

***Stewardship Sermon Series: Giving Thanks... "For Questions"***

***Salem United Methodist Church***

***Psalm 42:1-4; Luke 18:1-8; 2 Corinthians 12:6-10***

***November 9, 2014***

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For the Sundays proceeding Thanksgiving this November, the sermon series is focusing on Giving Thanks. Usually when we think of giving thanks we think of counting our blessings. This is just part of giving thanks. The Apostle Paul stated that we are to give thanks in all things (I Thessalonians 5:18). All things? Even when we are doubt? Even when we question God? Even when God doesn't answer our prayers? Really?

Giving Thanks for Questions. Have you thought what the world would be like without questions? This past week we experienced the greatest election shake-up in eighty years. Why? Because we, the people, were asking questions. Why is there so much gridlock in Washington? Why can't our Congress get anything done? So our answer was to kick out the old guard. Without questions, there would be no answers, no change, no thinking, no introspection, no new discoveries. The journey of discovery for scientists and inventors begins with the questions, "Why?" or "How?" Teachers also ask questions of their students to see what they have learned. Their questions, however, come in the form of tests or quizzes. But teachers also ask questions to get students to analyze information, to dig deeper, and to think of new ways to approach the problem. Asking questions is important. Without them we wouldn't know who we are, what we are to become, or how we are to live. One of the beautiful things about young children is that they are full of questions. A two year olds favorite word, besides "no" or "I do," is "why." The parent may say we have to put our coat on today. The child asks, "Why?" They don't understand that it has gotten colder and the coat will keep them warm. At the age of two everything is a new experience. The only way they learn is to ask, "Why?"

"Why" is used often in our spiritual journey with God, too, as we seek the answers to those ageless questions. Is there a God? And if so what kind of God is God? Have you ever asked these questions? Have you ever confronted God with "Why?" We may have asked God, "Why do we have to have winter?" And some of us have created our own answer to that by going to warmer climates during winter. But there are more serious "why" questions that we ask of God. Some people think that we do not have the right to question God, because God is God, all knowing and all powerful. We are mere humans who have no right or rank or privilege to challenge God. We should remain humble servants and accept whatever happens in life. This is *not* what the Psalms teach us. In just four verses of Psalm 42 the Psalmist asks God five different hard questions. Why? Scholars think that this Psalm was written while the Hebrew people were in exile in Babylon. They have lost everything in the war with the Babylonians: their capital city, Jerusalem, their Temple which was the only place where God could be worshiped, their homes, their jobs, their families. They were captured and taken to another country where they were mocked and treated like slaves. They have every reason to be downcast and depressed. They have every reason to feel that God has forgotten them and abandoned them, especially when the captors taunt them over and over again with "Where is your God? Where is your God?"

The Psalmist opens with the image of a dry soul. Babylon was a non-arid land. It had plenty of water from the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, but the Psalmist is not thirsty for water, but is spiritually parched. Did you know humans can survive for three to four days without water? Few of us have gone without water for that period of time. Water makes up 60% of our bodies. We cannot

survive without water. After being in exile for years, the Psalmist realizes he cannot survive without God, too. His soul thirsts for God. Have you ever been spiritually parched that your soul thirsted for God? The Hebrew people believed that God lived in the Temple. With the Temple gone, did that mean God was gone, too? So the Psalmist asks, “When will I be able to be with God again?” He is undergoing religious persecution in Babylon. He speaks for all the Hebrews when he asks, “Why have you forgotten me? Why must I walk about mournfully because my enemy oppresses me?” The Psalmist is questioning God! Why, Lord, why? Have you ever asked God, “Why?” We ask “why?” when we have lost a job, when someone we love is diagnosed with a terminal illness and dies, when catastrophes strike, when our candidate loses an election, when the Redskins lose. “Why, Lord, why?”

Does God make the Redskins lose? Some people think that if we pray hard enough, have enough faith, or confess our sins, God will answer our prayers. So when the Redskins lose, does that mean that Vikings’ fans prayed harder than the Redskins’ fans? No. Did the Republicans pray harder this election season than the Democrats? No. God is not a vending machine in that we put our prayer requests in and out pops the answer. So then, why does it seem that God answers prayers for people to find a parking space, but not heal someone of cancer?

We ask, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” Does God make bad things happen? See how important questions are. We can’t get to the heart of anything without asking questions. And sometimes we can’t always answer these questions, but we can make attempts. God doesn’t make bad things happen to people. God gives us free choice. Often bad things happen because of our poor choices. Sometimes it is just life. Things happen. Does this mean God doesn’t care? No, the Apostle Paul prayed three times for his affliction to be taken from him. What was God’s answer to Paul? “My grace is sufficient for you, because power is made perfect in weakness.” God does not make bad things happen, but God is with us, listening to us as we rant in rage with our questions of “Why?” or “Where are you, God?” God is embracing us as we cry until we cannot cry any longer and holding our hand as we take that first step into the unknown. God is with us pouring out abundant grace, perfecting our weakness with God’s power of love. The answers won’t pop up like an instant message or a text, but they will be made clear eventually. And if they are not, then ask the questions over and over and over again. This is the point of the story that Jesus told in today’s Gospel lesson. Be persistent. Keep asking. Badger God. God will act. God does hear our prayers. God does answer our questions, but in God’s time and in God’s way, not ours. It is ok for us to struggle or wrestle with our faith. It’s ok to ask the questions. In fact, to ask questions of God for which we think there are no answers is the beginning of growing in wisdom. To doubt God is the beginning of planting seeds of faith. We ask. God waters and our faith grows.

Jesus asked a question of us, too. He asked if he will find people who are persistent in seeking out their faith, asking those faith questions when he returns. We grow in our faith as we ask the questions. We grow in our faith by the surprises God provides in the answers. It is because of these surprises, because God quenches our parched souls that we can give thanks. The Psalmist didn’t give up hope. He knew God would help the Hebrews. He knew that the people would once again give thanks and praise God. And they did. After forty years in exile, God eventually returned the Hebrews to their home country. They began again by rebuilding Jerusalem and the Temple.

Have you ever had a time where you questioned God? Did God answer your questions? How were they answered? Do you have questions for God now? What are they? Ask them and then give thanks. We grow in faith because we ask the questions.

**Note: Forty-four questions were asked in this sermon. Give thanks and praise God for questions!**

