



Date: August 30, 2015

Title: "I'm Glad You Asked - 2015."

Description: Each summer the congregation submits questions one Sunday, which I attempt to address during worship the following Sunday. Here is this summer's version of "Stump the Preacher."

*When did you decide God and the ministry was your calling? What influenced your decision? What did you go through/how did you feel leaving your established Presbyterian Church to start at the beginning to form a new church?*

When I was twelve, I received a weekly allowance of \$1.00, and ten cents of that dollar was given to my church. That part was non-negotiable and one of the best things about faith my parents taught me. I observed that some people in church had offering envelopes with their name printed on them, not like the generic ones I used. I thought those personalized offering envelopes were neat and having one of my own would be cool. (I set the bar pretty low for being impressed.) "How can I get my own offering envelopes?" I asked my mom. "You have to be a member of the church." "Then I want to be a member!", I said. That's how I came to profess faith in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. With a conversion story like that, I knew I would never succeed as a televangelist!

The rest was a matter of going with the flow. In high school, a parachurch organization called "Young Life" stimulated my spiritual growth. In college I worked with Young Life as a volunteer, and when I graduated from college, I began a career on the Young Life staff.

Ten years later, I made my first career decision that was anything other than automatic.

I was working with Young Life, an active in a near-by Presbyterian Church. In that time, the things Young Life offered for my spiritual growth had become work, and they didn't feed me. But that church had become a wellspring of nurture for my faith. Every week I was challenged with new ways of thinking about God and of living Christ's grace. Out of the blue, that church invited me to become their youth minister.

Work at the very place that was feeding my soul? That was a no-brainer! Except it felt like I was running away from home. I'd been spiritually raised and nurtured by Young Life since I was 14; and during those decades, Young Life was doing the best youth ministry in the country. I felt like a traitor.

So I accepted the church's offer—on a trial basis. I took a leave of absence with the agreement that I could return after two years. W/in 6 months I knew I could never go back.

All this was not a purely spiritual process. My last position with Young Life had been funded by a grant and the grant money had been used up. I didn't want to risk working for a group that might not be able to meet payroll. Moreover, I had moved every two years and could see another move ahead for me. I was about done with that, and the church opportunity allowed me to settle in one place for a while.

(I'm answering the question about how I realized ministry was my calling, but I'm really talking about how I've made big decision. I believe God wants people to be ministers same way God wants someone to be a pharmacist, or a librarian or deliver pizzas. If it's something you love to do, and it's also something that does good for people, you're likely onto what God wants from you.

It wasn't always pretty. I began the process of becoming ordained as a Presbyterian minister. After a year or so, a church member with influence in the denomination phoned several members of the committee overseeing my process and told them I was not only an unfit candidate, I was ruining that church. The committee abruptly informed me that I was no longer under consideration. It was completely unnerving; I had never had someone out to harm me so directly.

Let me tell you, the session of my church went to bat for me. They knew church and they worked the system on my behalf. And the Presbyterian system worked. I was reinstated as a candidate for ministry and a couple years later, on Super Bowl Sunday in 1978, I was ordained. (That evening the Dallas Cowboys defeated the Broncos, 27-10.)

The church system doesn't always work. I've been thrown under the bus by our denomination a couple of times. But it's a good a system also. The generosity and foresight of the PCUSA birthed PHPC and offered liberal funding during our early years. That financial backing freed us from anxiety about meeting our expenses during our formative years and set a tone of generosity that remains part of the character of this church. For all its weaknesses, I'd rather be Presbyterian than any other denomination I know, and way more than trying to maintain faith as a solo act.

Coming to Duluth to begin PHPC was easy. It was so clearly a God-thing. After ten years, I was happy as Associate Pastor of a thriving church near Northlake Mall. But I heard of plans to begin a new church in Duluth and was immediately enthralled. I'd always loved starting new programs and this one sounded like a great adventure. So I applied and interviewed and got the job. I cried about leaving my friends and I stressed about selling my house and I drove around Duluth and realized I had signed on to become a country preacher. (In those days, this place was w-a-y outside civilized Atlanta.) But I loved it from the first day.

I'm sure it was much harder and more stressful than that. But that's how I remember it.

When making a difficult choice, I've learned to delay the actual decision as long as possible. I often discover that if I pray about it and hang out with the ambiguity and continue the conversation with others long enough, the decision eventually becomes so clear that it's hard to remember what made it difficult earlier.

*"Why does everyone view God as everything Masculine? To me, God is gender less. God is a spirit representing perfect universal love and justice. It's a challenge for me to say 'Father'. I feel that the Patriarchal representation of God has allowed humankind often to be biased and unfair to the other sex, that being female."*

"Thou shalt not make any graven images," instructs the KJV of the second commandment. Although I have a Chipper Jones Bobblehead that I treasure a great deal,

I don't believe God invested an entire commandment forbidding us from worshipping those darned old statues.

God is greater than anything we can imagine, so we settle for less than God when we take any picture or description of God and say, "Got it! That is God." Jesus taught us to call God our Father. (More accurately, our Daddy.) God is father-like. That doesn't mean that God is completely masculine. Scripture describes God as being like a mother as well as like a father. In Isaiah 66 God says, "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you..." In numerous other passages, scripture describes God with feminine traits.

When Christian women began to acknowledge that always using "he" or "him" to refer to God made them feel excluded or at least viewed as second-class, I responded with my typical male Christian charity: "Oh, that's dumb!" Then I began to concede, "No, my response is what's dumb." Restricting God to one exclusive image limits everyone's experience of God; this wasn't a women's equality matter. Besides, the image of "father" from my childhood was of someone distant and coldly disapproving, which is how I tend to view God if I'm not careful.

Like changing any habit, I had to be very deliberate at first, and perhaps go a little over-board. So when we sang the last line of the Doxology, instead of singing the traditional

"Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost" I sang "Creator, Christ, and Holy Ghost." You know what? Nobody noticed. So I sang a little louder! Which is a good thing, isn't it--- singing the hymns with gusto? Now, if some of us sing slightly different words, I like what that says about accepting each other's differences.

Recently I became aware of what I might be missing. "Creator" is not a complete substitute for "Father"; father is more personal. "Christ" and "Son" both refer to Jesus, but "Christ" is a purpose, while "Son" is relational. So now I again start some of my prayers with "Loving Heavenly Father". But not all of them. And I sing the Doxology using both sets of words.

*"Since Jesus was a Jew, why does the Jewish religion not acknowledge him?"*

I'm on thin ice trying to respond to this question. I can often observe what you've done.

(You're driving a new car! You've lost some weight! You've been at worship for a month!)

I can only guess the why behind your actions. You've lost some weight: have you found a diet plan that works? Or have you begun your first round of chemo? I can only guess...or ask.

So when I guess why, I try to presume the best possible motive, not the worst possible motive. "Why does the Jewish religion not acknowledge Jesus?" I resist imputing pure evil or demon-possession as the Jewish motive. It's only a guess, but maybe Jesus was so different from what they expected from God in their midst. They expected that God would be all about victory and power and our side are the good guys after all. When Jesus was about sacrifice and loving enemies they just missed it. Or maybe they didn't like the implications of what Jesus' way would cost. "Take up your cross and follow me" doesn't sound like "Seven Steps to Victorious Living" to me.

Both of those reasons sound uncomfortably close to home. I, too, have my notions of how God should respond and how God's blessings will be given that sometimes when God acts in a different way, I completely miss it. I am so confident that I'm on the right track that I miss the real right track.

Moreover, I admit that I'm uncomfortable with what following Jesus really costs. Sometimes I'm Christian like Olive Garden is Italian. I listen to people who have returned from mission trips where they worked alongside people in dire poverty. Almost unanimously, our folks observe, "Those people have so little, they're desperately poor, yet they have such strong faith and such joy!" If those people have found the secret of faith and trust in God and joy in the life God has given them, why haven't I sold all that I have and gone to live with them? Someone conducted national research about what makes people close to God. Merging all the spiritual traits, they reported that probably the

person in the U.S. with the closest relationship with God is likely a single woman raising her grandchildren in the rural mountains of Northern Alabama. So why haven't I ditched all this Atlanta traffic and moved to the end of a dirt road in the Alabama mountains?

I love the Lord Jesus Christ...and my present life-style. I'm willing to follow Jesus, as long as Jesus doesn't mess with what I've got going. Don't worry about me; I have a thousand reasons why giving up all my comforts wouldn't make sense and I'm not going to go off the deep end. But while I'm explaining to you why the Jews didn't follow Jesus, I need to wrestle with why I don't follow him either, not totally.

And yet, whenever I have gone off the deep end and trusted him beyond anything reasonable—my word, it was a thrill!

*"What does eternal life really mean to you? I find that as I get long in the tooth, the way I used to embrace it is far less important to me. Frankly, I don't even want to think about it. But when I was 18....different story. Is the term literally about immortality or something else?"*

Most Christians assume that heaven is where you go to receive eternal life, or even that salvation means going to heaven when we die. Okay, but that isn't what Jesus said nor what the Bible says. In John 17:3 Jesus says, "And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." Jesus describes eternal life as knowing God, with every indication that this is something available right now in this life on this earth.

The key Qs about eternal life seem to be these: What are we hoping for? And what are we going to do about it in the meantime? Christian hope extends beyond death; the resurrection of Jesus is clear about that. Anything we believe about life after death are like interstate directional signs in a fog. The NT admits, "we see through a glass darkly..." But that doesn't mean that we don't have any idea, that any opinion is as good as another. We have the resurrection of Jesus. We peer into the fog, and someone came out of the fog to meet us. The resurrected Jesus has come out of the fog of our future to meet us.

But when he appeared to the first followers, he didn't describe heaven in great detail. "Hey, you're gonna love it! It all starts with a tunnel & a bright light...!" He told them how to be confident in God (their heavenly father), and how to live out their hope in the meantime.

"And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." The important thing about eternal life isn't the eternal part; it's the life part. Life so intensely and fully wondrous that time simply disappears. We will be lost in wonder, love, and praise.

