

**Fed With Questions**  
**Reverend Tom Robinson**  
**8/2/09**

Ask any sports athlete, any politician, any person who has to deal with the public. They will tell you that no matter how great their accomplishments, how noble their intentions, they are judged by a single question: What have you done for me lately?

It's not just the rich and famous who get tripped up by this question. This is the one that we can use to catch someone with, or the one in which ourselves might be caught. It is the question that challenges our existence, our purpose, our call in life. 'What have you done for me lately' is asked by a frustrated Indian's fan when they see another strikeout or hear of another standout player being traded for prospects; by an irritated spouse who feels that their life partner has disappointed them; by an angry voter who wonders what happened to all those wonderful campaign promises of a year ago.

In this section of the gospel of John Jesus is asked something else - Hey, rabbi, fancy meeting you over here on the other side of the lake, on the other side from where you turned those meager elements into a banquet the likes of which we have never seen before. When did you get here, anyway, they ask.

But Jesus knows what is really going on behind the question. It is an effort to control, to manipulate, to get God to give in to our desires. So Jesus tells the audience that they are just rephrasing the old question – what have you done for me lately? He knows they just want another meal, another wow experience, another feel-good moment.

But Jesus knows something else. He knows that all of that is fluff, surface stuff, the kind of experiences that don't really feed a person. He is the Bread of Life, the Bread that will sustain, not for an hour or two, but for a lifetime. They don't get it, so they keep asking questions. What can we do in order to do what God wants us to do? What miracle will you perform so that we may see it and believe you? They are all different, but they are all coached the same way: What have you done for me lately?

Jesus is not about answering their questions. Jesus as the Bread of Life is not about a cold, factual kind of answer; but of a question that pursues, that takes one deeper into a relationship. Jesus as the Bread of Life goes beyond answering 'What have you done for me lately?' Jesus takes us deeper, to the point where we ask ourselves, 'What have I done for God lately?'

I've thought a lot about that, this whole thing about asking questions to take us deeper into faith. Over the next year you all will be exploring a lot of questions as you take a look at who you are so that you may prepare yourselves for your next minister. In their book *Holy Conversations* Gil Rendle and Alice Mann lifted up three questions that every congregation needs to ask as they plan for the future:

Who are we? (Identity question)

What is God calling us to be and do? (Purpose question)

Who is our neighbor? (Mission question)

But since you will probably be dealing with those questions somewhere in the next few months – and I don't want to mess up the planning process – may I take you in another direction. It is still along the path of being fed by questions, because questions often do a better job of connecting us with God than answers do. Answers are final, static. This is the answer. That's it.

But questions can often lead to another, and they can lead you to consider more deeply the issue you are questioning. I have shared with you some thoughts I have picked up from a book called *The Monkey and the Fish: Liquid Leadership for a Third-Culture World*, by Dave Gibbons. In one of his chapters, Gibbons lifts up three questions that he uses to guide just about everything he does, and these were such powerful questions that I felt a need to share them with you. They won't give you an iron clad answer to what it means for Jesus to be the Bread of Life. But they get you going on the road.

#### Question # 1 – Where is Nazareth?

Earlier in John's Gospel, Jesus starts calling his disciples. One of them, Nathanael, has a bit of a rough edge. "Humph," he says to his good buddy Philip, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" That's a question we have voiced before or heard before. Can anything good come out of someone from that place? Can anything good come out of someone who looks like that? It is the voice of prejudice, the voice of certainty, the voice of knowing exactly who someone is before you've gotten to know them. Nazareth is the place we want to avoid, the people we don't want to have anything to do with. But these may be exactly the places and the people God sends us to.

Gibbons says, "The question about Nazareth focuses us because it's contrary to the church-growth mentality of focusing only on people like us. It's built on the premise ... that our neighbors are people who are different from us." He goes on to ask a question that you all will need to ask yourselves in the next few months, if not for the rest of your lives: "So who in your community is the outsider, the misjudged, the misunderstood? Maybe the one who seems the weakest? Who are the strangers and the friendless? Focusing on them as a church may mean you won't grow as fast. And you may lose some people. But your church will be fulfilling the most beautiful expression of who God is."

#### Question #2 – What is my pain?

This has been a no-brainer for me lately. My pain has been in my shoulder, in my arm, especially now as I go through rehab to get my arm to do what I used to take for granted. But what this experience has taught me is to be more compassionate toward those who have physical impairments, those people who know all about their pain. It has also taught me how much the Bible talks about pain and brokenness, and how God often comes to us, not in our times of strength and triumph, but in our times of weakness and loss. We don't like to talk about embracing our pain. It may sound good in a pop psychology sort of way, but most of us would consider that a vastly overrated experience. We don't want to embrace pain; we want to avoid it like the proverbial plague.

And yet there is something deeply spiritual about talking about your pain, and accepting it. Dealing with pain means that we have to come to terms with our limitations; with realizing that we can't do everything. No matter how many prosperity preachers on TV tell us that we can do anything we want to because Jesus loves us, there is going to be pain in our lives. We fall and break something. A loved one dies. A marriage breaks up. We lose our job. A good friend moves away.

We all know about that, and that is why pain is so important and needs to be embraced. It's because we have all experienced it. It is a common element of life, no matter where you are from, how much money you make, whether you are a beauty queen or the runt of the litter. We all have our experiences of pain, of moments that hurt like you wouldn't believe. But it can also bring you closer to other people as you let your pain teach you about their pain.

It can also teach you about Jesus. To be the Bread of Life Jesus had to go through so much suffering, so much pain. There were many people who rejected him because of that. Many people deny

his Lordship because he wound up on a cross. But that suffering, that pain, unites us with each other, and more importantly unites us with God.

Question #3 – What is in my hand?

We have to go back a few books in the Bible for this one. When God confronted Moses at the burning bush and told him to go to Pharaoh and tell him to let the Hebrew slaves go, Moses had all kinds of excuses why God should pick someone else. Finally, in the midst of all of his complaining that he was a nobody and didn't have anything to show his authority, God asks him, "What do you have in your hand?" It was his walking stick, and God asked him to throw it down. The stick turned into a snake, and Moses wanted to get out of there in a hurry. But God then told him to take it by its tail, which Moses did – and it turned back into a stick again. God told Moses, "Perform this sign, and they will believe you."

Now, this is not a story to encourage you to go out and take a poisonous snake by the tail. This is to trust God with whatever gift you happen to have. As Gibbons writes, "This is another way of asking, What has God already given me? Instead of wishing for and complaining about what I don't have, what do I have today? Instead of dangerously comparing myself to others, what is within my grasp relationally, historically and resource-wise right now?"

For us to learn what it means for Jesus to be the Bread of Life, and to be fed by him and in him, what we need are not answers. What we need are questions; questions that will take us deeper into faith, question that will enhance our belief in Jesus. There is probably no better time for this than when we come to this table. As we eat and drink in remembrance of Christ, we have plenty of questions about this meal – what's going on here? What is this all about? Is Jesus really here? When we ask those questions, and other questions about the One who invites us here, we are being fed with the Bread of Life.

What have you done for me lately, Jesus? It seems all I have are all these questions, some of them which have no answer to them. But through those questions we come to a faith which reveals to us how Jesus as the Bread of life feeds us with eternal life, starting right now, with where we are, with what we have. Amen.

Bible Text is John 6:24-35.

©2009 ALPC