

February 17, 2013

Questions for Questionable Times

Where is God?

John 14:1-9

Opening words:

We live in questionable times. If you don't believe me, then just examine your favorite news outlet. The stories are overwhelming. Pollution is becoming more than an annoyance. Global warming is causing major weather issues. The world's population keeps growing and world hunger is a reality. The United States does not exist in isolation. Our country is facing some tremendous issues. Everyone has strong opinions about gun control, immigration and our national debt. It appears our country is divided between the red states and the blue states. Our politicians seem to be more interested in being elected to office than serving our country. The picture is not pretty. Everyone is restless because we live in questionable times. It is painfully clear. Going back to the past is not an option, but the path to the future seems unclear. Maybe that is why so many are searching for God? Maybe this is why so many people are asking spiritual questions?

Several years ago, East Ohio Resident Bishop John Hopkins reminded us of the "new normal". People no longer trust the church to answer their spiritual questions. That revelation has changed the way I have done my job. In short, I have gone back to the basics. People don't care about church customs and traditions. People just don't care what scholars, denominational leaders and preachers have to say. People don't care about my educational or denominational accreditation. Those things make me less creditable in the eyes of many. The only thing people do care about is Jesus and Biblical teachings.

This is sermon number one in my seven-part sermon series, *Questions for Questionable Times*. We are going to be looking at some basic questions people are asking. This is our question for today: *Where is God?* The answer to the question comes from today's Gospel lesson, John 14:1-9. May God gift you ears to hear.

John 14:1-9

¹ "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. ² My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. ⁴ You know the way to the place where I am going." ⁵ Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" ⁶ Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him." ⁸ Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us."

⁹ Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"

We begin this sermon series in the fourteenth chapter of John. Usually, you hear the background of this text on more sober days. Do you remember these words? For some time Jesus had been telling the disciples that he was going to be leaving and for some time they hadn't listened. Advertisers tells us we need to hear something seven times before we hear it the first time. That is why we grow tired of watching the same commercial over and over again. Do you have someone in your life that needs to hear something more than once before they hear it the first time? Don't be hard on that person. They are just like the disciples. For some reason, this time the disciples heard it; Jesus is leaving and they are upset. They are like young children whose parents are going out on a Saturday night. They want to know if they can go. They want to know who is going to stay with them. Jesus recognizes their concern and tries to comfort them. The Master says this is not the end. This is just a momentary separation. Someday, they are going to be reunited. That will be one great day! They will all be together and they will be living in perfection. Each one will have their own mansion. They heard what Jesus was saying, but they have some doubts. Two disciples respond in two different ways. Thomas admits his ignorance. He doesn't even know where Jesus is going. Phillip demands proof. In verse eight Phillips says, "*Show us the father and that will be enough for us.*"

His request is not so absurd. You can't really blame him. Everything about his life is about to change. Jesus is leaving! He spent three years with Jesus. He walked with Jesus. He talked to Jesus. He ate with Jesus. He sacrificed for Jesus. All of his dreams revolved around Jesus and now he hears Jesus is leaving. He will be alone and everything is about to change. He is not different from us. Going back to the past is not an option and the path to the future seems unclear. With his insecurities on display for the entire world to see, he says, "*Show us the father and that will be enough for us.*" Has anyone here ever wanted to see God? The answer is YES!

So this is my question for you today: where do you look for God? There are four ways people experience God. Maybe you have used them? Does anyone look for God in the **spectacular**? That is how I want to experience God, wide screen Technicolor. Does anyone here look for God at a specific **location**? For example, we come to the altar to pray. Does anyone here look for God among the **perfect**? How can you question the experience of God when the fall leaves are at their peak? In the text for today, Jesus is encouraging us to look for God in the hearts of men and women who serve others. The word is sacrifice? Has anyone ever experienced God while looking at you? Elbert Hubbard once said, "*God will not look you over for medals, degrees or diplomas, but for scars.*" If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**"

Spectacular

Are you looking for God in the spectacular? That is how Philip wanted to experience God. Philip said, "Show us the father and then we will believe." That verse is relating back to the transfiguration. Do you remember the story? Peter has just identified Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus takes the inner circle to the top of the mountain. It is at that location that Jesus is transfigured. In other words, Jesus begins to glow. It is at that location that the two greatest characters of the Old Testament appear, Moses and Elijah. Moses was the great law giver. Elijah was considered the greatest of the prophets. The climax of the story is when God appears. Only four of the twelve disciples have that experience. The other eight get the information second hand. Philip got the information second hand and felt left out. Philip said, "Show us the father and we will believe." In other words, he wants to have a spectacular experience with God too. Is there anyone here who wants to experience in a spectacular way? The answer is YES!

People are hungry to experience God in a spectacular way. That is why people study their toasted cheese sandwich for the face of Jesus. That is why people find the image of the Virgin Mary in their baked potato. That is why people see the image of the last supper in a rusting water tower. That is why people are spotting the parting of the Red Sea in the clouds. We are hungry for God and we are looking for him in spectacular ways. We want God to do something spectacular because we need proof that God is in control. Are you looking for God in the spectacular? And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

Location

Are you looking for God in a specific location? Lakeside is an old Methodist retreat center on the Marblehead peninsula. For decades, people have gone to Lakeside for family vacations and spiritual renewals. Lakeside is filled with many things, but the one everyone knows is the chapel in the woods. It is not fancy, but it is sacred. I can't tell you how many young people have accepted Christ at that location. I can tell you what one man said to me. He said, "Russ, I want to go back to the chapel in the woods to see if God is waiting there for me." Do you have a place in your life where God is waiting for you? The answer is YES!

In the Christian tradition, we go to the altar because it is at the altar we expect to experience God. Just think about it for a moment. We reserve the most sacred things in our lives for the altar. We pray about our problems at the altar. We get married at the altar. We baptize our young at the altar. We bury our dead at the altar. We beg God for peace at the altar during life's most challenging chapters. When you come to the altar you just don't hope to experience God. You expect to experience God! Are you looking for God in a specific location? And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

Perfection

Are you looking for God in the perfect? You know it is true. God created this beautiful world out of absolutely nothing. God's fingerprints are seen at every corner.

How can you question the experience of God when you look at the perfection of creation? How can you question the existence of God when you see the leaves in full color during an Ohio autumn? How can you question the existence of God when the spring flowers bloom after a cold dark winter? How can you question the existence of God when you are walking on the beach? How can you question the existence of God when the snow is fresh and everything is white? How can you question the existence of God when you stand on top of a mountain and soak in the view? How can you question the existence of God when the sun is setting or rising on a clear day? How can you question the existence of God when a falling star shoots across the sky? How can you question the existence of God when you look at the perfection of creation?

How can you question the existence of God when your relationships are perfect? How can you question the existence of God when an old friend calls you at just the right time? How did they know you were feeling down? How can you question the existence of God when your spouse looks at you and you communicate without saying a word? How can you question the existence of God when you find yourself proud of your children? Maybe you did something right after all? How can you question the existence of God when you discover your parents are proud of you? How can you question the existence of God when the entire church is praying just for you? It is at those times you are experiencing perfection. Have you ever looked for God in the perfect? And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**" You can experience God in the spectacular, in a certain location and in perfection. However, there is one more way to experience God. It may be the most common way of all.

Sacrifice

I want to end this message with a confession. Last Wednesday was Ash Wednesday. I should have been here leading worship. Instead, I was at the Consol Energy Center attending the Pittsburgh Penguins – Ottawa Senators hockey game. I wanted to go to the game but I also had to go to the game. Have you heard the story? For the past four weeks, a thirteen-year old Russian boy by the name of Kolya has been living at my house. He came to America to receive something he couldn't get in Russia, prosthetic legs. I have never been prouder of my wife, Kathryn. She has been working hard to get him his new limbs and enjoy his visits. His trip was successful because of a handful of wonderful volunteers. On that list of wonderful supporters are Sergei and Ksenia Gonchar. They met Kolya while Sergei played for the Penguins several years ago. He is now playing for the Senators. When the Senators came to Pittsburgh the other night, Sergei wanted to meet Kolya. Kathryn and I had to make sure that happened because Sergei and Ksenia sacrificed for Kolya. They gave \$6300 to make Kolya's legs a reality.

Kolya and Sergei met when the game was over. We were taken to the lower levels of the stadium. We waited in a hallway for a few minutes. I tried to take in all the sights because I knew I would never be back. Kathryn noticed him first. Sergei was walking down the hall with last year's NHL MVP Milkin, also Russian. When the men got to us, they spoke to Kolya quietly in their native tongue.

I don't know what they said, but I know Kolya liked it. He smiled. The next few minutes were filled with autographs and pictures. Finally, Kathryn asked Sergei if he wanted to see the legs. She lifted up Kolya's pant legs and exposed those cold metal pipes. Sergei smiled and did something I will never forget. He reached down and pulled his pant legs down to protect Kolya's dignity. He thanked Kathryn for her important work. Then, it was over. Kolya flew back home on Friday. Today, Kolya is not sitting in a wheelchair or scooting on the floor. Instead, he is walking on his own legs. That was made possible because of the important work of my wife. I have never been prouder of her.

As I reflect back on those four weeks with Kolya, I hope he had a good time in America. However, what I really hope is that Kolya experienced God. He had that opportunity. When he looked at Sergei he wasn't just looking at an international athlete. He wasn't just looking at a professional hockey player. Kolya got to see the face of God. That is what Jesus told us in the text for today. Jesus told Phillip he had been with God the entire time. When he was looking at Jesus, he was looking at God. It isn't just a Trinitarian issue. It is very practical. Jesus treated everyone with dignity and respect. Jesus sacrificed so others could have a better life. That is what Sergei did for Kolya. I have to ask this question:

Has anyone ever seen God while looking at you? Do you treat everyone with dignity and respect? Are you willing to sacrifice something so others may have a better life? Where is God? It is true. Sometimes, we experience God in **spectacular** ways. Check out your lunch! Sometimes, we experience God in some sacred **location**. We come to the altar to pray. Sometimes, we experience God in the **perfect**. Sometimes, people experience God through us. Do you treat everyone with dignity and respect? Are you willing to **sacrifice** something so others can have a better life? Jesus said it best. Jesus said, *"Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father."* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**