

**Questions and Responses #2**  
Micah 6:1-8, Matthew 5:1-12  
Browns Point UMC – January 30, 2011  
Rev. Elizabeth Ingram Schindler

*Instead of preaching a regular sermon today, the congregation was asked to submit questions they had about church life, theology, the Bible, or pretty much anything else. I responded as best I could to as many questions as I could. The following are some notes used to prepare the oral responses, but are not a transcript of the unscripted conversation that took place during worship.*

**1. What do we do with the communion bread and juice after service?**

This is a great question, and it has to do with what we think actually happens during communion. Of course, there's a wide spectrum on this issue: some folks see communion as *only* a "meal of remembrance." We eat bread because Jesus ate bread, and we're remembering his last meal with the disciples. Others, like Roman Catholics, believe in a concept called "transubstantiation," which means that when the priest prays over the elements (wine and bread for them), they actually become the flesh and blood of Christ. These folks believe that the substance of the elements is changed into Christ's actual flesh and blood while the accidents (what's available to the senses) of the bread and wine stay the same. We Methodists lie somewhere in the middle on this – like we do on many things – in believing that *something* happens when we ask the Holy Spirit to fill the elements, and they become the body and blood "for us," but we don't usually go as far as transubstantiation.

Obviously, what you think about the bread and juice/wine plays a big part in how you treat it. I think it's best to err on the side of respect in this case, taking great care with the elements in case someone in the room *does* believe that they have become the flesh of Christ. For that reason, you might see me pick up little crumbs off the floor instead of waiting for them to be vacuumed up after the service. That's why the priest in a Catholic or Episcopal church will drain the chalice after everyone has taken communion: it's not just because s/he is thirsty! Methodists generally ascribe to the idea that, once consecrated, the bread and juice should be either consumed by humans (so you can come get some more if you'd like), or returned to the earth. So we either consume it or put it outside rather than throwing it away or pouring it down the drain.

**2. Do Methodists believe in speaking in tongues? Words of prophecy? "Baptism in the Spirit?"**

Many more Pentecostal Christians rely heavily on this idea of being baptized in the Spirit, which causes people to speak in tongues, or in languages that they don't know and that most people cannot understand. There are stories in the Bible about this happening, and evidence in the second chapter of Acts that this is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Some churches believe that this is a sign of salvation or sanctification, and folks need not feel too sure about the state of their souls until they've experienced it. John Wesley didn't deny that it was possible for people to speak in tongues because of a gift of the Holy Spirit, but he didn't put much emphasis on it, either.

Current United Methodist belief is that it's entirely possible that the Holy Spirit might give someone this gift, along with many other gifts, and our official statement (yes, we have an official statement) says that we pray for sensitivity to be aware of and respond to manifestations of the Holy Spirit as they occur, and we try to be open to new ways in which God might be speaking to the Church. So again, we're kind of in the middle – it could totally happen, but we don't rely on it. [We should also note that when Paul mentions speaking in tongues as a gift of the Holy Spirit in 1 Corinthians, it's in

the same sentence with the gift of understanding the words spoken... and we believe that if God gives someone a new language to speak, God will give another understanding of that language so the word can be translated for the church.]

### **3. Explain the lectionary: how did we get it? What is its history? Do we use the same one as other churches? How are the texts related (if they are)?**

The lectionary is the schedule of Scripture readings that we use in the church. There are four readings for each Sunday – usually an Old Testament, an epistle, a Psalm, and a Gospel, though sometimes it varies. These texts cover *much* of the Bible, but not the whole Bible, every three years.

The first lectionary came about as a result of the Second Vatican Council, the big meeting of the Roman Catholic Church in the 1960's. The Catholic Church wanted to encourage its clergy to focus more on teaching Scripture as their primary duty to the church, and so they spent years working on an extensive schedule of readings, which they published in 1969 and still use today. Of course, within a year of their publishing their lectionary, other churches started using it or an adaptation of it. Soon there were a bunch of versions, which made ecumenism – working together between churches – difficult. So in the late 70's and early 80's a big ecumenical group got together to publish what's now called the *Revised Common Lectionary*. Most mainline Protestant groups use the same lectionary, or revise it just very slightly at times.

The lectionary is careful to give three of the gospel writers (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), lots of attention, and we basically walk through their gospels during their years. We're in Matthew this year. But the other texts are not usually read straight through in the same way. Sometimes the texts all relate to each other somehow – such as when the Old Testament tells the story of David and Bathsheba, and then the Psalm for the day is David's lament at his infidelity and asking for forgiveness – but other times the texts don't have a lot of connection. The idea is not necessarily to give us a "theme" for the day, but get us to hear the bulk of Scripture on a regular basis. Once we know what's in the Bible, we can do that theme-connecting ourselves.

*Follow-up question: Is it possible that the creators of the lectionary had a theological agenda that they're pushing on us?*

It's totally possible, but since an ecumenical group worked for years to put our current lectionary – and tested their product for years – it's unlikely that one theological agenda is overly prominent. In fact, one of the revisions that's come out in the last few decades is an addition of several important texts about women that were overlooked the first go-around.

That being said, if you listen to the same pastor preaching the lectionary for many years, you're likely to get a bit of a theological agenda. I personally try to push myself to preach on different lectionary texts each time, so that I'm not always in the gospels and am forced to dive into the most difficult texts.

### **4. Does God still send angels?**

The Greek word for angel is εὐαγγελιον (euangelion), which is also translated "messenger." And in that sense, I'm absolutely certain that God still sends angels. I know of folks who are currently living who have seen Jesus in a dream, in much the same way that I imagine the Angel came to Joseph in a dream to tell him not to leave poor pregnant Mary before Jesus was born. But there are also so many ways that God communicates with us through others, that it's tough *not* to think of God sending angels/messengers to us. Now, do they have wings and fly? I'm more doubtful about this, mostly because I just haven't experienced it. But I don't count anything impossible for God.

## **5. There were several questions about Jesus' childhood...**

Gosh, we just don't know. We can assume that he was a pretty amazing kid, because he became an amazing man. But we don't have any details of Jesus' childhood written down in the Bible aside from the story when he was a child and went missing from his family, who found him in the temple.

## **6. If Jesus is the Son of God, why does Matthew give a genealogy of Jesus? Shouldn't he have no genealogy except God?**

Great question! It does seem crazy that most of the first chapter of Matthew is a list of "begats." But there is a really important purpose here. We have to remember that the gospel of Matthew was originally written not for us, but for the Jews living around Galilee or Antioch. So Matthew couldn't just say, "Jesus was born and he was the son of God" and expect people to follow. He gave this lineage to show how God had planned Jesus to be a part of history from the beginning – and how Jesus was a part of *Israel's* history. All through the Old Testament, God is referred to as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and by showing his lineage back to Abraham, Jesus shows *his* connection with that same God.

The genealogy is divided into three sections of 14 generations each – from Abraham to King David, then to the fall of Jerusalem and the Babylonian captivity, then to Joseph, who actually had very little to do with Jesus' biological birth, but was chosen by God to be Jesus' dad. [There's some other significance in that list of begats, namely that 4 women are mentioned before Mary, and all of them are Gentiles, showing how God works outside cultural norms and God's love is beyond the bounds of our understanding.] [There's a great song by Andrew Peterson called "Matthew's Begats" that lists all of these in musical form. Very fun!]

## **7. Did Jesus ask God before performing miracles (did Jesus consult God or did the Father direct the miracles)?**

I don't think so. I don't think Jesus needed permission, because you have to remember that Jesus *was* God. He did all kinds of miracles – healing, controlling nature, raising the dead, casting out demons – but the Bible doesn't say he stopped to ask God the Father's permission or wait for God the Father to tell him what to do. It *does* say that he regularly went off by himself to pray, so we can assume that Jesus was in tune with himself and in tune with the heart of God the Father. But the miracles show us even more how Jesus was both divine and human: he had the powers of God because he *was* and *is* God.

## **8. There were several questions about why bad things happen.**

Why do bad things happen? This is a question great theologians have been wrestling with for centuries. First, I want to say that I think Christians do other Christians and non-Christians a great disservice when they try to diagnose people's misfortune as God's judgment or God's plan. When we say things like, "Everything happens for a reason," or "That must be part of God's mysterious plan," in the face of someone's suffering, it assumes that God has *caused* the misfortune or the suffering on purpose. I'm not sure that's true, and I'm certain it's not helpful. The story of Job tells us that the best thing friends can do with those who are suffering is sit with them in silence in the suffering: every time Job's friends speak, they say ignorant things that get them in more trouble. And if we think God is causing us to suffer now as judgment for our sins, then we pretty much ignore or diminish the power of the cross. My understanding is that Jesus suffered for us, ending the need for suffering, and

whatever suffering happens now *might be a result* of sin – the natural consequences from turning from God – but isn't judgment inflicted on us.

Further, I don't think we should assume that God absolutely controls every cell of every body all the time. God doesn't seem to be a micromanager, and God has intentionally created us with free will, which means God's predetermining our every move doesn't make a lot of sense. This means that *everything* that happens is not necessarily "a part of God's plan." Does God have a plan for our lives? Sure. But is every step controlled by God? I don't think so. Is God *ultimately* responsible for all creation? Sure. Does God *immediately* cause everything to happen? I don't think so.

So I think bad things happen because we make mistakes. Sometimes horrible mistakes. And where is God when these bad things happen? God is with us. That's the only blessing in it sometimes. But God never leaves us or forsakes us, even—especially—in the midst of the worst tragedies. And that is where we hang our hope.

### **9. Are hymns a traditional part of Methodist churches? Would an inclusion of more modern songs (Christian or otherwise) take away from the Methodist 'spin' on the service?**

Yes! Hymns have always been a huge part of Methodist worship, as John Wesley's brother Charles wrote hundreds, if not thousands, of hymns, some of which we still sing today. Of course, many of the words of those early hymns were set to well-known tunes – to songs that were sung in the local pubs – so people would feel more comfortable singing them. So the 'tradition' of singing 'contemporary' music is also about 300 years old.

But the question remains about how we decide what to sing in church and where we get the music. Of course, most of our songs come out of the two UM hymnals, both because they generally have theology that works for us and they're the most familiar to most Methodists. It's a self-perpetuating thing: we sing these songs, so they're the most familiar, so we sing these songs. And there are thousands of other hymns and songs in the world that would *also* be appropriate to sing in church – it's just a matter of finding them, teaching them, and making them a part of our worship life.

As to how songs are chosen, I usually choose the hymns for each week and ask for feedback from Darrell and Andrew, since they know a lot more about the church's history with music than I do. I try to find both contemporary and traditional songs in our songbooks, so that we have really solid theology that matches what we're talking about for the day, but we're not always singing "thees" and "thous" and words we don't all understand. I also really love a lot of the contemporary praise choruses that are out right now – but these songs are more difficult to incorporate in part because it takes some teaching, and in part because we don't have copyright licenses for stuff that's not in the hymnbooks we own. That's the same for songs that aren't written specifically for churches, too: if they're appropriate for congregational singing, they aren't out of the running for being used in church, but we have to have someone who can teach them and we need to have an appropriate copyright license to print the words and music. So the short answer is, "Adding contemporary and even secular music doesn't take away the Methodist 'spin.' It's just more complicated than using what's in the hymnal."

### **10. Why do we place so much emphasis on the atonement/dying part of Jesus and not as much on his life?**

This is a question that has challenged me since I received it. I hadn't really thought about it before, but I think we sometimes *do* place an inordinate amount of emphasis on Jesus' death and not enough on his life. Why? That's a tough one.

I think it might be because it's easier. There's a school of thought that says, "Once saved, always saved," which can be extrapolated to mean, "Once I accept that Jesus died for me, I'm done."

It's a lot harder to say, "Jesus wants me to strive to live like him, following the way he lived." I think that's absolutely what's intended for the Christian life, and it's certainly what we believe as Methodists. Our faith isn't just a decision or a belief, but a way of life. We're always striving for holiness, for sanctification. It's a journey, a journey with Jesus, not a decision we make.

We might also put a lot of time and energy into atonement theory because it's complicated and we're just trying to understand it. To try to wrap up what happened on the cross into a neat theory is pretty much impossible. There are several great theories out there, and all of them have some merit, but none of us has been able to capture the power of the cross in a few words or sentences. That doesn't seem to stop us from trying, though!

Another possibility might be because Jesus' death tells us an awful lot about his life: that he lived a life of giving, self-sacrifice, and humility. So if we have to choose one, we can learn both about salvation/atonement and life/sanctification by studying Jesus' death.

The other thing is, Jesus' death and resurrection are absolutely essential to our faith. This is what sets Jesus apart from every other religious leader in our tradition. So it's not surprising that we put a lot of weight on what happened at the cross. But I am challenged now to spend a bit more time focusing on how Jesus lived, and what that says to me about how I should be living on this journey of faith.