

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from September 20, 2009

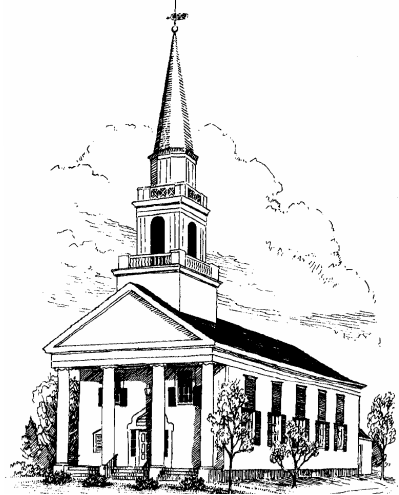
Rev. Ann M. Aaberg

“Afraid to Ask”

Scriptures:

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

Mark 9:30-37



Up until a certain age, children for the most part are not afraid to ask questions. I've had a few posed to me over the years, as I'm sure you have, which clearly exhibit this lack of fear:

“Mom, did they have dishwashers back in the olden days when you were a kid?”

“Mom, why do you have two stomachs?”

And the fill-in-the-blank question in the grocery store checkout line for *all* to hear: “Mom, what’s wrong with that man’s *face*?” (or leg, or head ...)

As children get older (again, for the most part) the filters develop, and a little fear begins to creep in—fear of embarrassment for asking a stupid or foolish question *and* fear of the answer. You can hear the timidity, the fear of the answer in the older child’s question: “Dad, is Grandma going to die?” My son somehow overcame that timidity and fear when my Dad was quite ill before his death several years ago. He had had an amputation due to diabetes, so he could no longer drive and there was a question whether or not he would be able to go home. We were in the throes of deciding what would be next for Grandpa. My son was sixteen at the time and going through driver’s education in preparation for his driver’s license and in the midst of our concerns about my Dad, my son asked me this question one day, trying to appear as offhand as possible: “So... Mom ... what’s going to happen to Grandpa’s car now that he can’t drive?”

As adolescents and adults, we have many questions we’re afraid to ask, some for fear of rejection. “Do you want to hang out with me Friday night?” “Do you love me?” “Will you marry me?”

And people say you men are afraid to ask for directions! I guess stopping and asking, “Which is the way back to Route 95 ?” can also somehow be excruciating painful!

I remember two classes in high school—Calculus and Physics—when we *girls* in the class were afraid to ask the teacher to go over the homework or to repeat what he just said for fear of embarrassment in front of the boys. I pray that is no longer the case in our classrooms!

Many times we are afraid to ask because we fear the answer itself: “How long have I got, Doc?” “Is my baby going to be all right?”

In our scripture reading this morning, we read that Jesus has again been telling the disciples of his impending suffering and death and his rising after three days, and we read: “But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask.”

Theologians and biblical scholars pose a variety of reasons for the disciples’ lack of understanding and fear to ask. Martha Moore-Keish offers several explanations, one of which is that there is a deep divide here between human understanding and divine revelation. We cannot understand the ways of God because we are not God. Because of the limits of human knowledge, it is impossible for the disciples to truly understand what God is doing through Christ’s passion. Another approach is that Jesus’ revelation about his future did not match Israel’s expectation of the Messiah. The “suffering servant” Jesus describes matches no one’s preconceived idea of God’s glorious Anointed One. Sharon Ringe of Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC, in explaining the enigma of the phrase “Son of Man” and the differing translations of “betrayed into human hands” also being read as “handed over to humans,” nonetheless concludes by saying that “the disciples’ inability to understand this teaching is a problem not of complex grammar or obscure vocabulary, but rather of a fate they cannot fathom or accept.” They cannot fathom or accept.

All the reasons we are afraid to ask questions seem to fall into two categories: fear of embarrassment over appearing ignorant or fear of the answer itself. The disciples are afraid to ask for the same two reasons. The last time Jesus told them this, Peter took issue and Jesus yelled at him. They may not want to incur the same treatment from their teacher, *and, in addition*, if what he means is what they think he means, they don’t want the answer.

Master, are you really going to die? When is this going to happen? I don’t get it – why? What will happen afterwards? What do you mean—you will rise again? What’s all this been for—this traveling, these crowds, your teaching, your healing—if you’re just going to die and leave us? And probably the most feared question: Jesus, are we going to have to die, too?

They were afraid to ask. And those of us who have been in similar situations in our own lives can understand their fear. Did I make a mistake in following him? What did I get myself into? Is it too late to turn around?

In their confusion and their fear and their not wanting to accept this suffering and death prediction, they revert to what most of us humans do: bickering with each other. When Jesus calls them on it, they’re silent, now with the red-faced shame piled on top of their confusion and fear.

It is in this moment that we can see God’s divine nature revealed in Jesus – God’s patient love for God’s children revealed in the next three words of the passage: He sat down. He sat down and called them together. Family meeting. You’re still not getting it. Let’s try this. And he puts a child among them. But we must be careful not to get all squishy and sentimental about Jesus’ use of a child to illustrate his point.

The value and status of children at that time were considered even less than property be-

cause, until they became productive, if they lived that long, they were a drain on the household. Jesus says: Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and *servant* of all, and then he picks up a child. Again, scholar Sharon Rindge helps us with the words. If we were listening to this in Greek, the sound of the word for servant and the sound of the word for little child are closely related.

The “servant of all” was the lowest in rank of all the servants, allowed to eat only when everyone else was full. A child was of equally low social status, without honor or high social standing, worth nothing, adding nothing. You want to be first? Jesus says, be last, be a lowly servant of all. You want to be the greatest? Then welcome a lowly child and you will welcome me and when you welcome me you’ll be welcoming the one who sent me.

The biblical experts treat this morning’s reading in two pieces: the lack of understanding of the disciples and their fear to ask as one piece and welcoming the child as the other. But if we remember that in our experience young children are usually the ones willing to ask the tough questions, we can tie the two pieces together. Jesus says welcome the child to welcome me. Welcome the ones who are still young enough and free enough to ask the tough questions: “Mommy, why does that man have a shopping cart in the middle of the park?” “Daddy, what’s a food bank?” “Nana, why did they bomb that building on TV?”

We remember that in another Bible passage Jesus tells us to become like children. Yes, the least members of society, *and* therefore, the ones who have nothing to lose and lots to gain by asking the questions. In the interest of being more authentic to who we are, in the interest of being more loving and direct in our relationships with each other, and in the interest of deepening our understanding of God, we are called to let go of our fear—our fear of appearing ignorant, but, more importantly, our fear of what the answer will mean—and ask. Pose the questions. For by doing that, we become like children. We give up the control and allow ourselves to become vulnerable to the answer, open to the guidance, honest in our dealings and, consequently, closer to our God because, instead of being trapped by our fear and inhibition, we are *relying* on God. Just as the curious child relies on the truthful answer from the parent, we can rely on God to be there with us when the answer is difficult to bear, when the dread weighs us down, when we feel “less than” in a culture which values doing one better, when the answer means we can no longer hide in our silence but must take action.

As we contemplate the disciples’ fear today and their desire to be the greatest, may we find the strength to admit that we are no more and no less than God’s children, and fully embrace how liberating and how powerful that is. May we feel as free as young children to approach each other and God with our questions and to rely on our faith in dealing with the answers: to ask for God’s directions, God’s guidance, God’s understanding when we don’t have a clue, and to accept God’s great commandment when we knew the answer already. And may we find the patience and grace to welcome that child in each other, in all people, knowing who we are really welcoming when we do. Amen.

