showed him mercy.”
 - I wish we could hear the tone of his voice when he gives this answer,
 - but even though we can’t, I think it’s very telling that this young Jewish man can’t even say the word Samaritan.
 - That’s how hated the Samaritans were.
 - So, he just says, “The *one* who showed mercy.”

Now there are TWO more QUESTIONS FROM THE STORY that are easy for us to miss that really help us to understand what GOD is saying to us in this parable.

- These two questions help us to understand the responses of the three who come down the road past the injured man.

The question the first two ask is this: “What will happen to me if I stop?”

- And it’s a reasonable question that I suspect many of us have asked ourselves when we’ve seen a homeless person or a hitchhiker alongside the road.
 - “What will happen to me if I stop?”
 - “What if the person is dangerous?”
 - “What if I have to do something I’m not comfortable doing?”

Those in JESUS’ parable didn’t know if this situation was real.

- “What if it’s a trick, a set-up, and I get robbed?”

For the Jews of Jesus day, there was more to worry about.

- “What if he’s already dead, and I touch him?”
 - For the Jews, to touch a dead body would make you ritually unclean, and then you couldn’t go to synagogue or temple for two weeks.
 - Two weeks without GOD in your life.
 - And then you’d have to spend some money to make the appropriate sacrifice for cleansing.
 - “What will happen to me if I stop?”

The Samaritan, however, asks a different question: “What will happen to him if I don’t stop?”

- “Will he suffer?”
- “Will he die?”
 - “What will happen to him if I don’t stop?”

Some years ago, I was driving past a middle school near the church I served.

- A large crowd of students was gathered in the vacant lot across the street from the school where clearly a fight was going on.
- As I continued down the road, I heard a voice saying to me, “Who is my neighbor?”
- I realized at once that there was at least one person in the middle of that crowd that was in need—my neighbor.
- “What will happen to him if I don’t stop?”

I turned around, went back, and broke up the fight.

The next week in confirmation class, some of the students asked me why I broke up the fight?

- (Undoubtedly, some of them had been in that crowd watching.)

I told them the question that went through my head,

- “What will happen to him if I don’t stop?”

We then had a discussion about breaking up and avoiding fights.

- The kids told me that if you try to walk away from a fight, you’ll get called a “chicken.”
- I asked, “Couldn’t you say that you’re a Christian?”
- One boy said, “I’d rather be called a ‘chicken’ than a ‘Christian.’”

A couple weeks later, a confirmation mom called me to tell me that her daughter, Janelle, had a classmate who went around picking fights with other girls.

- That week she had tried to start a fight with Janelle.
- Janelle told the girl, “I’m not going to fight you. It’s not because I’m afraid. I’m not. It’s not because you might beat me up, because I don’t think you can. I just don’t want to fight.”
- When Janelle got home, she told her mom what happened and said, “The whole time, I could hear Pastor Jeffrey saying, ‘Tell her you’re a Christian.’ I didn’t this time, but the next time I think I can.”
- A few days later, the same girl came to Janelle and told her that she had gotten in so many fights that if she was in one more, she would be sent to reform school.
- She told Janelle, “I don’t want to go to reform school, but I don’t know how to stop fighting. Would you help me?”
- Janelle told her mom, “I think I can help her.”

When I stopped, I thought I was asking the right question:

- “What will happen to the boy in the fight if I don’t stop?”
- I didn’t know the real question was, “What will happen to the girl that would become Janelle’s friend if I don’t stop?”

This parable also has changed the questions I ask before an election.

- Instead of asking, “Am I better off than I was two years or four years ago?” I ask, “Is my neighbor better off than two or four years ago?”
- The answer influence how I vote in the election.

“Who is my neighbor?”

- Anyone who is in need.

What is the question to ask when we see our neighbor in need?

- “What will happen if I don’t stop?”

And that, Christians, is the right question.