

Questions and Responses  
11.13.2011

*Please note that the questions below were posed by parishioners over a number of weeks prior to the 11/13/2011 worship services; responses below represent the opinions of the pastor, Rev. Elizabeth Ingram Schindler, and do not necessarily represent the opinions of Browns Point UMC or the United Methodist Church.*

**1. Why in our creeds (example, p. 7 or p. 881) do we affirm belief in “the communion of saints”? What saints are we talking about exactly? How do Methodists have saints?**

When we say “communion of saints,” we are not talking about people who have been officially made saints by the Roman Catholic Church. When Methodists say, “the communion of saints,” we mean the church, which is made up of all Christian disciples from past, present, and future. We use the term much more broadly than the Catholic church does. For us it just means “a Christian believer.”

That brings up the use of the term “holy catholic church” in our creed – it’s catholic with a little “c,” which just means, “Universal.” We believe that, despite our denominations and our divisions, we are all one church, one body of Christ. That’s what we mean by “catholic” (little “c”). In the same way, we might refer to our faith as “orthodox,” with just means “what’s traditionally and generally accepted as right and true.” This is not the same as “Orthodox” with a big “O,” which refers to a particular tradition (or set of traditions) in Christianity.

**2. We have an example of Jesus getting angry, when he overturns the money-changer’s tables in the temple. Do we have any evidence of God having a sense of humor?**

One approach is to say that since we are all created in the image of God, all of us are evidence that God has a sense of humor if any of us have a sense of humor. We’re fashioned after God, so whatever we have, God must have, too. That’s sort of a backward way of looking at it, though.

And lots of people would say, “God has a great sense of humor – just tell God what your plans are and God will laugh...”

There are certainly incidents in the Bible where God might be being funny – there’s one spot in 1 Kings where God strikes all the Philistines with hemorrhoids, for example. But it’s important to remember that humor is almost always contextual, so if Jesus made a joke in the New Testament, there’s a good chance we wouldn’t understand what he was talking about, or the translation would ruin the joke, or it just wouldn’t be funny to us anymore.

One thing that’s clear throughout the Bible is that God intends us to live lives of joy – so perhaps that’s the closest thing we get.

**3. How did the idea of tithing become linked with 10% of your income?**

The “10%” rule comes from the Old Testament, where the people of Israel were required to give God a tenth of their goods or harvest: they were to give the firstfruits of the harvest (the best, not the leftovers), and one out of every ten animals, generally the firstborn of every flock.

Jesus did not specify that his followers should give 10% of their income to the church, and this number isn’t given in the New Testament at all, but we can assume that the folks in the early church *knew* that a tithe was 10%, because they had already been studying the Hebrew Scriptures.

What's more, in the New Testament, you can actually argue that 10% *or more* is expected. Paul instructed the early churches to give proportionally (according to their income), but most of the language around giving doesn't limit it to 10% - it simply asks people to be generous, as God has been generous with us.

#### **4. Can you speak more in detail about the apocalyptic books in the Bible and what they might have to say to us about the end times?**

Last week I said that the book of Revelation wasn't meant for us – and I stand by that. It was written to the 7 churches in Asia Minor, and while it does talk some about the end of time, it does so primarily in metaphor, and the writers *and readers* of the book expected Jesus to return during their lifetime. So the events they were writing about were not meant to be used as checklists for us or ways to determine if Jesus is coming back soon or not; in fact, almost all of the images can be connected directly to the Roman Empire of that day. The New Testament is clear that nobody knows the day or hour when Jesus will return. Nobody. So I don't think we can use any ancient writing to try to predict when that will happen.

Revelation is considered an “apocalyptic” book, because it does have this language about what we refer to as the “end times,” when life as we know it will give way to an eternal future. Daniel is an Old Testament book that's also considered “apocalyptic.” The word “apocalyptic” comes from the Greek *apokálypsis*, which means “lifting of the veil,” or revealing something that has been hidden. It's a whole genre of writing that is difficult for us to understand, because it's unlike anything that we have going on today. The important thing is to *read* these books but not *read into* them.

I think I'm going to leave it at that, and perhaps one of our upcoming FaithGroups will focus on Revelation and/or Daniel for folks who want to study this in more detail.

#### **5. Does it really matter if you attend church if you feel like you have a good relationship with God?**

Yes. 😊

For one thing, we're called not just to “feel like we have a good relationship with God,” but to grow in both our understanding of God and our likeness of Christ. The primary ways that we do that are through what our denominations' founder, John Wesley, called “the means of grace:” things like corporate worship, Scripture study, prayer, and participating in the sacraments. While it's possible to do some of those things by yourself, it's unlikely that you will grow very much in understanding or likeness without others to challenge you, hold you accountable, and encourage you.

We might also take Jesus' “greatest commandment” to love God and love your neighbor to heart, and think about how we can do this *best*. Can we love our neighbors by ourselves? Of course. But do we each have every gift to transform the world in love on our own? Not at all. So the church is the place where the body of believers comes together to share their uniqueness, all participating in different ways and pooling their energy and resources so that transformation is more likely. And, we are always called to share the good news and invite others into relationship with God, not simply to be content with our own spiritual lives. As soon as we invite new people in, we're not solo anymore, even if what we're doing isn't officially called a “church.” As a United Methodist, I also believe that the local church is the primary representation of Christ's body in the

world, even if it's broken. It's our primary locus for ministry. It's the place we can meet and know and understand God *best*, when we are willing to engage in it.

Last, I'd say that like any relationship, your relationship with God isn't always going to be good. It'll rise and fall, ebb and flow. This is not because God disappears or moves away from us, but because we move away from God. When this happens, it's important to have a community that can remind us why getting back in touch with God is important, and to support and encourage us until we come from doubt into faith again.

## **6. What are your thoughts on the devil, evil, and how it all connects?**

This is a difficult, and honestly kind of uncomfortable question for me. There are references throughout Scripture to a "devil" of some kind, though what that entity looks like is unclear. I don't think that there's a guy with a pitchfork out to get us, and I don't necessarily believe in spiritual warfare, wherein God and the devil are constantly fighting over each person's heart, and we have to take sides to see who will win. The Resurrection of Jesus tells us that God wins in the end, love wins in the end, so the idea that we're engaged in a battle between good and evil doesn't carry much weight for me, though I know it's a meaningful and helpful metaphor for a lot of Christians.

I have to acknowledge, though, that evil exists in the world, and it's evident every day in the sin that surrounds and sometimes overtakes us. I believe that evil is anything that separates us from God; or anything that distorts God's plan for creation. This takes shape in personal ways: when people's hearts are so twisted that it's difficult to see the reflection of the Creator in them; or it may be social or systemic, which we see in racism, sexism, poverty, violence, oppression, destruction of the environment, etc.

In our liturgy, our "standard" prayer of confession says, "We have sinned against you in thought, word and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone." To me that says that we participate in evil sometimes out of choice and sometimes out of lack of attention or care. But when we pray the Lord's prayer, "Deliver us from evil," we also acknowledge that evil isn't the final word – that sin doesn't have a stronger hold on us than God does, and that we can be delivered into Resurrection life.

## **7. Thinking about the book, *The DaVinci Code*, is it possible that Jesus had a secret wife or children?**

Is it possible? Sure. Is it likely? I don't really think so. It seems like if Jesus *did* share his life with particular people other than the disciples, that would have been used as an example to all of us, not hidden away and pretended it didn't exist. Also, there was nothing that Jesus put ahead of being faithful to his/God's plan, and I think that all of us that find ourselves wrapped up in long-term relationships or parenting relationships are at risk of putting our families ahead of God – so perhaps Jesus stayed single as a way to make sure that he was always putting the right things first. Tough to say.

Maybe a more interesting question is, "Does it matter if Jesus did or didn't have a wife and/or children?" I'm not sure it does. God made us to be in covenant relationship with one another, and Jesus was in a kind of covenant with his disciples, similar to the way religious orders function now – so it's not like he was saying we shouldn't share our lives with people by being single. And since Jesus clearly agreed that sex as a part of marriage is a holy and good thing, I

don't think it's important that he never had a child. But maybe you have other thoughts on this. It's obviously an interesting idea, or things like *The DaVinci Code* wouldn't have been so popular.

#### **8. Do you have to believe in the virgin birth and/or the Christmas story to be a Christian?**

I will say that my answer to this question has changed since I moved to the northwest – because when I lived in the south I didn't know anyone who didn't believe in the Christmas story or the virgin birth (except a couple of Jewish people), so it never entered my mind to ask this question. But here's what I think now:

First, I'm not sure that what you *believe* necessarily makes you a Christian. I think your desire to follow Jesus Christ and be a disciple of Christ, living your life in love of God and neighbor, growing in righteousness and justice, makes you a Christian; and engaging in both belief and action on the journey to holiness makes you a United Methodist.

That being said, there are certainly parameters around beliefs that are classified as "Christian," and even "United Methodist," though the UMC allows for a good bit of diversity in its ranks. And one of the things that Christians have believed for centuries is that Jesus was both God and man, fully human and fully divine. Now to be fully human, he had to be born, so at least that much of the Christmas story had to be true. And it doesn't make much sense for him to be divine if he's conceived by anyone other than the Holy Spirit. And frankly, if Mary isn't a virgin, it isn't all that convincing to say, "This particular baby was conceived by the Holy Spirit, not by my boyfriend, Joseph." So I think the virgin birth and the Christmas story are directly related to belief that Jesus is God, and not just a great role model; and of course, it's necessary for Jesus to be God if we're going to believe that Jesus saves us, that we can't save ourselves... but that gets into kind of a circular argument.

So there's my answer: to be a Christian, do you have to believe in the virgin birth? No, but if you're growing in the Christian faith, following Jesus, I think you probably will believe it at some point.

#### **9. How does the church's use of metrics/numbers on attendance, etc. fit with Jesus' call to "go and make disciples"? Did Jesus count heads?**

There's lots of debate about counting in the church – whether this is real faithfulness, whether numbers indicate real spiritual growth, etc. – and we've talked about this some in the last year at Browns Point. Obviously numbers can't tell the whole story – they can't tell the condition of people's hearts, or how we've grown in righteousness or justice. And getting more people and/or more money in the church isn't *necessarily* a sign of faithfulness: it might be a sign that you have a great marketing campaign and you're feeding the people what they want to hear.

*But*, I believe that if we are being faithful to our call, we will grow, and this will show up in the numbers. We'll grow in righteousness, we'll grow in justice, and we'll help to expand God's kingdom. The church council has been talking about this a lot this last year using the term, "fruitfulness": we are called to bear fruit, not just to be happy with ourselves or feel like we're exceptionally holy people.

*And*, it looks to me like Jesus *did* count heads: in fact, he said every single "lost sheep" was important enough to leave 99 to go look for it. There are regular reports of how many people were present at Jesus' sermons and miracles, and regular reports of numbers in the early church in Acts. So I don't think it's *wrong* to look at numbers, as long as that's not the only thing we're after.