Homily
St. Anne's Episcopal Church
14 December 2025: The Third Sunday of Advent
The Rev. David W. Perkins, Th.D

The Power of Questions
Matthew 11:2-11

The German New Testament scholar, Eduard Schweizer, once quipped:
"It is not the (person) man stricken by doubts who stumbles but the (person) man no longer stricken by the question of Jesus." @

We see bumper sticker announcing "Jesus is the answer." But, what are the questions? Questions—If you're like me, you've been curious all your life. Questions are the beginning of the search for truth, for answers larger than those you now have. I remember asking questions in high school about the existence of the organism that causes typhus and trying to isolate it in a biology experiment. I remember asking questions about the characters of the Bible and reading to find answers.

What are your questions? Several aspects of this passage encourage me to keep asking.

Questions Are a Sign of Spiritual Experience

Jesus' life confronted John the Baptist with mystery. He had been preaching a judgment at the hand of God, brought about by God's coming One. Jesus did not meet John's expectations. He did not effect an immediate separation of the righteous and the wicked. So, John, in prison and in distress, sent disciples to ask of Jesus whether he was the genuine Coming One.

Questioning God does not mean you are unspiritual. A large portion of the Bible got written because people had questions about God. Jesus in this passage affirms John the Baptist as the greatest among the prophets. His coming is a sign of God's presence among them. He was not a reed blowing in the wind. John was in prison and soon to be executed. Jesus' failure to meet his expectations of a judging, punishing messiah, prompted his question.

Jesus' person and his coming into our lives often fail our expectations. The September 11 crisis is an example. Why would God allow such suffering? Climate change is another. Massive deaths to famine is another. What expectations in your life have not been met as you had hoped? What prayers have gone unanswered?

And, the theological formulations are often murky and unclear. Take the Nicene Creed for example. It's a double chew of theological bubble gum. Phrases like virgin birth, resurrection, only Son of God raise questions because of the mysterious nature of them. What does all this mean about Jesus and God?

The statements made in the words of institution. "Become the body and blood of Jesus." Just what IS happening here? The technical term for sacraments is mysteries—and they ARE mysterious.

Questions come about because of mystery, because something or someone is larger and deeper than our ability to comprehend and receive. We must ask questions, we must inquire. Otherwise, we have not encountered mystery. Mystery is not anti-intellectual. It is not that we are not supposed to think. Rather, mystery is supra-intellectual—stretches the mind beyond its limits.

Our questions are our quest, our inquiry, our search--ultimately for God. (quest and question from the same Latin root, inquiry, search)

John is our model. He phrased his question directly to Jesus. It's not a third party conversation about Jesus with others. Rather, it is direct address, "Are YOU the one who comes or do we look for another?"

Our uncertainties do not make us reeds blowing in the wind. Rather, we are seeking greater certainty, a more profound experience with God. We can follow John's example and ask our questions directly to God. Write God a letter. Write paragraphs in your journal. Ask God in prayer. Share your uncertainties with a believer whom you trust who has a strong sense of faith.

I followed what I could not understand
Because I knew,
That only that which passeth understanding
Can be true. #

Questions Can Be About the Fundamentals

John is asking the most basic question of all. Who is Jesus? We can ask those most basic questions. We can find ourselves troubled by the answers of former generations, like those in the Creed (begotten, not made, God from God, light from light). But, we can remember that they were making the same inquiry, they were on the same quest. Who is Jesus for us?

And, behind all the theological formulations, what do we find? A life lived for us. A life with ringing honesty, selfless giving. A life that we can trust. One profoundly and uniquely human, one like whom we all want to be. A selfless and excruciating death. And, the conquest of our greatest fear in the resurrection. That life, that person, we can trust.

And, where do we find him? In people who are committed to him, in hearing the Word, in the Spirit's whispers within, in creation. In bread and wine.

In the Great Thanksgiving, we pray that Jesus will come to us. "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." We ask him to take his place in bread and wine and come to us. And, consistent with his earthly life, he does come to us, he does make himself available to us. He comes to nurture, to forgive, to abide.

Something has happened
to the bread
and the wine.

They have been blessed.
What now?
The body leans forward

to receive the gift
from the priest's hand,
then the chalice.

They are something else now
from what they were
before this began.

I want
to see Jesus
maybe in the clouds
or on the shore,
just walking,
beautiful man

and clearly
someone else
besides.

On the hard days
I ask myself
if I ever will.

Also there are times
my body whispers to me
that I have. $

Questions Bring More of God's Love into Our Lives

Jesus' response to John--he did not give him a "yes/no" answer. That would have been dismissive. He counted on John's insight and knowledge of Scripture and on his ability to adapt and change his perspective. Actually, his answer to John raised John's own questions by citing Isaiah 35. These were signs of the coming of God's promised time of

salvation were obvious in Jesus' ministry. Jesus gave enough light to encourage John to keep asking and seeking, light that challenged and questioned John's own faith, stretching him toward faith. He invited John to take a deeper look into what he already knew. And, Jesus also challenged John not to be offended by him..

Nor did Jesus remonstrate with John or hit him with "shoulds." "You should not question." "You should KNOW who I am." Rather, he gave John additional light without removing from John the need for the risk of faith. Might Jesus respond to us in similar ways?

"It is part of the good news of the gospel that there is a Father to whom we can tell our doubts, even out doubts whether there is a Father. Indeed, it is part of (God's) his fatherhood that (God) he allows us to speak in this way and does not reject us." *%*

Based on how Jesus answered John, how might he already be answering your questions with gentle, loving light? How might he be trying to nurture you through to a more certain place? For certain, your doubts and questions have prompted the flow of God's love into your life, the increase of Christ's activity, the tenderness of his love. Faith is not easy and no one knows that better than our Lord.

Actually, his answer to John raised John's own questions by citing Isaiah 35. Jesus gave enough light to encourage John to keep asking and seeking, light that challenged and questioned John's own faith, stretching him toward faith. He invited John to take a deeper look into what he already knew. Might Jesus do that with us as well? And, Jesus also challenged John not to be offended by him.

Are we willing not only to ask questions but to have Jesus question us? Should we not allow Jesus to ask whether our assumptions and our expectations need to be revised? Should we not allow Jesus to ask us whether worshipping and serving while questioning is better than not worshipping and serving because we question? In Schweizer's words, are we stricken by the question of Jesus and how we must respond to him? (Jesus' followers at the end of Matthew worshipped and doubted at the same time. See Matthew 28:16-20.)

Mumford and Sons have some great advice for us in one of their songs.
But hold on to what you believe in the light
When the darkness has robbed you of all your sight &

<u>My Invitation to You</u>

Our questions create space for Jesus to come to us. Come to the rail today with your questions. Pray for Jesus to come to you as we offer the Great Thanksgiving. Hold out your hands for Jesus, take the chalice and drink from Jesus. Eat/drink--the Jesus of the Gospels is coming to you, pouring out his love within you. Ask your questions as you kneel. Can you hear his hint of an answer? Can you sense the mystery with which he leaves us, mystery that questions us as well? And, can you hear his questions of you as well?

"Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves . . .Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day, into the answers." *

Notes

@ Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew*, trans. David E. Green (Atlanta: John Knox, 1975), p. 257.

G. A. Studdert-Kennedy, The Warrior, The Woman, and the Christ (New York: R. R. Smith, 1930) p. 147.

$ Mary Oliver, "The Vast Ocean Begins Just Outside Our Church: The Eucharist," in *Thirst,* (Boston: Beacon, 2006), pp. 24-25

% Helmut Thielicke, *Our Heavenly Father*: *Sermons on the Lord's Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960), p. 24.

& MUMFORD & SONS, "Hold On To What You Believe"
http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/mumfordsons/holdontowhatyoubelieve.html

* Rainier Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet* Trans. M. D. Herter Norton (New York: Norton, 1962), p. 35.