

Sept 23, 2012 St. Augustine's Pentecost 17 Mary Green

Mark 9:30-37 Questions God Asks

The time is thirty years ago. It is a beautiful spring morning. I am sitting in the courtyard of our home in Bryan, Texas. I take up a frequent rant of late, a rant that on this particular morning I am directing at God. "What do you think you're doing here God? Why have you put me together with this man? We are nothing alike- we don't have anything in common. Why is he like this? And what are you going to do about it? What were you thinking when you put us together?"

My angry raving is abruptly interrupted by an authoritative male voice coming from behind me: "Where were you when I made those morning glories over there? Do you know how to make them open and close?"

I quickly turn around. No one is there.

The voice continues: "And where were you when I made that blue jay over there? Do you know how to make blue feathers for a blue jay or red feathers for a red bird?"

My angry rant is reduced to a subdued "No Sir." I know it is not my imagination playing tricks on me. I know it is the voice of God. I wouldn't think of asking myself such probing questions – questions that reveal my prideful lack of vulnerability and trust that are necessary for an honest relationship – questions that show me just how ignorant I am when it comes to understanding my husband. "No Sir, I don't know anything." I am humbled, not humiliated, but humbled by the same God who questioned Job long ago in a similar way. "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" These were the opening questions that began God's soul-searing examination of Job.

That's how God's questions are: Direct, cutting right to the quick. God questions us not because God needs the answers to questions, but because we do. We need the answers to why we behave the way we do and what our motivations are, what we're feeling and why. God's examinations bring us to consciousness with questions about ourselves that we're afraid to ask.

A good teacher examines students to help them recognize what they know and what they have yet to learn. God as the Ultimate Good Teacher examines us, tests us to reveal what we have yet to yield to God's grace . God does not test us to

give us a letter grade, a B+ or a C- or an F. God doesn't grade on a curve. And even with the tests of life for which I would grade myself on a Pass/Fail basis, in the school of discipleship to which we all belong I'm pretty sure the learning method God uses most often, for me anyway, is the rewrite method used at my seminary. When papers or exams were not up to what was expected, rather than being given a failing grade, students had the opportunity to rewrite the exam or paper. I skated through seminary watching my classmates do rewrites, and it was not till the last semester, when I had a severe case of "senioritis," that I had to rewrite a paper for the first time. I won't name names, but the professor that required that rewrite is a member of this church (or sitting in this room). Rewrites – Do overs – are a lot of work for both the student and the teacher, but it is an excellent and gracious way to learn. It is one of the teaching methods God uses most.

Scripture is full of this divine teaching method. Scripture contains a huge file of previous exams God has given. The first one you'll no doubt remember occurs early in Genesis. "Adam, Human, where are you?" God knew perfectly well where Adam was, but Adam didn't. Sometime when you feel lost and lonely hear God ask you that question and see what answer you come up with. Or the second question God asked Adam, "Who told you that you were naked?" Coming to consciousness – recognizing - the sources for our shame and guilt is the exam that precedes true repentance.

Think about the questions Jesus asked. Almost 50 different exams that Jesus gave are recorded in the gospels. If you're ever wondering why God doesn't speak to you, or feeling like your relationship with God is in a slump, try sitting for one of Jesus' exams. You can find a list of all the tests Jesus gave on the internet. Just Google "Questions Jesus Asked" and you'll get a complete list from the gospels along with links to meeting Catholic singles and great deals on Mormon undergarments.

Jesus' exams include questions like: What do you want me to do for you? Or Why are you so afraid? Or Why are you troubled? Then there's the humongous comprehensive exam that comes to each of us when Jesus asks: "Who do you say that I am?"

One of Jesus' exams is in today's gospel reading, an exam I'd never noticed before preparing for this sermon. "What were you arguing about on the way?"

Jesus is teaching the disciples. He's trying to keep the disciples focused on what he's telling them about his coming betrayal, death, and resurrection. This is such important information that Jesus is trying to give them that he's trying to eliminate

distractions, so they pass through Galilee- they bypass their home towns and their old friends, and keep on moving. As if Jesus is saying, “You’ve got to get this. It is really important that you grasp what I’m telling you.”

The Gospel says, “But the disciples do not understand what he is saying, and are afraid to ask him.” They are proud, not humble, not humble enough to admit they don’t understand. Not humble enough to admit that there is something they don’t know.

So they argue. They argue about status and who’s the best. Their pride blocks their understanding. “What are you arguing about?” Jesus asks, not because he didn’t know the answer, but because the disciples needed to discover their pride – the pride that prevented their walking humbly with their God.

So Jesus shows them how to be humble: He takes a little child, one who had no status in the culture of Jesus’ time, who had no privileges or rights in the culture of Jesus’ time, who was not guaranteed any protection under the law because there wasn’t any law of protection save the grace of God working through others. Jesus is showing them to be humble enough to receive someone who is without status and who is totally dependent indefinitely – because it is that kind of humbleness that defines true servanthood. If you can’t have enough humility to acknowledge you don’t know something, then receive someone who doesn’t know ANYTHING – a child. And do this because Jesus said so - in his name – because if you do, you will also receive the Father.

Humility is the foundation of servanthood. Being afraid to ask about what is not understood is a form of pride, the opposite of servanthood. Arguing about status is, of course, pride personified.

Arguing is not the same as discussing or debate. There’s an air of contentiousness that reflects pride. But there are some things that are worth arguing about. As another of my seminary professors often said, “Choose the ditches you’re going to die in.” There are some things worth fighting for, even dying for. But our usual, day to day arguing is generally petty and prideful.

That day 30 years ago in the courtyard of our home in Texas was the only time in my life when God spoke directly to me. But oh my goodness, I cannot count the times I’ve heard God test me through the words of other people, or scripture, or the circumstances of life. Twenty years after seminary I’m still doing rewrites. And at this stage of life I’m chronically plagued with “senioritis.” I suspect it is now a permanent condition. I’m praying I can do my rewrites now, before graduation. My Teacher continues to be gracious. When I see Jesus face to face at my

graduation I don't know if there will be a final exam. Dear God, if there is an exam, I hope it isn't this one: "What were you arguing about on the way?"

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