



January 29, 2017 – “Good Questions” (Psalm 15, Micah 6:1-8)

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Our reading today is full of questions. Questions from God, questions from God’s people, and questions of our own as we digest this text. They may not seem like the most important part of the reading, but their content tell us something about the question asker-what their expectations are.

A good question has these qualities:

- A good question has purpose-It should either be directed at gathering a fact or an opinion.
- A good question is open ended-Good questions are not yes or no questions if you actually want to gather information.
- A good question uses neutral wording-They aren't leading questions and don't express opinions
- A good question doesn't interrupt-Good questioners listen fully to the answer.

Some good questions I've heard in these walls lately included:

- Why do we say we believe in the Holy catholic church in the Apostle's Creed?
 - This question came up in a Sunday school class-this question was aimed at gathering facts, was open ended, and the asker was genuinely interested in knowing, because she wants to know what she's affirming as her faith.
- Another good one- How's your dad doing?
 - Another question aimed at gathering information, open ended, and doesn't assume to know anything about the answer. You can feel the care in this question.

Ever played the game “Hedbanz?” You get a card that has a word on it like “parrot,” “money,” “milk,” etc., and without looking, put it in your patented Hedbanz headband. Then with only yes or no questions, you try to figure out what word is on your head. It’s a glorified version of 20 questions, with props. Time is limited, and questions that receive a “no” ends your turn. I played recently with friends, all adults and we had the hardest time with this game, which is meant for ages 7 and up. David was impatient about narrowing down to his correct answer and kept asking questions like “am I a hammer? Am I a cow?” without first finding out anything else first. Doug was trying so hard to narrow down his answers, he asked all the wrong questions, concentrating on minutia. He had the word “pizza” on his head and asked, “is it alive?” We all said, no. Because pizza is not a living thing. But because he thought that bread contained living yeast, and the veggies and meat on the pizza had at one point indeed been alive, he went down a totally different road with his question, not even finding himself in the category of food. A few in the group became truly frustrated and gave up. There just seemed to be no way to win, even when the words were SO simple. Bread. Dog. The game is a challenge because you can't ask good questions.

What's happening in Micah isn't a game of Hedbanz. This whole section conjures up the image of a lawsuit in a courtroom; God as the plaintiff, the mountains and hills as the jury, and Israel as the defendant. In a courtroom, the content of questions is extremely important, as they aim to both gather information and influence opinion. God lays out a big one here, demanding answers: “O my people, what have I done to you? Answer me!” A fair question, considering God has given them everything-freedom, land, protection, blessing-and the people continually disobey God. This question reveals God's

deep concern for the relationship between God and Israel. God's serious questions may have serious outcomes for Israel. But you know, when you're wrong, and you know you're wrong, but you don't want to flat out say you're wrong, what do you do? Change the subject. Deflect. Answer a question with a question. Go back to just saying, "am I a hammer? Am I a cat?"

Let's review Israel's questions with our good question rubric:

- With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high?
 - So, a fact gathering question.
 - It's open ended
 - Not exactly neutral-assumes that what they will need to bring are things. Also, this question does not answer God's question, "What have I done to you?"
- Shall I come with burnt offerings, with young calves?
 - Not open ended
 - Starting to get off track-a leading question.
 - Interrupted the previous question

Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

- Uh oh, now our purpose is getting lost-not only what should we bring, but will it please God...
- Not open ended
- Leading question and dramatic at that
- Interrupted previous two questions
- Ok now we're just off the charts emotional!

These questions are laced with reactionary anxiety. Well, God, you know what? Nothing's going to make you happy is it! So what's it going to take? Thousands of rams? These questions also expect some sort of comeuppance or punishment. They are intentionally dramatic, maybe hoping that if they offer something huge, God will counter with something lesser. Maybe 100 rams will do. Their questions reveal not just anxiety and fear, but a limited understanding of who God is. Even after all they've been through, in Egypt, in exile, in rebuilding, they still view God as a deity who fits into a system that works for them. God does good things for us, we give nice things back to God.

Speaking of reactionary anxiety, anyone been watching the news this week? Or forget the news, who has been on Facebook? It's difficult these days to discern what is news and what is noise. Our own poor questions draw us into the center of our own personal echo chamber where we only ask questions that gets us the answers we already agree with. These questions may point to what we care about-But if we don't take a page out of God's question asking, and ask out of genuine concern and care for our relationships with others, then we are asking the same kinds of questions the Israelites were throwing at God. God asked, "What have I done to you?" and the people responded, "What's it going to take to get you off our back? A dramatic gesture?" Their concern was with themselves. They're asking Hedbanz questions, hoping that if they fill the void with noisy questions, they're failings won't be found out.

So with only empty questions as their defense, surely the defendant expects a sentence. Yet...none comes down. Instead Israel's questions are answered with a verdict that offers a way forward.

God has told you what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.

We've worn this slogan on t-shirts, seen it etched onto church walls, sung as a hymn, recited it from memory. It's a simple sounding answer that leads us into difficult places, but perhaps more helpful questions.

In Psalm 15, the questions are a little better.

- Lord, who may abide in your tent?
- Who may dwell on your holy hill?
 - They have purpose
 - They are open ended
 - They aren't leading

But, I think they expect a certain answer

This Psalm contains words believed to be used as liturgy upon entering the temple in Jerusalem. Perhaps the expected answer would be one from the priests like—"The one who may enter gives generously, and has followed most of the 613 Jewish laws this week." Me, right? This time though, they don't get a pretty sounding answer like we found in Micah, one they can wear on a bracelet or recite in Sunday school. They get the long version. Details.

Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right,
 and speak the truth from their heart;
³who do not slander with their tongue,
 and do no evil to their friends,
 nor take up a reproach against their neighbors;
⁴in whose eyes the wicked are despised,
 but who honor those who fear the Lord;
 who stand by their oath even to their hurt;
⁵who do not lend money at interest,
 and do not take a bribe against the innocent.

There isn't a certain time we've got to be on our best behavior to get a glimpse of the holy. God's dwelling place, God's mountain, the place where we are to come and bow before the Lord is here and now. That doing justice and loving kindness thing is spelled out here in how God describes community-it looks like doing what is right, speaking truth, and using our words, actions and attitudes to love our neighbor. These words aren't just meant for me. Not for one, but for us. Instead of asking, God, what must we do to please you? Or asking each other, "what kind of Christian are you if you support ____ or are pro-____ or went to the march for ____?" The Hedbanz questions just aren't going to cut it. It's limiting, not only for how we view our relationship to one another, but how we understand God's work among us. Let's try asking instead, "God, what must we do to honor your presence among us? Let's try asking each other, "how can I better love you?" Because better than a good question, a God question is centered in loving relationship.

If we are a community where God already dwells, then the questions don't have yes or no answers. Their purpose is to find real ways to express God's presence in this world. What does it mean for us to do justice in our city? What does loving kindness ask of us when we leave this place on Sunday afternoon? What does it look like when the questions we ask get expressed in relationship?

It looks like our youth group on MLK Day, packing bags of rice for refugees and writing letters to detained immigrants that said “You are loved and not forgotten. We are praying for you,” and then asking “how do refugees get to our country?”

It looks like women gathering for a controversial march, who are ready to walking behind those who are asking the country, “When will you hear our voice?”

It looks like our confirmation class worshipping at a Jewish synagogue, our young men wearing yamakuhs, and our young women asking questions like “How do we know God loves people who don’t believe the same things we do?”

It looks like a group of Presbyterians gathered in a church fellowship hall in downtown Atlanta, learning how to call their legislators on behalf of those who are homeless, hungry, victimized, and sick and asking “How do I take action on issues I am passionate about?”

It looks like showing up at Everett’s Music Barn on February 25th to learn about the relationship between Christianity and Islam and asking, “how do I love my Muslim neighbor?”

It looks like Jesus talking to a crowd of people next to the sea of Galilee whose hearts were full of questions about their own desperate situations captive to an empire, oppressed by Roman soldiers, suffering from wrongdoing, and then covering them with words of blessing. Blessed are you- poor in spirit, grieving, humble, hungry, the merciful, peacemakers, persecuted. Yours is the kingdom of God. You will see God.

We see glimpses of what Micah 6:8 and Psalm 15 look liked lived out, but we know it's not our ever-present reality. Krista Tippit, host and executive producer of the radio show and podcast "On Being," recently produced a conversation she had with Congressman and civil rights leader John Lewis in 2013 on the annual bi-partisan congressional civil rights pilgrimage to Alabama. As they talked about his experience growing up in the South, and the progress that has been made as well as progress that is yet to come, John said,

REP. LEWIS: I wanted to believe, and I did believe, that things would get better. But later I discovered, I guess, that you have to have this sense of faith that what you’re moving toward is already done. It’s already happened.

MS. TIPPETT: Say some more about that.

REP. LEWIS: It’s the power to believe that you can see, that you visualize, that sense of community, that sense of family, that sense of one house.

MS. TIPPETT: And live as if?

REP. LEWIS: And you live that you’re already there, that you’re already in that community, part of that sense of one family, one house. If you visualize it, if you can even have faith that it’s there, for you it is already there.

Start with better questions. And then live as if you're already there, doing justice, loving kindness, living a blameless life, speaking the truth, loving our neighbors, and living a life that dwells with God, expecting nothing less.