

“Ask” A sermon by Lee Ireland
Cathedral City Community Presbyterian Church
September 23, 2018, Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Mark 9:30-37

Let us pray together: Open our eyes to see your Spirit in our life. Open our hearts to receive the blessings you send each day. Guide us with your wisdom so that through us Christ may walk on the earth once again. Amen.

Jesus tells the disciples that he will be killed. Jesus, **“is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.”** You may remember from last week’s reading from Mark that Jesus told the disciples the same thing. This is the second time that Jesus tells the disciples that he will be killed and will rise again. Pretty startling news for the disciples when Jesus has been healing so many people and miraculously feeding large crowds – four thousand, five thousand people. It must have been heady times for the disciples. Crowds following Jesus asking to be healed. Now this teaching.

Teaching. That’s what Mark calls it. Jesus wanted to be alone because he was teaching his disciples. But the disciples were not very good pupils, were they? They didn’t understand, and they didn’t ask questions.

Asking questions. Math did not come easily to me, especially when I got to the more abstract math topics – algebra and trig. Did I ask questions in class? No, I didn’t want to seem that stupid in front of my classmates and take up class time. As I got older and wiser, I began to grasp these abstract math concepts. But, at the time, I don’t think I really could have grasped the abstract concepts being presented. My mind wasn’t there.

Perhaps that is why the disciples didn’t ask questions. They couldn’t wrap their minds around what Jesus was telling them. He was going to die. Now, Algebra and death are hardly the same, though I might have considered the two alike when I was taking Algebra. The scripture says twice that the disciples didn’t ask questions of Jesus. The first time, because they didn’t understand. The second time, they were silent. The disciples had been arguing about who would be the greatest – a discussion they didn’t want Jesus to know about.

Asking questions. It’s one thing to not ask questions when you don’t understand. It’s another thing to not ask questions because you don’t want to know the answer to the question. When you start asking questions you are starting a dialog you may not be ready to hear.

When have you been afraid and not asked questions? I hear it from time to time from people in the hospital who have cancer. What did the doctor tell you, I ask? I find out they didn’t ask the doctor. Probably, they feared the worst and didn’t want to know.

If you had been a disciple of Jesus, would you have asked him what he meant about death and resurrection? Would asking that question challenge what you wanted to believe about Jesus and his ministry. The disciples believed Jesus would be a conquering hero, not be killed on the cross. That’s what the disciples believed. What do you believe?

The disciples didn't ask probably because they didn't want to hear Jesus' answer. Likewise, there are people today who are quite proficient at avoiding asking questions, because the answers to those questions would challenge their beliefs. Is not asking questions how we, like the disciples, avoid information that would be uncomfortable to hear, questions that would challenge our beliefs?

Not asking questions is one of the characteristics of our world today. We don't ask questions of those who have a different world view from ours, whether it's a faith issue or a political one. People believe their side has the answers, that their camp is right. If everyone would just see it our way, they say. That's a monologue, not a dialogue. And many people are more comfortable that way.

In last week's reading from Mark, we learned the disciples wanted Jesus to see it their way - just as many do today. Peter tells Jesus he shouldn't talk of this dying stuff. Jesus should be talking about expanding his ministry - not about ending it with his death.

What would have happened if the disciples had asked the question of what Jesus meant about his death and resurrection? We can't say for certain. But from your experience and mine, we know that we're better prepared to deal with a situation when it eventually happens if we have previous knowledge of the happening, if we are forewarned.

But the disciples decided not to ask questions. If they had, they might have seen Jesus in a different light and they might not have liked what they saw. They may have been forced to rethink their relationship with Jesus. Should they stay with him or should they leave knowing what will happen? Do they want to follow someone who will be killed because he declared forgiveness of sins, who would be killed because the religious leaders could not tolerate the radical grace of God that Jesus proclaimed?

I would encourage you to not follow the disciples' example, but to open a dialogue with Jesus. Ask Jesus the questions you have about your faith. Tell Jesus your doubts. Open your heart to Jesus. Doing so can only strengthen your faith.

Now, I realize that you cannot literally ask your questions of Jesus in person. However, you can voice them in a prayer or you can write them on the white piece of paper you received when you walked into church today. If you have a question about your faith or Jesus or God, please write it down and put it in the offering plate. No need to sign it unless you would like me to know who wrote the question. I will review the questions and do my best to incorporate them into a sermon or answer them in the church's weekly email.

Let's not follow the disciples' example. Ask.