

Last week I introduced our Lenten Devotional Booklet and called your attention to where it makes the statement that Jesus answered only 3 of the 183 questions he was asked. How are you doing with finding which 3 he answered? Well, we'll come back to that...I did say that you had until the end of Lent to come up with your 3 answers that Jesus gave.

Today I want to spend some time thinking about questions – about how we ask questions, why we ask them and what is the purpose, I mean, what do we gain by asking questions of ourselves and others?

Eric Burtness, co-author of our Lenten devotional writes that there are 3 types of questions. The first type is the type that sends you on a negative spiral downward. These questions often begin with why...why can't I lose weight? With this question – as soon as we ask these questions, we start answering, and we're headed down hill fast with the answers our brain comes up with...I don't lose weight because I eat too many Twinkies...because I don't exercise enough...i have bad eating habits. Another question of this nature: why did I do that? Because I'm stupid...because I don't have patience. Questions of this sort take us down a road of negativity and we beat ourselves up instead of challenging us, instead of building us up.

The second set of questions are fact-finding questions: what were the contributions of MLK, Jr. to this country? What are the principles behind the constitution of the United States? Behind the accepted economic theories of the day? These questions draw facts from our brains. As soon as we ask the question our brains search for facts long ago gleaned from history books and middle school or from yesterdays newspaper article. When asked this type of question, our brains turn on, searching for and ready to spit out the facts and juicy little tidbits of information for our trivial pursuit games.

The third type of question challenges your mind...they open your mind to what's underneath and behind your thoughts, feelings, opinions...these questions draw you out. These are the types of questions that are often in play in conversations with Jesus. They are often asked of Jesus and rarely does Jesus give a straight forward answer. These are questions that help us to think for ourselves...questions that help us own our ideas and deepen our understanding. With this type of question, we begin to own our thoughts and feelings, and lead us to the limited understanding of God that is possible.

In today's gospel, Nicodemus, a member of the Supreme Court of Jewish authority on scripture, tradition and law comes to Jesus at night. Let's be clear: Nicodemus has spent his life searching Scripture for answers. He has poured hours and hours into reading and understanding God through God's Holy Word.

And, now he's come to the Word himself according to John. Nicodemus is a seeker – he wants answers from Jesus - . Nicodemus wants straight answers from this man who could do things that only God could have made possible. He's heard that Jesus turned water into wine at his family wedding after the wine had run out. Nicodemus heard that Jesus had gone to the temple and acted like a mad-man declaring that he was going to stop the corruption in his Father's house. These were only two of the stories recorded in this gospel that caused Nicodemus insomnia this night.

And, so he seeks Jesus in the middle of the night hoping he'll shine some light in his darkness. He begins with flattery and praise, we know you must come from God – there's no other answer for how you can do the things you've done. Jesus answers, Nicodemus, you look for God, but you will find God only when you have been born from above. And Nicodemus says, born again – how can that happen?

Now, because there is something lost in translation, we need to have a lesson in Greek here today. Jesus uses the greek word *anōthen* – it can mean “again” or “from above”.

Nicodemus is trying, trying to understand, to reason out, to wrap his head around God. Nicodemus hears and understands ‘again’ to refer to a second physical birth.

He and Jesus are talking on two different levels. Jesus is talking symbolically about God’s new creation. Based on other usages of this word ‘*anōthen*’, I think Jesus meant that our faith will come “from above”. I think Jesus means that like our physical birth was out of our control so is our spiritual birth. Our human searching and understanding can only take us so far in our quest to find God. But, he says, there is a power outside of each of us, greater than each of us that we can not predict nor control. Just as we did not birth ourselves, we do not birth our faith.

This is good news...and this is a great time to hear this as we are getting into Lent – with extra Bible Study, reflection, praying, and meditating – trying to deepen our faith, our relationship with God, our understanding of God. We probably bring our own questions into this time – why, how long, when...

Jesus’ Word for us today is good news because like Nicodemus we can misunderstand and think that we have to do something to earn God’s love and life eternally with him. This is good news because Jesus says that it is the One from above who gives life, who births our faith that saves in each of us. The One from above will grow and nurture you, teach you, and cuddle you. The One from above will bring you in from the night, from the dangers of darkness and show you light and life.

Truly I tell you, Jesus says, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.

The good news today is that when it comes to faith in Jesus Christ, God is the birth-giver, the mid-wife of our faith, not us. God asks only that we receive this gift of new life – not asking how this can be, but giving thanks that it is.

Like Nicodemus we seek answers from Jesus. We are confused. We want Jesus to answer our question “how can this be Jesus”. We want things to add up and make sense according to what we think we know about God. What we are given instead of answers is the mystery of God’s love revealed on a cross. What we are given instead of answers is God’s love blowing where, when and how it chooses.

Nicodemus leaves, he goes back out into the night, uttering, “but how can these things be”? His quest for answers, for God continues. And, now as we continue our quest, as we answer the call to follow our Lord and Savior, may we be guided by the wind, the ruah – the very breath of God. May our seeking open our hearts and minds to God.

Let us give thanks for the gift of new life in Jesus Christ that the whole world would be saved through him.

Thanks be to God.
Amen.