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As I’ve heard many of you say at one time or another, one of the things that sets this church apart from many of our neighbors is that we not only tolerate, but *encourage* questions. In fact, I think it would be fair to say that we thrive on questions. And the answers to those questions? Well, our questions tend not to lead us to hard and fast answers, but to even more questions. Deeper and deeper they go, like we’re slowly peeling back the layers from an intriguing, infinitely layered onion... Though we may sometimes feel a tad isolated in our neck of the woods, we are *not* wholly unique in this quest. In fact, this trait is in keeping with The Center for Progressive Christianity’s 5th Point defining what it means to be a Progressive Christian: “By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who find grace in the search for understanding and believe there is more value in questioning than in absolutes.”

Given the questioning congregation in a non-doctrinal denomination that we are, it might seem like a no-brainer to just sign off on this particular point and move on. Yet this is not the Christian ethos in which many of us were raised. Some were actually shamed for asking probing questions in Sunday school or CCD. It seemed to be disrespectful--and maybe even blasphemous--to do so. The bible was translated more or less literally for us, and those interpretations and the values they expressed were presented as forever fixed and unchanging... Although no one ever said it aloud, the unspoken rule seemed to be, “Check your brain--your inquiring mind--at the door.” ...One year the Easter Bunny brought me a refrigerator magnet with a message on it that I think captures this perspective quite well: “God said it. I believe it. That settles it.” No wonder by the time I let my questions and doubts surface in college, I thought my only options were to accept

this brand of Christianity hook, line, and sinker; or to reject Christianity altogether. There was no middle ground that I could see. There was only one “it.” And there were large pieces of that “it” that just didn’t make sense to me.

Much of the tension that exists in the political arena today would seem to be, at heart, a conflict between these two theological extremes. In his book “The Heart of Christianity,” Marcus Borg describes those poles as paradigms and describes the conflict between them as a difference in understandings of what constitutes truth. One paradigm associates truth with fact alone, while the other is also comfortable allowing poetry and metaphor to represent larger truths, which may not correspond precisely to the factual, historical reality. Although we are often led to believe that the literalistic view is the older one, the original one, even, it actually dates back only to the Enlightenment, when the rise of science challenged and transformed peoples’ ways of thinking about the world. And it seemed to some that, for the bible to remain the undisputed Word of God, for the very foundations of Christianity to remain intact, everything—or almost everything—within the bible’s pages, supernatural or not, must be treated as fact.¹ As so many of our current political and social debates tell us, it’s really, really hard to mediate these two worldviews and approach agreement, let alone compromise. I’m not here to say who’s right and who’s wrong. These are points of view, after all. But, if we acknowledge where *we* are coming from and peruse the bible fully aware of the particular lenses *we* are wearing, what do we see?

Today’s scripture reading seems like a good place to start. I don’t know about you, but I often experience the presence of God in nature, so Moses’ encounter with God in the burning bush does not challenge my worldview overly much. And I’ve experienced God calling me to do

¹ Borg, Marcus: *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003, pp1-20.

something that seemed impossible, had doubts about my ability to accomplish the task, yet proceeded with some internal and external prodding and felt divinely supported as I did so. That's what discernment is all about... No, what troubles me in this text is the conversation between Moses and God about God's name. I mean, Moses asks God a simple, straightforward, albeit a bold, question, and what does he get? "I AM WHO I AM." And some scholars believe God's response was even less precise than that: "I will be what I will be." *Que sera sera*. Either way, what kind of a response is that? A non-response, a riddle, an enigma, an invitation to observe and question and ponder.

Underlying God's actual words, it would seem, there is a message: "Don't *even try* to box me in, Moses." To name something is to begin to limit it and, in so doing, to have power over it. God was not about to be limited or controlled by a label or by Moses' perception in that particular moment. And, indeed, God could not be so limited. The "I will be what I will be" translation seems to say, "Watch me, Moses. Watch what I do and will do and find out." It corresponds pretty closely to our UCC slogan "God is still speaking," doesn't it? It's pretty open ended, leaving lots of room for the activity of a dynamic god and lots of room for our curiosity and our questions, as well as space to be in relationship with God. Open-ended, but also paradoxical, inviting intimacy, but remaining elusive.

I can't help but think of Job who, after serving God faithfully for many years and prospering, lost everything, not just his possessions but most of his family. Job was devastated, he was angry, but, perhaps more than anything, he was perplexed. And, as we're apt to do when tragedy descends upon us, he couldn't stop asking, "Why? Why me?" His friends kept telling him he must have done something wrong to deserve such a fate, that God must be punishing him for his

disobedience. But Job knew in his heart that this wasn't true. He knew he had remained loyal to God. And so he dared to question God personally. And finally he received a response. But it probably wasn't anything he'd been expecting to hear. No, God waxed poetic:

*“Where were you when I planned the earth? Tell me, if you are so wise...
Have you seen to the edge of the universe? Speak up, if you have such knowledge
...Do you tell the antelope to calve or ease her when she is in labor?...
Do you show the hawk how to fly, stretching his wings on the wind?...”*²

Etcetera, etcetera. On and on God goes with the questions, stacking beautiful cosmic image upon beautiful, intimate image. And all but rendering Job speechless. Until at last Job concedes,

*“I know you can do all things and nothing you wish is impossible...
I have spoken the unspeakable and tried to grasp the infinite...
I had heard of you with my ears, but now my eyes have seen you.
Therefore, I will be quiet, comforted that I am dust.”*³

It's hard not to be disarmed by God's remarkably beautiful response to Job. And yet, if we stop and think for a moment, we're likely to realize pretty quickly that God has not answered Job's question. In fact, God's response is a total non sequitur. And even as a non-response it's paradoxical, as God calls the universe into being, even as God tenderly cares for its creatures, the antelope and the hawk, among others. Even though Job backed down, how could he not have felt just a little bit frustrated? Probably he walked away from the scene with even more questions for God, if different ones. But he also walked away with a certain level of understanding, understanding that God was at once bigger and smaller than he had or could ever begin to imagine and that, ultimately, God and God's ways were a mystery that would always remain just beyond his comprehension. And so, essentially, there would never be an end to the questions or to the little epiphanies that unfolded as he continued to live his life prayerfully and mindfully.

² Mitchell, Stephen., transl: *The Book of Job*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1987, pp79-80, 82, 84.

³ Ibid, p. 8.

One might think that Jesus' arrival in the New Testament would have cleared up a lot of this confusion and perhaps even done away with paradox altogether. After all, we Christians know Jesus as the fullest revelation of the heart and the will of God. And a human being, God in flesh like us, that's palpable. Something, someone, we ought to be able to grasp, right? But still we have a dichotomy similar to what we experienced in Job--the dichotomy between a cosmic Creator God and an intimately engaged Jesus... Not only that, but Jesus seems to have inherited his divine parent's tendency to speak in riddles, also known as parables. Some have asked why, if Jesus really wanted people to understand what he was talking about, he didn't just say exactly what he meant. No beating around the bush.

And yet Jesus *did* say exactly what he meant and quite skillfully at that. His parables are multifaceted. We can step into different characters' shoes and see entirely different things. We can try on the prodigal son's sandals one day and the envious brother's the next. We can be the good Samaritan today and the injured man in the ditch the next. We can impose the frames of these seemingly simple stories on our contemporary lives and continue to interact with Jesus and the biblical story, the gospel, forever. Quite ingenious, really.

Then there are the other types of parables, such as the parable of the mustard seed, where Jesus explained what faith and the kingdom of God are like. Not what they are, but what they are *like*. Because they couldn't quite be pinned down in a literal fashion, Jesus gave us metaphors to ponder, and the space for our own conceptions and experiences of faith and the realm of God to evolve with us.

We know God and Jesus share *many* traits, but just one more I'd like to highlight here is about naming and identity. In each of the Synoptic gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—Jesus asks his disciples just who they think he is. The answer, from Peter, is always the same, “the Messiah.” As is Jesus’ response, that they should tell no one. It’s not entirely clear why Jesus instructs them to keep this conversation a secret, and probably there is more than one reason: This revelation likely would have posed too great a threat to the religious and political powers that be. It was simply too early for Jesus’ identity to be revealed. Or maybe “Messiah” just didn’t cover it all, all of who Jesus was and would be. He might easily have countered Peter’s claim with God’s words to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” "I will be what I will be."

Admittedly, Jesus did sometimes speak in absolutes, as in the Sermon on the Mount when he declared that he did not come to do away with the laws of the Jewish Pentateuch. That even the least of the commandments ought not to be relaxed. And yet his actions tell us something a little bit different than these seemingly decisive words. As in how he raised the religious authorities’ eyebrows by healing on the Sabbath, instead of simply ignoring the pain that surrounded him and resting, as the law had commanded him to do.

From beginning to end, the bible, it would seem, invites our questions. --Don’t even get me started on the book of Revelation!—The bible is made for dialogue. In fact, often times it is in dialogue with itself! Not unlike we Christians and our various Christianities. For some absolute assurances might be life giving. Ambiguity can be an uncomfortable place to live. Paradox a difficult concept to embrace. And so what are we to do? Listen to these words of the Austrian author and poet Rainer Maria Rilke in a letter to a young, aspiring poet:

...here I feel that no human being anywhere can answer for you those questions and feelings that deep within them have a life of their own; for even the best err in words when they are meant to mean most delicate and almost inexpressible things...

...I want to beg you, as much as I can to be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue.

Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them.

And the point is, to live everything.

Live the questions now.

Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.⁴

May we seek to live our questions this day and every day of our lives.

Amen.

⁴ Rilke, Rainer Maria: *Letters to a Young Poet*. M.D. Herter Norton, transl. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993, Fourth Letter: 33-35.