

Sunday, September 20, 2015  
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church  
Mark 9:30-37

## Stupid Questions

“There are no stupid questions.” It’s a saying meant to put people at ease, to encourage them to speak up if they don’t understand something. “Voice your question. Don’t worry about how it makes you sound. There are no stupid questions.” It’s a good saying for this time of year, near the beginning of school, and Sunday School—teachers sometimes say it. It’s a good saying for people who are new to groups, organizations, churches—or even if you’re not new, you just don’t know everything about everything. It’s understandable that there are things you don’t understand. Ask, so you can find out more about what you don’t know. There are no stupid questions. The only stupid question is the one that is not asked.

That’s the question the disciples don’t ask. Actually, in today’s gospel reading there are two questions: one that is asked, and one that is not. In the first part of the reading there’s the question the disciples don’t ask. The disciples don’t ask Jesus what he means, even though they don’t understand what he is saying. This happens as they’re traveling back from a trip up north to Gentile regions and cities, where Jesus did many healings, and where he said some strange things, especially what he said at Caesarea Philippi—the gospel reading from just last week. Jesus said strange things about what was going to happen to him, how he’s going to suffer and die and then three days later rise again. And Jesus said strange things about what it means to be his disciple, how it includes taking up the cross, how you save your life by losing it. This is very hard to understand. And now Jesus is saying it again. The disciples don’t understand. But they don’t say anything. Maybe they don’t want to sound stupid.

Or maybe they were operating according to another saying, this saying: “Better to shut up and give the impression you are stupid, than to say something and erase all doubt.” I think the disciples do that, the disciples erase all doubt about how savvy they are, as the gospel reading continues. It’s here that we find the question the disciples do ask—not to Jesus, but amongst themselves. The disciples go from not saying anything, to saying things that make them sound like they are not with the program, that show how they really don’t get what Jesus is saying. Their question is: “Who is the greatest disciple?”

They ask it as they are on the way to their home base, back south in Capernaum. While they’re traveling, they hang back a little, talk amongst themselves, argue amongst themselves, about this question of who is the greatest. Knowing how Mark’s gospel has gone up to this point, the stories we’ve heard in the past few weeks, knowing a bit about the role the disciples play in Mark’s gospel, we can imagine how this argument might have gone. One disciple might have said: “Remember back when Jesus got into it with the scribes and the Pharisees over what you do before dinner? Remember when they had that discussion about cleanliness and religious traditions? Well, you may also remember that it all started because they saw one of us not washing their hands before they eat? That was me. Yep. I really think I’m a great disciple. I haven’t washed my hands all week.”

And then maybe another disciple said, “Oh yeah, well, remember when we started this trip, travelling way up north to the Gentile cities of Tyre and Sidon, and then our goal was to head back south to Galilee? And we went home in a way eastward direction, by way of the Decapolis? Remember that? Remember how someone volunteered to be the navigator? Yep, that was me. They gave me a map, but I tossed it out. Great disciples don’t need maps.”

And maybe another said, “O yeah, well you know how Jesus keeps being all secretive, all these times he tells us not to tell anyone what he’s doing or what’s in store for him, until three days after he dies? Well, I haven’t told anyone anything about him. And I’m not going to tell anyone anything about Jesus, ever. I really think that shows that I’m the greatest disciple of all.”

One might read today’s gospel about the disciples not asking the question they should, and then arguing about who is greatest, one may read this and think of another saying: “There are no stupid questions, there are only stupid people.”

Jesus doesn’t say that, though. Jesus doesn’t call anyone stupid, ever. Jesus gets frustrated with his followers, for sure. Jesus speaks a hard truth to Peter—we heard that in the gospel last week—Jesus gets pretty sharp with Peter when Peter tries to tell him that the Messiah shouldn’t suffer. And on numerous occasions, Jesus gets worked up with all of his disciples when they are afraid. At those times Jesus scolds his disciples, scolds them severely, but it’s not for being stupid, it’s for lacking faith. That’s what really gets Jesus, not when they say stupid things, but when they lack faith—faith being something different than cognitive capacity or function. Faith being something bigger, and deeper than intellectual aptitude or acquisition.

There is thinking involved in faith, and there is learning involved in faith. Faith is something requires questions. Thinking and learning are key parts of faith, but the tests of faith don’t come with pen and paper. The tests of faith come when you don’t know what something means, and you can stay silent—or you can have the courage, and the humility, to ask. The tests of faith come when you are with fellow disciples, your brothers and sisters in Christ, when you are with them and you start comparing yourself favorably to them. Or maybe that happens when you are not with them, maybe that that’s when we start comparing ourselves favorably to all those other people who call themselves Christians. But the biggest test of faith, the final test of faith, is even harder than those. It’s hard, and it’s a take home test. The final test of faith is a take-home test—and you can use your notes. It’s open book. In fact, God has given us the notes, we’ve been given all that we need to know for this test, which is: what do you trust, who it is that made and saves you, how that changes what you put first. That’s the ultimate test of faith. Lots of very smart people get that very wrong.

The disciples got it wrong. We don’t know what they thought made a disciple great, but we know what Jesus thinks. Jesus has an answer for what makes the greatest disciple. Jesus answers their question, and in answering it, Jesus makes a point. Even before we get to the answer itself, by answering it, Jesus makes the point that it’s not stupid question, “Who is the greatest?” Jesus doesn’t say that’s a stupid question. Instead, he uses it as an opportunity to teach them, to explain what they don’t know. “You want to know who is the greatest? Jesus says, “I can tell you more about that. All of you, come sit down here with me.” And then Jesus gives an easy-to-understand explanation. Jesus says just what it is we can do if we want to be great. Jesus says that the one who is greatest is the one who serves. And then, great teacher that he is, Jesus illustrates what he’s saying with something tangible. Jesus takes a little child into his arms. “You want to be great?” Jesus says, “Here’s how you do that: You welcome a child.

Do you know how it is to hold a child in your arms? Do you remember what it was like, when you were a child, and someone held you in their arms? That’s what God does for us. That’s what God wants us to do for others.

We know this. It’s no secret. We live in the Easter world. We can tell it. Be a great disciple. Tell others about God’s love for them. Welcome them, as God has welcomed you.