

## Key Questions

Let's begin this time together with a question. Have you ever noticed that in the gospels, Jesus asks a lot of questions? His questions make us think. And we try our best to answer them. But many times, the answers we come up with lead to still more questions.

A couple of years ago, several Fairfield Circuit church members participated in a study based on a book entitled *United Methodist Questions, United Methodist Answers*. When Belton Joyner wrote that book, he did a marvelous job of providing answers in everyday language to questions on the beliefs and theology of our Church. But at the conclusion of each of his answers was yet another question. Maybe that was the author's point. In our continual seeking, in all of our strivings to know God more clearly, there are always going to be more questions than answers. We keep on asking questions.

Preachers like to ask questions too. Before I became a pastor, I was a layperson. On Sundays, I sat in a pew. And listened. When, in his sermon, the preacher asked a lot of

questions, was it because he didn't have all the answers? Do you know *anybody* who has all the answers?

Maybe the preacher asked questions because he didn't want his listeners to forget the message as soon as they pulled out of the church parking lot. I think pastors hope that members of the congregation will remember. That they'll go home and reflect on what they've heard. And that during the week, they might even wrestle a bit with some of those questions.

In today's reading from Matthew's Gospel, Jesus has some questions for his disciples. And the setting where he asks these questions is significant. Jesus and the twelve are in a region north of the Sea of Galilee. They're in Caesarea Philippi—a Roman fortress near the site of a grand white marble temple built to honor Caesar. Later, Philip the tetrarch built up the place and renamed it after himself as well as Caesar. In present-day vernacular, we'd call this town "Philip's Caesarville."

When Jesus asks these questions, he's standing in the shadow of Caesar's temple. In that particular time and place, for Jesus' first hearers, there's a sharper edge to those questions—and to the answers—than there is for us. Because Caesar has proclaimed *himself* to be King. Divine Ruler. Lord.

But here at this stronghold of military might, at this iconic shrine, someone other than Caesar is confessed as God's anointed one, God's Messiah. Many in Israel envision the long-awaited Messiah as a powerful liberator on a war horse, a mighty deliverer who will overthrow the despised Roman forces that oppress them and occupy their land. Anyone affirmed as Messiah is sure to be viewed as confronting and challenging imperial Rome and Caesar himself.

But Jesus speaks of another realm. A heavenly realm.

Two kingdoms stand in tension over against one another: the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of this world.

Throughout his Gospel, Matthew takes care to be sure readers understand that these two kingdoms do exist. That they are at odds with one another. And, my brothers and sisters, they *still* are at odds with one another. Our twenty-first century world has its Caesars. Its overlords. Its empires. The powers and the principalities still demand allegiance. And in doing so, do they not—in collaboration with contemporary culture—exert influence on what people believe about Jesus?

Today we hear Jesus ask a key question: *Who do people say that the Son of Man is? Who do people say that I am?* If you

take a walk through downtown Columbia today and you ask men and women on the street who Jesus is, a lot of them will tell you that Jesus was a wise teacher of ethics. That he was a great morality prophet. That he was a man from Nazareth who lived and died two thousand years ago. Period. Maybe that's how a secular society expects its citizens to respond.

To accommodate. To conform.

Just like citizens of Rome were expected to conform as loyal subjects under Caesar's rule.

But the apostle Paul has something to say to believers in Rome. Paul counsels them—and counsels us—about conformity. *Don't be conformed to this age*, he cautions. His words cause us to consider the ways we embrace conformity.

When we're young, isn't conformity everything?

Here in the Midlands, most kids went back to school last week. And we pray that they and their teachers have a great academic year. But what many students seem to want is to look just like all their classmates. Clothes. Shoes. Backpacks. Hairstyles. You name it. They have to be like everybody else's.

But with maturity, you begin to realize that there is value and peace in being exactly who you are. You are unlike anyone

else. You are unique. You've become more comfortable in your own skin. You're no longer so interested in trying to emulate your peers. But the world's still trying to get you to conform. Especially when conforming entails spending money and being a good consumer. The consumer-culture will do everything it can to get us to conform. But Paul urges us not to buy into that. Paul urges us not to be conformed.

But to be *transformed*. To be transformed by the renewing of your mind. To be transformed by letting yourself be led in a new direction. To be transformed by opening your spirit to a realm that's already present but not yet fully accomplished. To be transformed by growing accustomed to listening for the One who speaks to your heart. The One who speaks of the divine desire and intention for you. The One who speaks of what is good and acceptable and perfect.

And I think that this mental and spiritual transformation prepares us for Jesus' second question: *Who do you say that I am?* It's our answer to *this* question that defines us as a believing community. It's our answer to this question that defines us as church. But the church isn't our accomplishment. The church isn't our achievement. We recall Jesus' words to

Simon, now called Peter. Which means “Rock.” *On this rock I will build my church.* Jesus Christ builds the church. The church is his. The church is a gift he gives us.

Jesus has a gift for Peter, too. Peter will receive the keys to the kingdom of heaven. At some point, you may have seen an image of Rubens’s seventeenth-century painting of Peter holding the keys of the kingdom. In the painting, the eyes of Peter are focused upward, expressing his assurance that the One who guides his steps, the One he serves, is the very One who gives the keys. Keys that symbolize Peter’s leadership of the early church.

Since Peter received those keys, nearly twenty centuries have passed. Today, with all kinds of technological advances like keyless entry and digital access, we may not use keys quite as much as we used to. But for most of us, keys are still a part of daily life. Physical, tangible keys.

A few years ago, a member of a church I served—looking panicked—asked if anyone had turned in a set of car keys. No one had. I don’t know whether the keys were eventually found. I hope so.

I'd be in trouble if I lost the keys I carry: among them, keys to various doors and locks in the churches and the parsonage. Keys to vehicles. Quite an assortment of keys. Experience has taught me, every time I walk in the house, to put my keys in one particular place. Then, the next time I go out, there they are, ready to be picked up. At least, that's what I try to do. But there have been times when I laid them down somewhere else and then couldn't put my hands on them right away.

That reminds me of a true story about a woman I'll call Jane. One day, Jane called her husband at his workplace and reported that she had locked her keys in the car. She asked him to please come and help her. When he got there, he tried the door on the passenger side. It was unlocked! He opened the door, took out the keys, and gave them to Jane. It wasn't too long after that that she again called her spouse at work. She told him that she'd locked the keys in the car a second time—that she'd checked, and all the doors were indeed locked. Could he please come? Muttering to himself, he left his place of business and drove across town to help her. And when he arrived, he walked over to the car, reached through an open window, and handed Jane the keys.

It's not always easy to keep up with keys.

But keys—the metaphorical kind, that is—can be a means of grace. Later in this same Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus gives kingdom keys to all who know who he is. Gives kingdom keys to the whole church. Gives us who are his church the authority to make determinations on earth that will be ratified in heaven.

What an awesome responsibility! Keys can be used to grant access or to deny access. Keys can be used to close and lock doors. Or keys can be used to unlock and open doors. Keys can be used to excommunicate and exclude. Or keys can be used to include. To restore. To welcome.

We receive the keys of the kingdom of heaven because we are people who know who Jesus is. How will we use our keys to this kingdom, of which the church is an earthly foretaste? Maybe the answer to that question lies not so much in *what would Jesus do?* as it does in *what does Jesus want us to do?* Us. His disciples. Believers who are who we are because we know who Jesus is.

At Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asks his first disciples that second key question. *Who do you say that I am?* And Simon



Peter confesses: *You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*

Peter speaks for the twelve. But each one of us in every believing community in all times and in all places hears Jesus ask this all-important question. And we respond as one body with many members. We are people who know the answer:

*Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.*

And that brings us to another question: What difference is that making—what difference is that *going* to make—in *your* life?

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.