

Ever since the time of our first parents, mankind has questioned God. We have probed, searched, demanded and pleaded; no subject has been off limits, no question too deep or too offensive. Every generation has placed God on trial and demanded answers for life's toughest questions. Some questions are universal like the classic problem of evil and why bad things happen in this world. Other questions are unique to a particular culture and generation. For example, in our time we are consumed by questions regarding human sexuality and genderism. Now before I go too much further let me say questioning something is not always a bad thing. Socrates made a name for himself by developing what came to be known as the Socratic Method. This method essentially returns a question with a question. Instead of two people arguing in a heated way, the Socratic Method is meant to get the parties involved to examine their own values, principles, and beliefs rather than just verbalize their exaggerated feelings. It seeks to expose contradictions in the way people think and act. Through questioning, you are not necessarily trying to prove your point, but rather disprove the other's point. So when someone accuses you or criticizes you or questions you, you shouldn't immediately go on the defense. Instead ask questions. What do you mean by that? How do you know? Can you explain further? Can you provide an example? I have found the Socratic Method to be an invaluable resource when engaged in a debate. Even though we might not identify it by name, we all use the Socratic Method. That's because our minds are naturally inquisitive, and so from a very early age we learn by trial and error, questioning our surrounding to gain clarity. Who hasn't been worn thin by the incessant questioning of a child who has learned that every answer offered can be followed up with a "Why?" Parents, by dint of sheer exhaustion, finally come to the timeless response, "Because I said so!" We are not particularly proud of this answer, but it is sometimes the only way to terminate a line of questioning, which gives every indication of continuing into perpetuity.

As humans we love to question everything. But the lesson we learn from Jesus this evening/morning is there is a right way to question and a wrong way to question. When it comes to matters of God there are two lines of questioning: there is "faith seeking understanding" and then there is "understanding seeking faith". The first line of questioning is God pleasing. After all, God invites His children to approach Him with all boldness and confidence; to seek Him where He is to be found; to knock and He will answer; to draw closer to Him and He will draw closer to us. "Faith seeking understanding" is just that. We ask God by prayer and petition to reveal

His will for our lives, to help us understand our purpose, to guide us along our path, to correct us when we have gone astray and to overall make good on His promise never to leave or forsake us. “Faith seeking understanding” begins with faith in God and then blossoms outwards to understand ourselves, our lives, and the world around us. Questions asked in faith are always promised an answer. Now we might not always be happy with the answer we receive back from God, but we are promised an answer when we ask in faith—ask and it shall be given you, seek and ye shall find.

Not so with “Understanding seeking faith” for here we begin with human understanding. Here we begin with man’s reason and then subject matters of faith to rational scrutiny. Man, not God, is almighty. God is placed into a nice and tidy little box. And once He has been put in His place, He is conveniently filed away with all the other things mankind has no further need of. Questions are asked with the sole purpose of bringing God into alignment with our reason and intellect. God is expected to adapt to our ever changing notions of goodness, fairness, justice and the like. *Understanding God* becomes more important than *knowing God*. “Understanding seeking faith” is an attempt to deify man’s quest for knowledge and make it the highest good. And this fits quite well with our sinful impulse to know what has not been given to us to know. Like the knowledge of good and evil, mankind continues to usurp God’s knowledge. The line of questioning in our Gospel text is most certainly of this type. It is clear that the chief priests and elders whom questioned Jesus were not seeking clarity, but confrontation. Their questions were of the “understanding seeking faith” kind, and they sought to entrap Jesus according to their own particular way of understanding God’s authority. But in good Socratic fashion, Jesus returns a question with a question. Unwilling to be drawn into their accusatory dialogue, He turns the table on them by asking His own question. In doing so, He exposes their weakness and the pitfalls of their argument.

I think the take away for us this morning is to remember that not every question deserves an answer. As Christians, we are always under attack for our faith. And when skeptics come calling we feel we have to be their Johnny-on-the-spot and give a defense of our beliefs. Sometimes questions come in the form of mockery and ridicule, others come in the form of scorn. But once people know you are Christian you immediately have a target on your back. You become “that person” who is to be pitied and ramrodded for believing such silly superstitions. There is a certain guilt of obligation we feel in the face of these types of belittling questions. We believe wrongly

that we have to answer every question otherwise we are not defending the faith or being good Christian witnesses. Or worse, that if we don't know the answer to every question asked by a critic then somehow our faith is shallow and weak. Starting from this defensive posture, we often make a mess of things. Scripture is very clear on two things: 1) you cannot argue anyone into the kingdom of heaven, and 2) God needs no defense. The better approach is to follow the example left by Christ Himself. When a question is asked, we need to determine whether that question is worthy of a response. Was it asked in the spirit of "faith seeking understanding" or "understanding seeking faith"? How can you tell the difference? By practicing the Socratic Method, by asking probing questions of our own to see why the question was asked in the first place and whether or not an honest dialogue is sought after. And if the spirit of the question is born of antagonism it's perfectly acceptable to remain silent. Jesus remained silent in the face of His accusers many times. But if the spirit of the question is born of genuine desire we should and must answer carefully, thoughtfully and thoroughly, ready always to give a reason for the hope that is within us.

Mark Twain once said, "Never argue with a fool, onlookers may not be able to tell the difference." His witty insight carries a hint of truth. Sometimes in our desperation to defend our faith we are the ones made to play the fool. There is a time to engage and a time to be quiet. And when we choose the latter, our lack of engagement is not a sign of cowardice, but courage. It is not out of ignorance we keep silent, but wisdom. In silence, we absorb the abuse, bear the cross, trust in God to have the final word, and then count it as a joy to suffer for the name of Christ. Amen.