

**Matthew 21:23 - 32**  
**Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 21A**  
**October 1, 2023**  
**The Rev. Katherine Bush**

Whether or not there are dumb questions, there are a lot of different kinds of questions: trick questions, rhetorical questions, questions born from genuine curiosity, questions that beg more questions, multiple-choice questions. There are three questions in this quick gospel encounter. The chief priests lead off with a question of credentialing, their version of "Who do you think you are?" And Jesus responds with a question that is essentially a trap, meeting his accusers - who don't seem curious at all, but rather defensive - with a question that will allow him to deflect. This back-and-forth is basically a game of gotcha. As such, we'd be forgiven for being entertained but not intrigued or inspired by this first part of the story. Not unlike so much that fills our news feeds these days.

It's the question that follows the story about two sons that is worth our attention. "A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" This isn't a hard question. Which one did the will of his father? The one who did something. It's almost a gimme instead of a gotcha. What the father is looking for is someone to do the work, not someone who talks about the work.

The French philosopher Voltaire suggested that we ought to judge a person by their questions rather than their answers. Some other folks did some gospel math and determined that Jesus is asked somewhere around 180 questions but answered fewer than 10. Some say eight and some say three. It seems to depend on what you call an answer: you may recall that his answers were often stories that begged more questions. Beyond that slim ratio, Jesus himself asked over three hundred questions. This calculus suggests that we might make ourselves more at home with questions, learning to sit with the gray and complex and with the challenging. Because even an easy question like "Which child did the will of his father" leads to another more difficult question: which child are you? Which child am I? Our willingness to let these ancient stories nudge at us, poke at us, and even interrogate us is what faithful engagement is all about.

Yesterday, we gathered out in Calvary Park to bless our companion animals in honor of St. Francis' feast day, coming up on Wednesday. And as part of that liturgy, we read Mary Oliver's poem, "Some Questions You Might Ask," a poem that is really a series of questions about the soul: its shape, location, and who gets to have one. This lovely poem about creatures and their inherent soulfulness often prompts me to wonder what questions I am asking these days. Are they questions meant to put others on the spot and simultaneously elevate me? Are they questions about the simple logistics of the day and not invitations to hear how the people around me are really doing? Grocery and calendar questions are essential, but if I'm not also asking bigger questions then I know I'm missing out and maybe

even missing the point. I need, we need to be reminded to take time to wonder about the big things. What are some questions I might ask?

If we turned it around so that the prompt was “Some Questions Jesus Might Ask,” we’d be met with a stream of queries: What do you want me to do for you? Do you see this woman? Who by worrying can add a single day to their life? What were you arguing about on the way? Why did you doubt? Who do you say that I am? Do you love me? Maybe we should be glad for the relative ease of today’s “Which child did the right thing?” Yet, allowing the question to move from an ancient parable to a question about the shape of my faith can still bring me up short. On the surface, it’s a question not so different from household queries about whose turn it is to unload the dishwasher, but ultimately, it’s a question asking you and me about whether or not our love and faithfulness can be seen by our actions, not just our words. Are you just talking about the vineyard work or are you out in the vineyard with dirt in your fingernails and maybe an ache in your back?

In all the banter, storytelling, arguing, and examinations, Jesus offers at least two clear messages: the first is a comfort, even a delight with the questions. He is unafraid of asking questions that provoke and challenge and then leaving them to be held open-ended, not answered with clarity and concision. The second is that all the banter, storytelling, arguing, and examinations will finally recede to the background of the action - that is a call to action, to move our bodies out into the vineyard, into the world to show what we believe, as the old prayer says, not only with our lips but with our lives.

As with so many parables that Jesus tells, the question at the end of the story is more than, “Which of the two did the will of the father?” The question that lies at the heart of the matter even thousands of years later is, which one are we?