

## God's Questions

A Sermon on 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16 by the Rev. Philip Major  
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During the most difficult days of the Vietnam War state department spokesman Robert McCloskey addressed the national press corp. It was one of those typical, tense press conferences; the reporters searching for clear information about what was actually happening with U.S. troops on the other side of the world, the state department doing its best to not provide information that would create military or political problems. Near the end of an especially confusing exchange of questions and answers McCloskey brought a little humor to the room saying, "I know that you believe that you understood what you think I said, but I am not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant."

Communication is one of the messiest parts of our lives. Have you ever had a conversation with someone where you ask them a question and when they respond you realize that the person never actually heard your question? Perhaps the person just listened to the first few words, then stopped listening and spent the next few seconds coming up with their best answer to the question they *thought* you were asking.

This is sort of what is happening in our story from the book of Samuel. The main problem in this story is King David wants to build a house for the ark of the covenant and God doesn't want him to. The root of the problem is that David's questions are completely different from God's questions. David thinks he is coming up with the right answers, but his answers are in response to his own questions, they don't respond to God's questions. David has reasons for paying attention to the ark of the covenant, they just happen to be his reasons, not God's reasons.

This ark was not a boat, like Noah's ark, it was a large wooden chest, containing relics of the children of Israel, possibly the original stone tablets inscribed with the ten commandments. The ark was thought to hold unusual powers, bringing victory to some and death to others. When David becomes king of all Israel and makes Jerusalem the capitol city, one of his first decisions is to bring the ark to Jerusalem. When the ark finally arrives, David says to Nathan, his advisor: "*See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent.*" David is asking a question born out of his faith: Why should the ark of God continue to reside in a tent, while I live in a palace?

But that night Nathan hears the Lord speaking to him. The Lord has several questions for David: *Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever ask any of the tribal leaders of Israel "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?"* The Lord does not say to David, you have given the wrong answer. He says, your questions are *not my questions*.

It's pretty much like David listened to the Lord speaking just long enough to pick out the word 'house'. He immediately began to give his attention to *his* plans to build a house for the ark. But David's assumption took him in the wrong direction.

God isn't concerned about a house for the ark. God doesn't have much concern at all for buildings made of wood and stone. God is concerned with building something that will grow God's kingdom on earth: God's people. God's questions are about how *we* will assist as God builds God's kingdom.

Like David, we ask questions about important topics. But just as God turns David's question about houses in a different direction from what David expects, doing God's work often means turning our questions in different directions from what *we* have come to expect.

At times we need to make room in our lives for God's questions, in addition to the questions that come first to our minds. Let's take an example that is a frequent topic in our lives as well as in scripture: caring for those who are hungry. When we see a hungry person we often ask good questions, such as:  
\* how can we help feed this person?

\* how can we help this person get to the place where they can feed themselves?

These are really important questions. But Jesus understood that hungry people are hungry for bread, and they are also hungry for much more than bread. Doing God's work means asking God's questions when we see a hungry person, such as:

\* what else did this person lose when they lost the ability to buy food?

\* how can we feed this person's soul as well as their body?

\* how can we welcome people who hunger for bread and for more than bread into all of our activities?

We act as Jesus' disciples by searching our hearts for God's questions and adding these to the questions that are in the front of our minds.

At other times we actually need to let go of *our* questions, because they are keeping us from asking *God's* questions. Let's take another example that is a frequent topic in our lives as well as in scripture: young people. In churches our talk about youth often boils down to one question: how can we get more young people attending our church?

I've asked this question myself. But as I have spent more time with our youth and with scripture I've come to believe this question is actually *distracting* us from God's questions about youth. This question is distracting us, just as David's plan about constructing a house for the ark was distracting him from God's plan. And just as in the book of Samuel God is concerned with building the kingdom among God's people, today God is concerned with building God's kingdom, including among *our* young people.

But our model for the building of God's kingdom is not Walmart or Facebook or Highland Park Church. Jesus Christ is our model. Jesus does not question his disciples about attendance numbers. Jesus taught his disciples to pay attention to the quality of their own faith, not to the quantities of followers.

We can see from our vantage point that great quantities of people have followed and continue to follow Jesus teachings, but the actual work of building the kingdom is God's work. St. Paul understood this. St. Paul says, *I planted the seeds, the next guy watered, but it was God who gave the growth.*

God will give the growth. Our work is to follow Jesus' example. Jesus asks his disciples questions about, forgiving others, showing commitment with actions and following the examples and receiving the gifts of the young, the poor, the lame, and the outsiders.

God's questions about our ministry with youth are like Jesus' questions for his disciples. Are we letting ourselves be transformed by God's forgiveness? If we are, young people may see the transformative power of God's kingdom. Have we demonstrated our faith with our actions? If we have, young people may see the integrity of God's kingdom. Are we willing to receive the gifts God gives us through our youth? If we are, young people will know that we value them as full members of our church rather than as receptacles of *our* visions and wisdom.

These are God's questions. This is how *God will build* God's kingdom on earth. We participate in God's work and questions when we let ourselves be transformed by God's forgiveness. We participate in God's work and questions when we show our faith with our actions. We participate in God's work and questions when we let ourselves be transformed by the gifts of our youth.

Jesus told his disciples, *where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.* This is an essential principle for every part of our church, including our work with youth. It is connected to our conviction that we are called to be God's people as a community *and* that each one of us is God's child. God desires nothing more than to be fully present in each of our lives. This truth is the core of God's question about our ministry with youth. God is asking us: are you being fully present with the young people I have given you?

My heart is full of joy this day, because this is the kind of question our youth group leaders have in their minds. This group of 9 adults began their work in our new youth group program just a few weeks

ago. In many ways we are starting out fresh. Our group is not large, with about 12 youth divided among three age groups. But in these few weeks I have noticed these leaders are following Jesus' way of giving their attention to God's questions. First, I noticed that they simply enjoy being with our young people and give their full attention to our youth and the gifts they bring. Second, when our leaders met as a group they set a goal for the year, based on the kind of presence Jesus brought to his disciples. Their goal was to be fully present with youth in good times and hard times and for youth and adults to learn from each other as they walk their journey to adulthood together.

So we can be inspired by the example of our youth group leaders. Like them, each one of us can give our attention to God's questions. Like them, each one of us can follow Jesus example of working on the quality of our faith. Like them, each one of us can serve as laborers in God's vineyard, doing our part as *God builds* God's kingdom.