

Sermon for Sunday, March 19, 2023
Fourth Sunday in Lent
“Ask Better Questions”
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Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa

[Click here to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

Beloved People of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

There’s no such thing as a dumb question, right? I think that’s true when we’re trying to grasp a new concept or skill or doing science. We learn by asking all the questions. When it comes to faith, we need to ask all sorts of things, too. But there are some questions that aren’t helpful, that are even bad - questions that are formed by assumptions, questions that lead us to judgment or isolation.

Take the disciples in our story today. When they see a man who is blind, their almost knee-jerk reaction is to say, ‘Teacher, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ That’s a bad question. It assumes that illness and disability are caused by sin; that the man deserved to be born blind; that physical blindness is a form of failure. After Jesus heals the man, the crowd gets in the game. Bystanders interrogate the man, seeking to dissect what’s happened to him. They ask bad questions because their intent is to drive him out and prove that Jesus is a heretic.

What are our intentions? What assumptions do we carry? How do we respond when we encounter someone who’s suffering? Someone who’s changing? How do our beliefs prevent us from seeing others? Our artwork today raises those questions. The piece is called *Insight*. The artist is Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity. She writes in her artist statement:

In this image, hands expressing denial and exclusion press in on the man. In the background, I wrote a barrage of questions I imagine emerging from the crowd:

Why did God heal you?

What did you do to cause this?

Who sinned?

Alongside those questions, I wove in contemporary statements I’ve heard spoken in situations when we think a tidy rationale will comfort us:

Everything happens for a reason.

God only gives you as much as you can handle.

Pray harder.

I wonder what this story would look like had better questions been asked.

What if his neighbors had instead asked the blind man, “How do you feel?”

What if the man had asked the crowd, “What are you afraid of?”

What if the Pharisees had asked one another, “What if it’s time to change?”

Surrounded by remnants of narrow vision, the man has new insight. He looks beyond the words, beyond the crowd, beyond the accusations driving him out of town.¹

What are the questions God is inviting us to ask as we consider our world and the people around us?

When I was a pastor at Luther College, I was in lots of conversations about the mental health of students, as our young people were suffering well before the pandemic started. We were asking what's going wrong for this student, for that student? Then one day my colleague David Vasquez said something along these lines: *We're acting like students who are anxious and depressed are having an abnormal reaction. But there's so much anxiety and pain all around them in the larger culture. What if students are having a normal reaction to an abnormal situation?* That question gave me a fuller picture of students and their awareness, insights, and lived wisdom. It helped me to name the connection between pastoral care and advocating for justice and healing in the larger world. Asking a different question helped me to see more clearly.

A similar invitation comes from Oprah Winfrey and the renowned brain development and trauma expert, Dr Bruce Perry, in their book *What Happened to You: Conversations on Trauma, Resilience and Healing*. A description of the book asks:
Have you ever wondered, "Why did I do that?" or "Why can't I just control my behavior?" Others may judge our reactions and think, "What's wrong with that person?" When questioning our emotions, it's easy to place the blame on ourselves; holding ourselves and those around us to an impossible standard. It's time we started asking a different question ...[Rather than asking] what's wrong with you? [ask] what happened to you? It's a subtle but profound shift in our approach to trauma, and it's one that allows us to understand our pasts in order to clear a path to our future—opening the door to resilience and healing in a proven, powerful way.²

Asking different questions and seeking to see differently can be unsettling, to say the least. It can be distressing even. Yet in all the challenges and distress we face, for whatever reason, we are not alone. God accompanies us completely, fully, entering all the places of pain. A poem offered this week by A Sanctified Art has brought that alive to me. It's called "Jesus in the Psych Ward", by Rev. Sarah Speed. This week I've also imagined a similar poem called "Jesus in the Nursing Home".

"Jesus in the Psych Ward"

He's in group therapy, plastic chairs in a circle.
Paper cups with weak coffee. Everyone in the room has seeking eyes.
The Pharisees admitted him. They said things like, *He's more than we can handle.*
They let the rumors fly.
The other patients like him. They say, *He listens to me.*
He calls them by name.
And when one of them asks,
Is this our fault? Are we here because we sinned?
Jesus does not wait for the facilitator to speak.
He crosses the circle. He kneels down. He grabs their hands in his and says,
Child of the covenant, God loves you too much to ever wish you pain.
Bodies and minds crumble sometimes, but God's love for you does not.
And after that there were happy tears and the group was dismissed to lunch,
where they broke bread and no one talked of sin.³

What happened to you?

Lots has happened to all of us throughout our lives and in the past three years.
And in all of it, we are loved. You are loved, you are held, you are accompanied.

This love empowers our resilience.
It helps us ask better questions.
It allows us to see ourselves, and others, more clearly, with more compassion.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.

¹ Artist Statement on *Insight* by Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity from A Sanctified Art. Inspired by John 9: 8-41 Silk painting with digital drawing and collage.

² *What Happened to You: Conversations on Trauma, Resilience and Healing*, by Oprah Winfrey and Dr. Bruce Perry. Flatiron Books. April 2021.

³ "Jesus in the Psych Ward" by Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed, from *Seeking: Honest Questions for Deeper Faith*, a Lenten Devotional by A Sanctified Art