

Have You Made Your List?

“Have you made your list?” “Is your shopping done?” “Are you ready for Christmas?” “How many days till Christmas or perhaps till school is out?” “Can’t I open just one present now?”

Questions seem to be as much a part of this season as does red and green. Questions are an integral ingredient of human communication. Children seem to embrace and understand the power of questions at a level often lost in adulthood. Adults can get impatient with questions and lose sight of what questions provide besides just answers. It can become even more uncomfortable when the questions continue until they come to the place where answers don’t come easily, or perhaps don’t come at all.

As John The Baptist continues elbowing in on the Christmas Story, one might wonder about the discrepancy between last week’s “John” story where he boldly declared that his purpose was to prepare the way for “one” who was to come, the baptism story most are familiar with where John declares and God confirms that Jesus is that “one”, and the story shared today where he is questioning, via his followers, Jesus himself. Scripture does not share the details of John’s story between the time of Jesus’ baptism and John’s question. Yet I find it understandable how one can go from proclamation to question. Though we do not know what John was expecting with the arrival of this “great one”, we can recognize that perhaps what John has expected the coming of God would mean and the situation he found himself in (imprisoned) differed. His question indicates that even the most faithful have times of confusion and through the response from Jesus to John; we know that God not only hears and responds but points the questioner to God as revealed in Scripture. There is no indication that Jesus was bothered by John’s question, nor that any of the followers were surprised that John asked such questions.

It is important for us to acknowledge that questions can sometimes seem to be a bother. They can also create a sense, possibly just that unidentified nagging feeling, that questions regarding issues of faith are inappropriate, perhaps an indication of disbelief. Advent, with its invitation to reflect and examine, allows us to view questions with the same deliberation as we have examined expectations and looked past initial appearances.

In researching the “why” behind the human tendency to ask questions, I found that age did not matter when it came to the purposes for asking. Yes, our questions themselves may change, become more complex or perhaps even more ambiguous, yet the function of questioning remains the same whether you are two or two hundred and two.

One of the functions of questioning is to express interest, curiosity and awareness. Through questions children alert their caregivers to what has captured their attention. Questions can be a way for others to know when a mind or heart is open to conversation and contemplation. From parents knowing what is the right time to address essential topics, to openness and revelations through Scripture, Christian conversations and other ways the Holy Spirit moves, questions indicate awareness. Awareness of God and of the ways in which we encounter and experience God brings questions which are not indicative of disbelief but of curiosity.

Questions also build relationships. Questions are invitations to share words, thoughts and life. Imagine carrying on a conversation without questions; it would quickly become just a series of random statements. Trust is built as questions are asked and answered. When surface level, routine questions are listened to, respected and responded to, the questioner is likely to feel comfortable asking more intimate, important questions.

Questions also lead to truth. The adage “you can’t know if you don’t ask” may not be absolute, however there is much which we work out through a series of questions and answers. The children’s game “20 questions” is a classic example. Often the deepest truths of faith and life come only as we examine and question both the realities we experience and the meaning that is assigned to them.

Yet, the power and purpose of questioning goes beyond expressing interest, building relationships and discovering truths. Questions can also remind us that there are always some things that are beyond us. Questions allow us to be human, which then leaves a unique space for God to be God. Questions can not only be requests for information and understanding, they can express wonder. In Luke the question of Elizabeth, aunt of Mary, is recorded.

Again, the question asked is not what one might expect. For a young, unmarried woman to be expecting in that day and time was cause for gossip and speculation. Questions such as who the father might be, how the family would respond, and what would be the consequences would be have been the norm. For the aunt, a part of the family who would have been shamed, to ask “who am I to deserve the favor of God”, indicates awareness that in the midst of the ordinary, God can and does do extraordinary things.

The extraordinary workings of God are seen in the very ordinary people and situations of life, or in those who are often looked over or down on. Living in an extraordinary relationship, discipleship with God, asking, seeking, growing -- isn’t that what Christmas offers?

First United Methodist Church – Lebanon, IL
Scripture: Luke: 1:39-56, Matthew 11:12-11

December 16, 2007
Rev. Joy Caschetta