

Imagine a Church sermon series
#3 – Invites Questions about How Faith and Life Intersect
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When I was a seminary student serving as an intern at a church, I had a member of the congregation ask me to lunch. Darrell, who was usually friendly and talkative, said very little until after the food was brought. And then, with a shameful look, he said to me, “I have some concerns.” Realize that’s not a minister’s favorite thing to hear. It ranks right up there with, “Who picks these hymns, anyway?” and “There’s a called Board meeting tomorrow but you don’t need to attend.” I told the man I was all ears and over breadsticks and pizza he said in a hushed voice, “I have some questions about the Bible. I don’t know if I believe all of it.” I assured him that he was not alone and I encouraged him to talk the senior minister, who was much better trained to handle these things. He said, “Oh, no, I can’t tell this to a real minister! That’s why I wanted to talk to you.” I asked him why he wouldn’t go to the senior minister and he said something that has always stuck with me: “I can’t let anyone know I have questions.”

We continue our Imagine a Church sermon series exploring our Vision and Mission statements to see how well we’ve been living them out these last seven years. We want your feedback on this so we have a better sense of how well we’re being who God is calling us to be. Later today, there will be an email waiting for you with a link to a short survey. Please take time to fill it out! We’ve had quite a few folks fill out our first two surveys, but we want to hear from a lot more of you. Thanks for letting your voice be heard.

Today we look at the line that says we connect people to God and each other by “inviting questions about how faith and life intersect.” Is it OK to ask questions, to express doubts, to challenge the words we read in the Bible and the practices of the church? A lot of us grew up in churches and households where the answer was an emphatic “No.” God was to be worshipped and obeyed, but never questioned. The answer to any question was, “God works in mysterious ways.” End of discussion.

But that’s not the example the Bible has set for us. If you have questions, you stand in a long line of famous people who didn’t quite understand this whole faith thing. Abraham, Moses, Jacob, Job, all of the prophets – every one of them had serious questions they weren’t afraid to ask directly to God. Hear these words from the prophet Habakkuk: “O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you ‘Violence!’ and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble?” Or how about these lines from the psalmist, who asks, “Why, O Lord, do you stand so far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?”

In the New Testament, Jesus is peppered with questions as he goes about his ministry. Today’s scripture is a great example, when a lawyer tests Jesus by asking him, “Who is my neighbor?” and Jesus responds with a story about a foreign Samaritan man who demonstrates compassion and care. Other questions asked to Jesus carry the same kind of urgency: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” “What is the greatest commandment?” “Are you the one who is to come?” “Can you change my water in wine, maybe a nice sauvignon blanc?” OK, that last one may not be in there. The Bible is full of rich examples of people questioning Jesus to get a greater understanding of who he is.

But somewhere along the way, questions went from being a necessary step of faith to a spiritual no-no. I think this had a lot less to do with God welcoming our questions and a whole

lot more to do with the church not knowing how to answer them. When the Protestant Reformation put the Bible in the hands of the people, an amazing thing happened: they read it. And when they read it, they found that the God the church had been selling them was different than the God they read about in scripture. So they started asking questions. Many of the most prominent question-askers were rewarded with excommunication or a backyard barbecue with them tied to the stake. The message? Don't ask questions.

The questions didn't stop with the Reformation. Ever since, we've been reading the Bible, listening to sermons, going to Sunday School, and watching what's happening around us in the world, and responding with "Huh?" How do we reconcile what we know about God and what we see in the world? How do we make sense of starving children, genocide, holy wars, broken families, and pandemics in light of God's promise of goodness and protection? This capricious, conflicted world compels us to cry out, "How long, O Lord?" How can we claim to have faith and NOT have questions?

Sometimes these questions are about God. Sometimes they are about the church and how it does or doesn't reflect the love and grace of God. And sometimes those questions are much more personal. I once asked people on Facebook to name some of the questions they have when they come to church on Sunday. Listen to the genuine searching here, some of it from life-long church members: Am I loved? Do people care? How can I really experience God's love in my life? Are these people going to judge me? Can I fit in? What's the difference between free will and God's will? Can I make change out of the offering plate? Never let ministers respond to your Facebook questions. Do you hear the deep, soul-level longing in those questions? Whether people have questions about God or questions about themselves, people come here each Sunday with questions.

And still, churches have told their congregations that God is not to be questioned. "God's ways are not our ways," they say. So the church has developed a reputation as a place where assent to belief is expected and where questions represent weakness and aren't welcomed. "The Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it." But the Bible says a lot of stuff I struggle with, or that doesn't mesh with what I experience in my day-to-day life. Are we supposed to just blindly accept that this is the way it is, or is there space for questions, for conversations, for wrestling with God to find a blessing?

Not only do I think questions should be welcomed, I believe they are essential for a growing faith. Diana Butler Bass says these questions have less to do with doctrine – "What should I believe?" – and more to do with the experience of faith and life – "How am I to live?" For example, she writes that it's one thing to ask, "Do you believe that Jesus was historically and scientifically raised from the dead?" It's quite another to ask, "Do you trust in the resurrection?" People are wrestling with the hard questions, and for the church to tell them that they can't ask those questions is a sure sign that we are out of touch with people's lives and hearts. We as a church need to create space for them to be asked.

I believe Crestwood's future depends on how open we are to these questions. The definition of belief is changing, moving from an intellectual assent to a set of principles to an experiential encounter with God and other people, and we need to let people know that not only is it OK to ask questions and have doubts, but the relevancy of their faith depends on it. And they need to know they are not alone in asking their questions, that they don't have to whisper when they ask them, that they are free to express all their fears and frustration and doubts within the walls of a welcoming church.

I've seen this in action here at Crestwood, and it's amazing to watch. I've sat in Sunday School classes as people have expressed doubts and in gatherings where guests have asked about why we don't do infant baptisms or why we have women ministers and Elders. I've had email and text exchanges with people wanting to know where God is in the midst of their mess. And behind all of that is the fundamental question: Is it OK for me to ask questions? Are we at Crestwood open to people asking us their deepest questions about how faith and life intersect?

This may sound daunting to us, as if people are going to start quizzing us on our theology or our understanding of God's authority. But here's the great thing about all of this: you don't have to have the answers! And no, that doesn't mean you can just say, "Go ask Kory." Because, honestly, can any of us answer why bad things happen to good people or who really is our neighbor or what it truly means to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength? I know I can't. But I believe we are not called to provide pat answers; instead, we're called to give people the space and the community in which to ask the questions. Because I believe people will find that their questions and our questions are the same questions! We are wrestling with the same kind of knotty stuff they are, and they are not alone in wondering how what we hear on Sunday intersects with what we experience Monday through Saturday.

Ultimately, I believe Jesus is the answer to their questions, so it's our job to connect them with Jesus. Am I loved? Do people care? Will I be judged? I believe Jesus is the definitive answer to these questions, and those answers are embodied by us in how we welcome people into this space, as they place their spiritual baggage alongside ours and say, "I have questions." As we sit next to them in the pews, as we pass them the communion trays, as we invite them to Sunday School, we are saying, "Yes. You are loved. You are welcome. You matter."

When we answer those basic questions, we create room for the deeper ones, questions about God's power and the existence of evil and why churches love committees. I don't know that we'll ever have answers to those on this side of Heaven. But I believe transformation is found, not in finding the answers, but in asking the questions. As Rainier Rilke says, "Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves. 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 answer."

From biblical times until the present time, we have questions. How can we not? I believe our questions are answered for us each Sunday when we come into God's presence, when we are reminded of God's goodness, when we are welcomed into a community. Sometimes, during the course of the week, we forget those answers. And so we are welcomed back, welcomed again to the table, welcomed to ask what's on our minds and hearts. We are invited to ask, and then to experience the presence of Christ among us and within us, who walks with us as we live into the answer.