

March 28, 2012
Questions for Lent and Easter

The Priority Question
John 12:1-11

Opening Words: John Simone Sr. once said, "*The key to wisdom is knowing all the right questions.*" I think he is correct. Even without answers, questions have value. After all, what is a question? A question is nothing more than a request for more information. Only fools think they know everything. How many questions have you asked lately? Jesus asked twenty questions in the Gospel of John. Those questions are the foundation of my newest sermon series, *Questions for Lent and Easter*. Each one is an excellent question because each one is timeless.

This evening we find ourselves in the twelfth chapter of John. There is a direct connection between Sunday morning's reading and this evening's reading. Once again, the main characters in the story are Mary and Martha. They owed him a great deal. Do you remember? Jesus has just resurrected their brother, Lazarus. How do you thank someone for resurrecting your dead brother? They did it by inviting Jesus over for supper. It is during that meal the topic for this evening is illustrated. Let me call this evening's message *The Priority Question*. May God give you ears to hear our Gospel lesson, John 12:1-11.

John 12:1-11 1 Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. 2 Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. 3 Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. 4 But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, 5 "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." 6 He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it. 7 "Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. 8 You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me." 9 Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 10 So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, 11 for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and believing in him.

March 2, 2012 will be remembered as one of the most violent weather days in the history of our country. There were 140 tornados sighted that day, 76 confirmed landings. Thirty-nine people were killed. We prayed for all the lives that were changed that day, but we were inspired by one, Stephanie Decker. Perhaps you remember her story. She is a 37 year old wife and mother, who lived in

Henryville, Indiana. It was like a living nightmare. A tornado slammed into her home. With no other option, she acted like a human shield and lay on top of her children to protect them. The good news is, everyone survived. The bad news is, Stephanie lost both legs, one above the knee, one below the knee. They were her children. It is a sacrifice she said she would make again. Can anyone here question her love for her children? Can anyone question this woman's priorities? Can anyone question your priorities?

At the very heart of this evening's Gospel lesson is the issue of priorities. According to the text, it is six days before the Passover. Jesus is in Bethany. Jerusalem and Bethany are geographically close, about two miles. It just so happened, Jesus has friends who live in Bethany - Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Jesus has an open invitation to their home. However, this time Jesus has a formal invitation to their home. The women want to thank Jesus for resurrecting their brother, so they hold a dinner in Jesus' honor. Jesus never traveled alone. He brings the twelve.

The event is going off as planned. Everyone is having a wonderful time. Martha is serving, and Lazarus is reclining at the table. It is Mary who does the unexpected. She takes a pint of perfume nard and pours it on Jesus' feet, wiping it with her hair. Her actions are odd for two reasons. First, usually someone's head was anointed, not their feet. Second, Hebrew women never unwrapped their hair in public. Regardless, the house is filled with the odor of that sweet perfume. Everyone seems to handle the anointing except for one of the disciples, Judas Iscariot. He would have made the perfect church member in the twenty-first century. He protests and says money is being wasted! After all, a penny saved is a penny earned. The very least they could have done is sold the nard and given the money to the poor. Jesus deflects his criticism and applauds Mary for her priorities. Do you think Jesus would applaud you for your priorities?

This evening I want to talk about your priorities. You are a disciple of Jesus Christ. Do the priorities in your life reflect your devotion to Jesus? Do your priorities reflect your devotion to something else? Mary revealed her priority when she poured the perfume on the feet of Jesus. Your priorities are probably more guarded. However, your priorities are just as important. So let me ask you three straightforward questions this evening. This is the first question. Is Jesus a priority in your life? This is the second question. Are the holy habits a priority in your life? This is the third and final question. Is love as a way of life a priority in your life? Once again, I am going to ask you to answer those questions in your heart. These questions are not original. I have borrowed these three questions from James W. Moore, who was the pastor of the St. Luke's United Methodist Church in Houston, Texas. If you are ready to answer those questions for yourself say, "**Amen!**"

Jesus

Several weeks ago, my daughter, Sarah, called me. She is the Director of Christian Education at the Hudson United Methodist Church. She had a problem. One of her responsibilities at her church is to teach their confirmation class. One of the girls in the class has a friend, who was Muslim. The topic of salvation came up and the girl wanted

to know about her friend's salvation. She was concerned her Muslim friend wasn't going to heaven. That triggered a debate within the class. She called me and said, "Dad, I don't what to say. I know we are only saved by Jesus, but I don't want to look narrow-minded. I don't want her friend to go to hell." I said, "Sarah, let me say two things. First, we are not to judge. God is in charge of the final judgment. God will judge as he pleases. Second, you are in a difficult spot. You work in a Christian church and you are paid to teach them Christian theology. What does the Bible say? The Bible says the one thing that separates the Christian from the rest of the world is the resurrection of Jesus. You never have to apologize for Jesus." She ended by saying, "Dad, I want the kids to like me." I said, "Sarah, what is more important to you, being liked or being respected?" It isn't just Sarah's question. It is a question for each one of us. Do you want to be liked? Do you want to be respected?

Our world is getting smaller all the time. Our country is getting more diverse all the time. There was a time when Christianity dominated America. One hundred and fifty years ago, everyone was a Christian. America is different today. Everyone in this room knows a non-Christian. We are just like the girl in the confirmation class. We like our non-Christian friends and we don't want them to go to hell. I don't want to look narrow-minded and I want to be liked. However, our opinions do not change Christian theology. The resurrection of Jesus makes us different from the rest of the world. Do you remember Romans 10:9? Many believe it is the first creed in the church. *If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*" I am comfortable saying this next line. If you don't declare and if you don't believe in the resurrection of Jesus, then you won't be saved. What is more important to you, being liked, or being respected? If Jesus is a priority in your life, say, **"Amen!"**

The Holy Habits

Dr. Earnest Campbell tells the story of a woman who went to a pet store and bought a talking parrot. She placed the bird in a bird cage and waited for the bird to start talking. However, the bird didn't say a word, so the next day she returned to the pet store to complain. The store owner recommended she buy a mirror. Parrots love to preen themselves as they talk. She bought a mirror and placed it in the cage. However, the parrot still didn't talk. She returned to the pet store again to complain about her non-talking parrot. This time the store owner recommended she buy a ladder. Maybe running up and down the ladder will stimulate the bird to talk? She bought a ladder, took it home and placed it in the cage. After a day the bird still didn't say a word, so she returned to the pet store again. The pet store owner said, "I don't understand. Why don't we try a swing?" She bought a swing and once again placed it in the cage. Once again, the bird didn't talk. The next day, the woman returned to the pet store and said to the owner, "You aren't going to believe what happened! The parrot died!" The store owner looked at the woman and asked, "Did the bird say anything before he died?" The woman said, "Yes! He said, 'Doesn't that pet store sell any food?'"

Are the holy habits a priority in your life? Do you remember them? They are: prayer,

meditation, Bible study and fasting. They are the spiritual foods that keep us growing spiritually. If you don't practice those holy habits, then you will be just as successful as the dead parrot in the cage. How much time do you spend practicing the holy habits? Are the holy habits a priority in your life? If you could do a little better, say, **"Amen!"**

Love as a Way of Life

In the tenth chapter of Mark is the story of the rich, young ruler. You know the story. I have looked at it in the past. He had everything. He was rich, so he could buy anything he wanted. He was young, so he had his health. He didn't have to worry about taking his pills on time, because he wasn't taking pills. He was a ruler, which means he had influence. He had everything but the most important thing, salvation! He goes to Jesus and asks the Master this question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Do you remember how Jesus responds? He asks him if he had followed six of the Ten Commandments:

1. Do not murder
2. Do not commit adultery
3. Do not steal
4. Do not bear false witness
5. Do not defraud
6. Honor your father and mother

Jesus asks only about those six commandments; he does not ask about the other four. The other four commandments deal with our relationship with God. (No others gods, no idols, don't misuse the name of God, keep the Sabbath) Why didn't Jesus ask about those four? What is Jesus trying to say? Jesus knew the best way to love God is to love other people. When I first accepted Jesus as my Lord and Savior, I wanted to hug God. Then I learned the best way to love God was to love his people. The parable of the sheep and the goats deals with judgment. (Matthew 25:31-46) To those who find favor with God, these words are spoken: *"Whatever you did for the least of these my brothers, you did for me."* How concerned are you about the needs of others? Is love as a way of life a priority in your life? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

One of the most magnificent structures in the world is the cathedral in Milan, Italy. It is such a large structure, there are three front doors. Each door leads to a different aisle in the sanctuary. Over the arch, of one of the side doors is a carved wreath of roses, and underneath it is the legend, "All that which pleases is but for a moment." Over the arch of another side door is sculptured a cross, and there are the words, "All that which troubles us is but for a moment." But underneath the great central entrance to the main aisle is the inscription, "That only is important which is eternal." I think there is a lesson there for us! I have said it a million times.

The only things that really matter in life are those things that are going to matter in one hundred years. What is going to matter in one hundred years? Jesus! How much of a priority is Jesus to you? Will you please pray with me?