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19th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Year A
University Presbyterian Church
Tuscaloosa, AL
10 August 2008

God, source of all light, by your Word you give light to the soul. Pour out upon us the spirit of wisdom and understanding that, being taught by you in Holy Scripture, our hearts and minds may be opened to know the things that pertain to life and holiness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

QUESTION MARKS

ROMANS 10:5-15

To be or not to be? That is the question. Or maybe *the* question follows that All-American greeting: Welcome to McDonald's. May I take your order, please? Do ever feel as if you are speaking Shakespeare in Mc-crazed world? The stories that God writes in the person and work of Jesus Christ are more powerful, more profound and more poetic than anything that the Bard ever wrote; and the faith that God gives to us through Jesus Christ sets the stage for something richer, more dynamic and celebratory than anything ever produced at the Globe. Faith is the essence of life itself; and life is the essence of the faith we practice. The God whom we worship gives us life; and this life-giving God gives us faith that we cannot purchase or earn.

Ah, the questions that we ask say something about us and something about God. "To be or not to be?" is a pre-modern question still being asked in a post-modern world, and yet next to questions like, "Would you like fries with that?" it sometimes feels antiquated or smudged with ketchup and mustard, with expedience and greed. Yesterday, on the way home from the Main Event, an educational gala sponsored by the state of Alabama's three presbyteries, Adam Miller, John Whitehead and I were inching along MacFarland Boulevard when I noticed a bumper sticker that asked, "Got Jesus?" Offended, I grumbled, "Yeah, he is in the trunk?" The suggestion that the Messiah could be reduced to

product---to something that you or I possess---offends me, because in life and in death, we belong to God.

Questions mark us. The tradition to which we belong as Presbyterians is a questioning one. Since Westminster, adults within our tradition have used catechisms to fashion children in the faith. What is the chief end and aim of being human? To glorify God and enjoy God forever. The Heidelberg Catechism starts with the question, "What is our only comfort in life and in death?" That we belong body and soul, in life and in death, not to ourselves but to our Saviour Jesus Christ. The questions that we ask in confirmation class establish a pattern of questioning that often evolves into something else by the time that one goes off to college. Late night dorm conversations often become spiritual (if not religious). Do Buddhists go to heaven? Why don't Jews eat barbecue? Is it possible that this is all that there is?

In truth, the questions begin well before confirmation, and for those of us who are truly committed to the Reformed notion of "the life of the mind in service to God," questions mark our steps until our bodies wither and perish. One of the pleasures of everyday life at UPC is being part of the Food Pantry. If you have not met Cameron, who is son and grandson of Food Pantry staff members, I suggest that you do so as soon as possible. He is approximately this big; and the more time that he and I spend together, the more questions he asks. When I introduced him to Lydia, he and I celebrated this Laurel-and-Costello-like liturgy in which I said, "This is Lydia," and he said, "Where?" Then I pointed to her, and he said, "Where?" So backed up and tried again. I said, "Lydia," and he said, "Where?" The point is that all one has to do is walk into a Presbyterian Church at any age, and the questioning begins. Questioning is contagious. So is God's grace in Jesus Christ.

Being in Birmingham yesterday was a blessing, especially when we were lost downtown. Being in downtown Birmingham reminded me of being at a national gathering of the Association of Presbyterian Church Educators there many years ago when I served as a Director of Christian Education

in Darlington, SC. At that time, Eugenia Gamble served as pastor of Birmingham First. You probably know her story better than I, but I will say something about it anyway. She is the daughter of a judge in the Deep South whose pursuit of social justice was resisted violently, and yet they did not shy away from saying what God called them to say and doing what God called them to do. I sat there engaged fully by the power of this witness and by the force of her preaching. She asked tough questions and proclaimed hard truths. I remember thinking, "She is doing this in Alabama." Little did I know...that I would be in Tuscaloosa sometimes standing, often kneeling, in this particular tradition at this particular time...

Another fact about Gamble: During parish setting supervised ministry, I met regularly with a lay committee made up of members of the church with whom I served. An exercise that proved especially helpful to them and to me was reading sermons by preachers that God used to shape me in the faith. The sermons were based on lectionary texts that I had preached in that parish. It facilitated marvelous discussion (while making it clearer than ever that each person brings a different set of questions to church with them each Sunday), and what stands out in my memory of the discussion of Gamble's sermon was her use of questions, especially rhetorical questions, in proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ with boldness and humility.

Paul is not bad at this either, as the capstone of this passage from Romans is a series of rhetorical questions: How are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? How are they to believe in one whom they have not heard? How are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? How are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? Answer: They are not. They are called by the one in whom they believe; they believe in the one whose voice sustains them; and they hear only because someone is faithful enough to proclaim truth even when the act lands him in prison, as it does Paul. Paul still preaches Shakespeare in a Mc-crazed world. The one who once persecuted Christians now is persecuted for his faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul's Jewish heritage, like Jesus Christ's, is with him always even unto the end of the age. For Paul, and for us, Jesus is the Messiah. Notice with whom this passage begins: Moses. Paul frames this section of Romans by quoting the Torah and by acknowledging questions being asked in Rome: "Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law that 'the person who does these things will live by them.' But the righteousness that comes from faith says, 'Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'...Or who will descend into the abyss?'" To do the former is to bring Christ down, to reduce the Gospel to something to be shopped for, possessed; to do the latter is to suggest that we are somehow justified by our own efforts, by our own sufferings when, in fact, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is irreducible. By his suffering, we are healed; wallowing in our own suffering not only is unnecessary. It is the essence of faithlessness; it is the essence of sin.

For Paul, faith is defined more by actions than by words. The person who does these things lives by them. The disciplines that shape our lives say more about who we are than any faith statement that any of us will ever write. Ask Paul: the Word is Jesus Christ; all other words are subservient to him. Ask John: this Word was with God in the beginning, is now and ever shall be. This Word speaks us; it is in us and through us and for us and for our neighbors: All of them (as difficult as this is to accept at times). This Word may feel foreign to us, but it is always near, on our lips and in our hearts. Paul goes on to say, "If you (and I) confess with our lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in our hearts that God raised Jesus from the dead, we will be saved." What? No mediator other than Christ? What? I do not have to shop or suffer my way into heaven? No, we are justified by God not mammon; we are justified by faith not works.

Somewhere in the distance, just beyond the clouds, I hear Martin Luther and John Calvin saying, "Go for it! Explain why we had a Protestant Reformation," and just as I start to travel down that road, I am blinded by the light of Scripture. Paul follows "for one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved" (statements that often are quoted in defense of "accept

Jesus or else" Christianity) with: "For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, everyone who calls on the Lord will be saved." In Christ, there is no Jew or Greek. Faith is not defined by one's racial, ethnic or religious identity. All are invited to practice. By calling on God's grace in Jesus Christ, one believes. By believing, one hears; and by hearing, one proclaims. May you find in the depths of your being grace that is giving by God. May you have the courage to ask the questions that this faith invites and listen to how the Spirit responds. Emboldened by this Spirit, may you find the strength to do what God is calling you to do: proclaim the glory of the God in whom we live and move and have our being. To Jesus Christ, who loves us and freed us from our sins and made us to be a kingdom, priests and priestesses of God our creator, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.