

Questions and Responses 05.29.2011

Several times per year, instead of a traditional sermon, I like to collect questions from the congregation and respond to them during the sermon time on Sunday morning. The questions are always interesting, and are usually things that several people have been wondering about and just didn't think to ask! Below are some notes on some of the questions asked this time, but are not a transcript of what was said during church.

1. What kind of issues are appropriate about which to call the pastor: just spiritual questions? marriage? parenting?

You should call the pastor about anything about which you feel like you need to talk to someone, or about anything you think the pastor can be helpful. Our conversations will be confidential. I am not a licensed therapist and cannot do long-term psychological work, but can help you work through short-term issues, be a conversation partner, offer resources, and pray with you. I am always happy to discuss spiritual issues, relationship issues, health issues, ethical dilemmas, etc.

I *expect* you to call if there is a major emergency in your family.

You can also call me if you just want to get together and get to know each other better! There doesn't have to be a problem for us to talk.

2. Do we know what became of Mary, Jesus' mom, after the crucifixion?

John 19:26-27 says, "When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home." Then in Acts 1:14, Mary is with the other disciples when they are praying about who will replace Judas in the inner circle (Matthias), so we can trust that the beloved disciple *did* take Mary home and take care of her.

It isn't in the Bible, but Catholic tradition holds that Mary was assumed into heaven – taken up bodily; and that the mention of "a woman clothed with the sun" in Revelation 12 is Mary.

3. Why do non-Jewish people have their sons circumcised today? Does the church have a position on this issue?

There is no specific United Methodist Church statement (that I can find) on male circumcision, or specifically infant male circumcision. There are statements on baptism comparing the role of circumcision in history to the role that baptism plays now – it's an initiating rite into the community, so circumcision is replaced culturally and spiritually by baptism as a 3-way covenant between God, child, and community.

The UMC's statement on health and wholeness calls for the end of cultural practices such as female circumcision because of the pain and spread of infection.

Some reasons why Christian families would have babies circumcised today include:

- Cultural norm – or families wanting son’s genitalia to look like father’s
- Journal of the American Medical Association suggests circumcision can help stop the spread of STD’s, including HPV (areas where fewer men are circumcised have higher rates of cervical cancer caused by HPV) and HIV/AIDS in heterosexual couples
- There’s a worldwide belief that circumcision is cleaner, circumcised genitalia are easier to clean

Reasons not to:

- Violation of rights of the child
- Pain – only about half of US doctors use anesthesia when doing the procedure

This is a very controversial issue right now in the state of California, where a group is trying to outlaw infant circumcision, though it is required by the religious laws of Jewish and Muslim groups.

4. If you were baptized as a baby, should you be re-dedicated as an adult? Why don’t we have a more rigorous education required of both adults and children to join the church?

No one who has been baptized in a Christian church needs to be baptized again as a United Methodist, but we can do a liturgy to remember and reaffirm your baptism.

We baptized babies because we believe God is already working in their lives, and we want to affirm God’s grace in them even before they can acknowledge God themselves; that’s the difference between infant-baptism churches and adult-baptism churches. So others might dedicate a baby and then have a baptism when that baby is 12 or so and decides that s/he wants to be a Christian; we do baptism straight away, and the community makes a promise on behalf of the child.

Our process is that baptism is the first step and **confirmation** is the second step. Most UM churches do confirmation between 11 and 14 – usually starting in 6th grade (maybe too early, in my opinion). This is a preparation period to teach young people whatever they might need to know to make an informed decision about whether or not they are ready to claim the faith as their own. It’s very serious; we will not take it lightly.

Our own process will start this fall and go for many weeks – classes, mentors, field trips – to learn about our faith and get students ready to decide whether or not they want to be confirmed. This is open to everyone over the minimum age limit, but is designed for young people. If folks are interested in adult confirmation, we can do something like this geared toward adults...

5. Is there a master guide to the Methodist calendar somewhere?

There’s no official “Methodist” calendar except the UM program calendar, which outlines special offerings and designated Sundays (which are many). Otherwise, we

follow the Revised Common Lectionary, available online or in books. Our church doesn't always follow the lectionary, we do follow the seasons:

- Advent (4 Sundays before Christmas) –
- Christmas/Epiphany –
- Epiphany Ordinary Time –
- Ash Wednesday/Lent/Holy Week –
- Easter –
- Pentecost –
- Ordinary Time

6. Where do you draw the line between what rules in the Bible are to be followed and which ones can be disregarded as outdated?

We talked about this some in the fall when we did the “When Christians Get It Wrong” series – but first off, I don't think we can read the Bible as a list of individual rules without making a lot of mistakes. We have to read the whole arc of Scripture and interpret it in light of itself.

Second, Jesus says the primary rule is to love God and love your neighbor. Those things are guides to all other questions and rules.

Some of the stuff that's mentioned in the Bible that's become routine or acceptable probably shouldn't be – adultery and divorce, for example – those shouldn't be routine things. In part, because when people get married in the church, the church promises to uphold them in their vows, and we don't often take that promise seriously enough.

Nothing should be “disregarded as outdated”, but everything should be read in light of the grace of Christ.

7. How did the Methodist church begin?

John and Charles Wesley were Anglican priests who wanted the church to be more than it was; they led a lively renewal movement throughout the Church of England. John and Charles came to America as missionaries to the colony of Georgia but didn't stay long and weren't super-successful, in part because of John's social faux pas. Lay preachers were sent to America to work in the colonies, including Francis Asbury – but these were still Anglican laypeople, and they simply worked as laypeople in the Anglican churches in America.

Then the American Revolution happened, when tensions with the Anglican church increased; Wesley ordained four men to administer sacraments in America – in 1784 in Baltimore they organized the Methodist Episcopal Church in America. During the first half of the 19th century, the second great awakening, churches grew and the MEC founded colleges and seminaries.

In 1844, conflict over slavery (and other things) split the MEC into Methodist Episcopal Church and MEC, South. 1939, the MEC South, the MEC, and the Methodist Protestant Church united to become The Methodist Church. 1968, The Methodist Church united with the Evangelical United Brethren (a union of the Evangelical Church and the United Brethren Church) to become the United Methodist Church.

There are always questions about other religions and whether non-Christians will go to heaven:

There are a million views on this. My own view is simply that we don't know how far God will go or how persistent God will be in retrieving all people into God's kingdom. I prefer to focus on God's grace and the work we are called to do now rather than what will happen in the afterlife. And this is too big a question to answer in just a couple of minutes!

There were several questions about the Trinity:

The Trinity is too big to respond to in just a few minutes, too! The Methodist articles of religion state, "There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body or parts, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness; the maker and preserver of all things, both visible and invisible. And in unity of this Godhead there are three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost." This is about as succinct an explanation as we have. The Trinity is one of the toughest concepts in Christian theology, so don't fret if you don't totally understand it!

One important thing to remember is that all three parts of the Trinity do all parts of God's work: creating, redeeming, sustaining. To say that each member of the Trinity has one of those jobs is a heresy called modalism – that's essentially saying we have three Gods, not one Triune God. Don't let the "Father" language throw you off. We'll talk more about this later.