

“What Our Questions Reveal”
Matthew 22:23-33

A number of years ago, while still living in the Charlotte metro area, Lori and I went to a party for individuals who worked in her office. Spouses had been invited, too. I didn't know many of those who would be attending and asked Lori ahead of time who might be there. In naming some of the possible attendees she mentioned the husband of a co-worker was employed by the City of Charlotte. In particular, he was responsible for all the traffic signals in its 298 square mile area. At some point in the party itself, I eventually met that man and in an effort to start a conversation said "I understand you're in charge of all the stoplights around here." He looked at me and with a deep sigh replied "Which one do you want to complain about?"

Sometimes our questions reveal more than we realize. In the case of that city employee, his response clearly indicated that he'd had a bad day or more likely, a succession of bad days. Still, in all kinds of settings the questions we pose can show not only our frustrations, but much about our own assumptions, including those queries that arise in the life of faith.

We see that dynamic in a question posed to Jesus in the scene we read about moments ago. It came from a day when he faced a series of verbal quizzes posed by Jewish leaders who felt threatened by Jesus and wanted to damage his credibility before the crowds. Two weeks ago, we heard of how some disciples of Pharisees and Herodians tried to discredit him by asking if it was lawful for the Jewish people to pay a hated poll tax due to Rome. Next Sunday, we'll reflect on the moment a lawyer asked him to name the most important of God's laws, believing it to be an impossible question to answer, too. As was true of both of those times, though, in our scene Jesus answers his interrogators in a way they did not expect.

In this moment, it is a group of Sadducees who take their turn with Jesus. Sadducees were part of the priestly class in ancient Israel. Wealthy and theologically conservative, they believed that only the first five books of the Bible were authoritative since they were the only ones attributed to Moses. Thus, they did not believe in a resurrection of the dead since they knew of no Scriptural moment when Moses had spoken about it. That conclusion distinguished them from the rest of their fellow Jews as belief in an afterlife was common for their first century peers.

“Teacher,” they begin, “Moses said ‘If a man dies childless, his brother shall marry the widow, and raise up the children for his brother.’” They were naming something known as the levirate law spelled out in the book of Deuteronomy. In it, Moses had said that if a man died without a son, the man's brother was to marry the widow. Moses had added that should a son be born of that union, the child would bear the name of the first husband and spelled out penalties for a brother who refused to marry the widow in such circumstances. (Deuteronomy 25:5-10)

With that as Scriptural reference, the Sadducees spring their trap. “Now there were seven brothers among us; the first married, and died childless, leaving the widow to his brother. The second did the same, so also the third, down to the seventh. Last of all, the woman herself died. In the resurrection, then, whose wife of the seven will she be? For all of them had married her.”

Those Sadducees were not recalling some first century equivalent of that twentieth century actress Elizabeth Taylor who was married eight times, but instead were posing a fictional

scenario for which they believed Jesus would have no good answer. Their question implied that they knew Scripture better than he and fully understood the ways of God. They thought that they had him trapped, but like their compatriots before and after, were not prepared for his reply.

“You are wrong,” Jesus said “because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.” Jesus is telling them that marriage as we understand it does not continue in heaven. “And as for the resurrection of the dead,” he went on, “have you not read what was said to you by God, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?’” He is citing words from his father found in the book of Exodus that given its verbal present tense—“*I am* the God” --spoke of the enduring existence of ancestors who had died 500 years before.

Tom Long, my former preaching professor and a guest in this pulpit a couple of years ago said of this scene that “In every question there is contained the assumptive world of the questioner.” He went on to explain that in their elaborate scenario the Sadducees revealed two assumptions. First, that in the unlikely case of a resurrection—given their view—a woman would still belong to one of her husbands. Yet even more than that, their query assumed that the future was merely the present reality extended out. In other words, the only thing God can do in the future is what God does now. (“Jesus’ Final Exam,” sermon at Duke University Chapel, 11/9/86)

What is your assumptive world view of God? What are the central beliefs that shape your understanding of God? Do you, for instance, believe that everything happens for a reason or do you believe God can work in, but not does cause all that occurs? Those are two different theological stances and will shape the questions that you ask amidst good and hard times. In the first approach, one will ask what God would have you learn from events while the second stance raises the question of where God is working as events occur. Those are not the only assumptive worlds when it comes to our beliefs about God, but just as was true of some Sadducees long ago, the questions we ask do reflect the assumptions that we hold.

Tony Campolo, retired professor at Eastern University, spoke of that reality years ago when talking about prayer. “Sometimes,” Campolo said, “we pray as if God is some kind of transcendental Santa Claus who promises to deliver the things that we want, providing that we’re good and pray just right. This was illustrated for me very clearly one evening when my six-year-old son came into the living room just before bedtime and announced, ‘I’m going to bed. I’m going to be praying. Anybody want anything?’ I am convinced,” Campolo concluded “that the understanding of prayer, of many of us who are older, often fails to transcend that of my young son, even though we may use more grown-up words to express it.” (Campolo, Tony, *Stories that Feed Your Soul*. Ventura, California: Regal Books, 2010, p. 136)

Jesus, in the moment of responding to a far-fetched scenario posed by ones who did not even believe in an afterlife, illuminated the assumptive world of their question. Yet in his answer, he also offered an understanding of God who will not be bound by human perceptions of what is possible or impossible; a God whose word can be trusted. Thus, Jesus lifted up how assumptions can shape not only the questions we ask, but our response to them.

Bill Thompson was a Presbyterian pastor who died in May at the age of 86. During his ministry, he served churches in New York and Florida, in this Presbytery and Lambertville, New Jersey. Several DPC members were part of that congregation during his years there.

Shortly after he died, I received an email from one of those members who shared words from Bill's daughter Becky about a conversation in his final days. "As the social worker was here today," she wrote, "I marveled (once again) as I listened to my dad talk. When the social worker was sharing his knowledge about the dying process, he was mentioning how we often fear death...my mom asked my dad if he was afraid at all to die at this point. His answer confirmed what we knew was always his stance. He looked up and said, 'Fear death? Why would I fear death? I have lived my whole life for the Lord ever since I was saved by Him. I served Jesus, walked with Him, and because of His death and resurrection I have eternal life in Him. Why would I fear death? I don't fear death, I greet death. I am looking forward to seeing Jesus face to face; to finding out what it means to sleep in Christ. I've lived the past 40 some years preaching this and now I get to experience it myself...I'm just sad to leave my family, my sweetheart of 50 years. I'll miss her.'"

Becky concluded: "No face was without tears. How does one who is dying, in such discomfort and so weak, give strength to everyone else in the room? Only by the grace of God," she answered. "[God's] strength is evident in my dad and it is contagious. It always has been. What a blessing! Another victory!" (email received 5/17/17)

Friends, our questions reveal our assumptive view of God. Thus we need to keep asking them and keep listening to what Scripture proclaims, trusting that as we do, the answers we need will emerge and take hold of us, too.