

**A SERMON GIVEN BY REV. PAUL J. KOTTKE
UNIVERSITY PARK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**

Sunday, June 27, 2010

Title: Wisdom Within Questions [First in a series based on Dr. Timothy Johnson's book *Finding God in the Questions*]

Scripture: Matthew 16:13-15 and I Peter 1:13-16

Theme: This morning's sermon will set the stage for the new series. It is aimed at those who are open to the questions of life and faith, those who know that the kaleidoscope of daily life shifts and that our experience and understanding of God shifts with it.

Do any of you remember Art Linkletter's television series "Kids Say the Darndest Things?" There was also a book by the same name. Bill Cosby picked up on the same series in the 90s. The title says it all. Mr. Linkletter would ask the young children, usually ages 3-8, questions and then get out of the way. He just died this last May [2010]. [An interesting side note is that here was a man who got along with children so well and yet his family experienced the tragedy of his young adult daughter's committing suicide in 1968.]

Any parent/teacher has experienced this same thing – children asking questions incessantly, then coming to the funniest conclusions. When Jean and I had our first child, I remember making the commitment that there would be two things I would always do: a) seek to answer my daughter's questions, no matter how repetitive, b) always try to give a legitimate answer no matter how difficult. In other words, I would seek to never become irritated and say to her "no more questions" and I would never use the answer that so many parents seem to use: "because I said so." Well, guess what! It was not long before I found myself saying to both Jessica and Bryan, "Okay, time out – no more questions. Let's have silence for five minutes!" And then I remember how exacerbated I was with myself the first time that I responded to a question that had been asked a zillions times – why, why, why ... Sure enough the words came out of my mouth "Because I said so, that's why."

Asking questions – that is how we learn. As adults, we have become enculturated enough to learn how and when to ask questions appropriately – which is important. But hopefully, we do not cease to ask questions. Questions are a primary learning tool throughout our lives. This is true not only in our personal lives but in our professional lives. The way we stay engaged is to ask questions, to seek a better way of doing something, to seek a variety of ways to be in relationships with those closest to us and those who are strangers. In our Christian language, we call this hospitality, always believing that we are engaging God in how we relate to one another.

Last Friday [June 25] in the *Denver Post* in place of the Tena Griego column was a guest columnist, Jennifer Marshall from the Heritage Foundation, writing about a Christian book *Souls in Transition: The Religious & Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*. In this article, Ms. Marshall makes the argument that young adults are determined to be free but that they do not know what is worth doing with their freedom; and that in this transition from childhood to adulthood, they depend heavily on their parent's guidance – even as they publicly act out against their parents.

She goes on, "Nor do they necessarily recognize they're under the influence of powerful cultural dynamics that hinder their quest to 'strand on their own two feet'. Trends

such as postmodernism and relativism are ‘confusing’ and ‘debilitating’ and ‘thwart many of them from ever being able to decide what they believe is really true, right, and good.’”

It is curious to me that within the field of religion, there is a serious discomfort with the asking of questions, so much so that the various branches of Christianity created what is called a catechism. Catechisms are doctrinal manuals often in the form of questions followed by answers to be memorized, a format. Any question asked must be immediately followed by one and only one answer. It is as if we are afraid that if the answer is not immediately provided, then the questioner’s faith will crumble then and there.

It seems that an individual only has two options: either you embrace the answer provided [whether you really believe it or not] or you reject it. How many people have walked away from religion because they simply could not in good conscience accept the one answer given to them. Perhaps this is why [according to Ms. Marshall’s article] 85% of young adult Americans are not practicing a religious discipline. The vast majority may state a belief in God and have spiritual questions. But typically, they do not see the Church as a viable option. Many have bought into the expectation that to belong to a Christian church, there is a correct answer for every question [whether you agree with it or not] – the belief that there is only one correct way to think and speak about God; that there is only one correct way to articulate a belief in Jesus Christ; that there is only one correct way to behave as a disciple of Jesus. And often these people will say “thanks, but no thanks.” One of the reasons, our campus ministry at DU has become so successful is because Ryan Canaday has created a safe environment for these young students to ask their religious and soul questions.

This sermon series is for those who are open to the questions of life and faith, those who know that the kaleidoscope of daily life shifts and that our experience and understanding of God

shifts with it. [This morning’s sermon is just setting the stage.]

We do seek the answers, but we must be carefully aware that the answers so easily given are likely answers that are way too narrow, when in reality God’s answers are far more broad. [Matthew 16 – “Who do you say that I am?”] Yet let us not kid ourselves – some forms of questions are purely intended to confuse and tear down any sense of responsibility or authority. And so there must be a discipline and a direction within our task of asking questions. We do well to learn how to ask questions that lead to the abundance of life found in God. [I Peter]

Let me share a few words from Dr. Timothy Johnson in his book *Finding God in the Questions* from which this sermon series will be heavily drawn:

I have been comfortable with intellectual and spiritual doubt...I welcome it as a companion that stimulates me to think about what I really believe. I find that I need to continually explore the basis of my religious beliefs, that I cannot simply accept the teachings of theologians or the dogmas of the church. I have also been acutely aware that others who are very spiritual may have very different views from mine on the specifics of religious belief. [p.19]

I find myself swimming in waters with many conflicting currents: the continuing need to find answers to the big questions of life that are both intellectually and spiritually satisfying, a growing fascination with both the hard-nosed demands of scientific reasoning and the dramatic spiritual and ethical ideals found in the teachings of Jesus, and a growing anguish born of being materially privileged in a world of terrible suffering caused by poverty. I am also aware that I am in a critical passage in my life for making decisions about how I will live the rest of it. Some

of this uncertainty is undoubtedly age-related. But much of it arises from a growing conviction that I have not lived up to my own spiritual expectations, and therefore I should make some changes while I still have time. [p.21]

Frankly, I am often surprised by some of my friends who basically have not thought about their religious beliefs since childhood and seemingly have no interest in doing so. They have essentially decided that what they learned in Sunday School or from official church teachings is good enough when it comes to religious beliefs... Most professionals would never dream of taking that attitude in presuming that what they learned decades ago in medical or graduate school is still adequate. But when it comes to religion, they seem to have concluded that the less they expose themselves to new ideas, the less they will rock their intellectual or spiritual boasts, and the better off they will be. [p.23]

The task is not learning the narrow answers – the task is embracing the sacred wisdom. I am absolutely convinced that this is the journey the scriptures seek for us. Indeed, the invitation of this sermon series is that we find the courage and the discipline to explore fundamental questions regarding our faith which will paradoxically lead us to the deeper answers that are truly worthy of our faith as Disciple leaders for Jesus Christ.