

## Sermon

*If the mystery is Christ in us, then our journey is one of discovery, of learning to love ourselves, to love the questions that show us new sides of ourselves, that lead us into the divine within ourselves and with other people.*

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# LOVING THE QUESTIONS

*By Lavina Fielding Anderson*

And it came to pass, that after three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions. . . .

And his mother said unto him, Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us? Behold, thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing.

And he said unto them, How is it that ye sought me? wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business? (Luke 2:46–49)

**I**T IS SIGNIFICANT THAT THE FIRST RECORDED action of Jesus in mortality was to ask questions. What were those questions? I wish we knew. Furthermore, the first recorded words addressed to Jesus in mortality were a question—the question of Mary; and the first scriptural words from Jesus in mortality were also a question.

I want to talk about questions. The search for truth is a delicious, deliberate, and sometimes dangerous dance between questions and answers. It is a willingness to entertain questions as though they are “angels unawares,” to journey with the questions, to live with the questions, to love the questions, and sometimes to die with and for and in the questions, only to be reborn in a new question.

Jesus was a question-asker. His questions still ring in our minds and stir our hearts after two thousand years, compelling our attention and challenging our complacency. Think of the

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new avenues of communication and the many voyages of self-discovery triggered by these penetrating questions in conversation with Jesus:

- What manner of [person] ought ye to be? (3 Ne. 27:27)
- What wilt thou that I shall do unto thee? (Luke 18)
- Where is your treasure? (Matt. 6:21)
- Who is my neighbor? (Luke 10:29)
- Could ye not watch with me one hour? (Matt. 26:40)
- Who is the greatest among you? (Matt. 23:11)
- Which of you is without sin? (John 8:7)
- For if ye only love them which love you, what reward have ye? (Luke 6:32)
- How oft shall I forgive my brother or my sister? (Matt. 18:21)
- Whom do ye say that I am? (Matt. 16:15)
- What shall it profit [you] if [you] shall gain the whole world and lose your own soul? (Mark 8:36)

One reason these are such great questions is they have powerful answers, simple answers, clear answers; and yet, they invite—almost compel—us to ask further questions. Take, for instance, that simple, narrative-based question, “Could ye not watch with me one hour?” The answer is obvious: no. The apostles were slumped sideways and snoring. The question is rhetorical. It is a question, on one level, designed to produce guilt and shame because of obvious failure and inadequacy. We have plenty of questions like this already: Why aren't you a better wife? a more faithful home teacher? less slothful in service? Or like this one: So you're right, but everybody else is wrong? And that really terrific question: What's the matter with your testimony?

But Jesus' question leads us into deeper questions: What do we do—what does God himself do—with the fact that our desire to watch will always, in this life, be limited by the flesh and our imagination and the inadequacy of our love? What does it

mean to watch with someone? And, why does someone ministered to and attended by angels still yearn for the touch of a human hand, the look from a human eye, the pity and terror and tenderness of a human heart?

In the spring of 1994, a gathering of women precious to me began its testimony meeting with Janice Allred and Margaret Toscano sitting on the top row of risers and laughing about being on the edge. Janice, in her gentle, quiet voice, asked a question, "If I'm excommunicated this year, will you still love me?" I have walked with this question ever since.

I have not heard Janice ask that question again, but I have been collecting various answers to it. With terrifying frequency, some answers have been: I can't love you unless the Church loves you. And the answer of the Church is: This is a court of love. Of course we love you. In the name of love, we cast you out. This answer should lead us all to deeper questions: How is that possible? What kind of love is this? How can we get the Church to love us? What is love purchased at such a price worth? And how can we continue to love the Church?

Those of us associated with SUNSTONE are about this question: What does it mean to be a Mormon intellectual—to put the fruits of our minds and hands at the service of our faith? But we have other questions: What does God want me to do with my life? What does discipleship mean? How can we be in the world but not of the world? How can we love if we cannot serve, and how can we find ways to serve? What do I do with brothers and sisters who ask different questions or who ask no questions? Does God respect my questions as much as he respects someone else's answers? And there are deeper questions still: What does it mean to be God? Who is he, or she, or they? What makes me feel like their daughter?

Questions are dangerous. Certainly some questions we ask are. Do we *have* to ask questions like this? Do we have to ask questions at all? Isn't it more comfortable to lean on our certainties or on the certitude of others? Hugh Nibley asked, "Are you ashamed of getting the right answer, just because it's the same as everyone else's?"<sup>1</sup> Jesus healed the epileptic son, but he also asked the father, "Do you have faith that I can heal him?" The father answered, "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief" (Mark 9:24). Jesus accepted the father's answer, but what if he really wanted a different answer? John Donne, in his third satire, writes in cautious paradox:

To adore, or scorne an image, or protest  
May all be bad; doubt wisely; in strange way  
To stand inquiring right, is not to stray;  
To sleepe, or runne wrong, is.<sup>2</sup>

I remember hearing Elouise Bell say, "I don't apologize for my doubts. I'm not particularly proud of them, either." Isn't it just as dangerous to have only questions and no answers as it is to have all the answers and recognize none of the questions?

These aren't questions to supply easy answers to. These are

WHAT DOES GOD WANT ME  
TO DO WITH MY LIFE?  
AND WHAT DOES  
DISCIPLESHIP  
MEAN?



questions we need to live with, to lie down and rise up with, to take on our journey, sometimes to wrestle with as Jacob wrestled with the angel, and sometimes to dance with.

#### HARD QUESTIONS, COMFORTING ANSWERS

*The courage to question opens new visions of life.*

CONSIDER these metaphors for questions: questions can be treasures, the pearl of great price to be carried in the bosom and protected from thieves; or the faint and flickering light from a candle in a windy place that will show us our path one step ahead while we take that step in faith, trusting that if we continue our journey through the weary night, the sun will rise in the morning, drowning the light of our candle in the glorious light of full day.

A question can be a companion on our journey, just as Paul was accompanied on his journey to Damascus by his question, "Who art thou, Lord?" (Acts 9:5). He received an immediate answer and then spent the rest of his life working out what

that answer meant as he shared the glad message with others.

A question can be like a child that we carry within our bodies. We protect it and nurture it as it grows. We have faith that the kicks, swelling, and heartburn will turn into a baby with flawless fingers, toes, and ears. We carry the question in hope, but questions like this make us weary. They give us backaches and headaches. Frequently, they make us sick to our stomachs. And they never stay little and contained. They lead to birth, sometimes rending and tearing as they come forth and take on a life of their own.

Asking questions requires courage. It requires a willingness to open one's self to uncertainty, to doubt, to disparagement, and to discouragement. It is to be willing to die to the old self, sometimes to die little deaths daily, in the confidence that change does not mean to lose oneself but to find oneself. Helen Keller said with sublime confidence:

I cannot understand why anyone should fear death. Life here is more cruel than death—life divides and estranges, while death, which at heart is life eternal, reunites and reconciles. I believe that when the eyes within my physical eyes shall open upon the world to come, I shall simply be consciously living in the country of my heart.<sup>3</sup>

One of the great questions Christianity poses is its paradox that we save our lives only in losing them (Matt. 10:39). We're uncomfortable with this paradox—which is, no doubt, its purpose. We're meant to struggle with Pilate's question, "What is truth?" (John 18:38). Sometimes we may hope that if we never ask ourselves that question, we will never have to ask ourselves the next question, which is: Is this particular concept a piece of the truth? and then the third question: And if it is true, what does it call me to do? How does it call me to live my life?

#### IS THERE NO OTHER WAY?

*Questioning paths lead from fear toward love, understanding, and acceptance.*

I think there is no question that Mormonism, which began with the humble question of Joseph Smith in the Sacred Grove, which provides a glamorous, glowing list of new questions, and which provides some of the most soul-wrenching and soul-satisfying answers imaginable in human terms, does not currently welcome many questions. What can be our response? If we can give up those questions, then I think there is no doubt that we will have more comfortable lives. But I think most of us have already passed that point. We have already begun the terrifying and satisfying journey of asking unpopular questions. And I really don't think it's possible to go back. We can't unask questions. We can't unknow what we know. We can't uneat the fruit.

We are launched on Eve's quest for the knowledge of good and evil. We have asked her question, "Is there no other way?" I hope that we will also be able to affirm her answer: "It is better to pass through sorrow, that we may know the good from the evil." Not easier, not safer, not more comfortable—

but better. That means, I think, that we have to acknowledge those questions that fear asks and answer them with courage.

Audre Lorde's poem "We Were Never Meant to Survive" does not minimize the fear but casts it in the most intense and ultimate of terms:

For those of us who were  
imprinted with fear like a faint  
line in the center of our  
foreheads[,] learning to be afraid  
with our mother's milk. . . .  
And when the sun rises we are afraid  
it might not remain.  
When the sun sets we are afraid  
it might not rise in the morning.  
And when we speak we are afraid  
our words will not be heard  
nor welcomed  
But when we are silent  
we are still afraid.  
So it is better to  
speak remembering  
We were never  
meant to survive.<sup>4</sup>

We need to remember that we have taken upon us the name of a leader whose speaking led him straight to the cross. Caiaphas must have breathed a sigh of relief when he heard the thud of the hammer on the nails, thinking, "Well, that's that. We certainly silenced *him*." But Paul gave us the view from eternity when he reminded us that Christ will "put down all rule and all authority and power" and "put all enemies under his feet," for "the last enemy that shall be destroyed is death" (1 Cor. 15:24–26). Because he knew that end, he could say, by the "rejoicing which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, [I stand] in jeopardy every hour" and "I die daily" (1 Cor. 15:30–31).

Father Leo Booth, who describes himself as both a recovering alcoholic and a recovering priest, has written about religious addiction in a powerful book called *When God Becomes a Drug*. Right at the top of the symptoms of religious addiction he places the

inability to think, doubt, or question information or authority. This is the primary symptom of any dysfunctional belief system, for if you cannot question or examine what you are taught, if you cannot doubt or challenge authority, you . . . miss the messages and miracles God places in your life because you literally do not know how to recognize them.

In refusing to think or question, you hand over responsibility for your beliefs, finances, relationships, employment, and destiny to a clergyman or other so-called [spiritual] master. You are usually told that not thinking, doubting, or questioning is a sign of faith. . . . Faith is said to mean unquestioning obedience. This is how religious abusers control; it is how

ministers and leaders are able to financially or sexually abuse their followers. . . .

If you are not permitted to think for yourself, to question, you stop your spiritual growth because you do not know how to see the ways God is working with you and through you. When you use your critical faculties to analyze, interpret, explore, and question, you discover new shades of meaning and greater richness in God's truth. Questioning and exploring [are means] of having a dialogue with God. To refuse to doubt, think about, or question what you are told is to miss an opportunity to talk with God.<sup>5</sup>

I never thought that one of the consequences of being excommunicated, would be that I would stop being afraid. More precisely, I never expected that one of the consequences of being excommunicated would be the revelation of how afraid I had been—how much in love I had been with legalisms, rules, and restrictions; how quickly and willingly I had drawn lines to exclude others; how easily I had ranked others by righteousness; how much of my life had been governed by rules: what I ate, drank, and wore, what I could say and how, what I couldn't say. I was a Pharisee supreme, judging others by how they spoke, walked, dressed, spent their money, acted on their political beliefs, prayed, and thought. There is nothing like

being judged to show the dark side of judgment. I tell people that nothing in my personal and family life has changed because of the excommunication—and from one perspective, that's true. We still have family prayer, read scriptures daily, sing hymns together, attend church weekly, spend our time and money in good causes, and find people who need our service. I had wondered if excommunication would mean a greater interest in smoking and drinking, if I would give myself permission to try the marijuana brownies that I had denied myself as a student at Brigham Young University. None of those things happened.

But an immense internal change has occurred. The fear is gone, and with it, the burden of the rules, regulations, and restrictions. It simply slipped off my back like the burden that Christian, in *Pilgrim's Progress*, dropped at the feet of Christ as he passed through the wicket gate of baptism. I no longer feel any need to evaluate my own righteousness or—more important—the righteousness of others according to the rules. I haven't given up judging as an act of will; a merciful hand has lifted it from me. Was I afraid, all those years, that only a rule stood between me and moral chaos? How could I have had so little faith? And how could I have had so little love that the first thing I wanted to know about others was their righteousness checklist instead of their stories and their hearts? There's an



immense freedom in listening for understanding instead of listening to evaluate, judge, prescribe remedies, and fix in various ways. I can't think of the difference without feeling my heart well up with praise and gratitude to God.

#### THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST

*If the gospel is a mystery, then questioning is as essential as knowing.*



I believe that an essential and important part of goodness—of being right with God—is asking questions. I think we cannot save ourselves without asking questions. I think we are totally useless at saving others without asking questions. I believe this because, without asking questions, we will never approach the Savior to ask the terrible and tremendous question of faith: “Good master, what must I do to be saved?” The Savior responded first with a question: “What says the law?” But that question was just to clear the ground, so to speak, for the real answer came next, “Come, follow me.” (See Luke 18:18–23.) We cannot get real answers unless we ask real questions. Or as screenwriter Wilson Mizner says, “I respect faith, but doubt is what gets you an education.”<sup>6</sup>

The most intense and urgent invitations to ask questions come from the Savior himself. Paul warns people to shun “fables and endless genealogies, which minister questions” (1 Tim. 1:4), but Jesus urges, begs, commands, promises:

Draw near unto me and I will draw near unto you; seek me diligently and ye shall find me; ask, and ye shall receive; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.

Whatsoever ye ask the Father in my name it shall be given unto you, that is expedient for you. (D&C 88:63–64)

To those who “confessed they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth,” the Savior promised to “reason with you, and . . . speak unto you” (D&C 45:13, 15).

I think of all the anxious warnings that we receive not to delve into the mysteries. What exactly are these mysteries? Alma identified the resurrection of the dead as a mystery (Alma 40:3), and Paul explained to the Corinthians that the change that will come “in the twinkling of an eye” upon the righteous living “at the last trump” is “a mystery” (1 Cor. 15:51–52). In explicating the parable of the sower to his apostles, Jesus explained that the reason he was doing so was because “unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God” (Luke 8:18). When Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon saw their vision of the three degrees of glory, they described it as

“the mysteries of his kingdom” (D&C 76:114). The Melchizedek priesthood, we are told, “administereth the gospel and holdeth the key of the mysteries of the kingdom, even the key of the knowledge of God” (D&C 84:19).

In what sense are they mysteries? True, we can't make these processes happen from our own knowledge. They are mysteries in that we don't understand how they work. I agree that we have many layers of understanding, but even little children can explain the parable of the sower. Nineteen-year-old missionaries have no trouble making the logic of the three degrees of glory apparent to investigators. The ordinances of baptism and the laying on of hands are the first steps into membership, not the culminating steps of salvation. Even the endowment is urged for the many, not reserved for a privileged fraction.

And, perhaps more important, it is not the scriptures that forbid us to search the mysteries. The scriptures propel and lure and coax us toward mysteries. The Doctrine and Covenants promises, “If thou wilt inquire, thou shalt know mysteries which are great and marvelous; therefore thou shalt exercise thy gift, that thou mayest find out mysteries” (D&C 6:11). The Savior urges:

- Ask that you may know the mysteries of God, . . . according to your faith shall it be done unto you. (D&C 8:11)
- If thou shalt ask, thou shalt receive revelation upon revelation, knowledge upon knowledge, that thou mayest know the mysteries and peaceable things—that which bringeth joy, that which bringeth life eternal. (D&C 42:61)
- Unto [you] that keepeth my commandments I will give the mysteries of my kingdom, and the same shall be in [you] a well of living water, springing up unto everlasting life. (D&C 63:23)

But what exactly are these mysteries? The mysteries may lie not in technical questions of how the resurrection will be performed or who may visit whom in the kingdoms of glory but rather what Paul calls "the mystery of Christ," "the fellowship of the mystery . . . to the intent that . . . the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church" (Eph. 3:4, 9–10). He refers to the "great mystery" of the union of "Christ and the church" (Eph. 5:32), the "mystery of faith" (1 Tim. 3:9), "the mystery of godliness" (1 Tim. 3:16). In *Doctrine and Covenants*, "the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven" seem to be defined as: "to have the heavens opened unto them . . . and to enjoy the communion and presence of God the Father, and Jesus the mediator of the new covenant" (D&C 107:19). Perhaps the clearest definition of this central mystery is Paul's statement to the Colossians that "the riches of the glory of this mystery . . . is Christ in you" (Col. 1:27). Now *that* is a mystery: within our limited, sinful, ignorant, mortal selves resides the purity, the power, the unfailing love, the immortality, and the glory of Christ himself. Think of the questions *that* mystery contains and engenders!

Brothers and sisters, if the mystery is Christ in us, then our journey is one of discovery, of learning to love ourselves, to love the questions that show us new sides of ourselves, that lead us into the divine within ourselves and with other people. I hope that we will love these questions, live with them, struggle with them, dance with them, rejoice in them, weep over them, stretch ourselves to the cracking point with them, measure ourselves against them, and be filled to the brim with them . . .

that Christ may dwell in [our] hearts by faith; that [we], being rooted and grounded in love, May be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that [we] might be filled with all the fulness of God. (Eph. 3:17–19)

May we be transformed by both the hunger of Eve in the garden and the clear vision of Anna in the temple who saw the Anointed One in the face of a helpless baby (Luke 2:36). May we ask our questions with faith, and courage, and above all, with that love which is the fullness of God. ☞

#### NOTES

1. Hugh Nibley, fireside, Brigham Young University, 8 Nov. 1968, notes in my possession.

2. John Donne, "Satire, III," in *Elizabethan and Jacobean Poets: Marlowe to Marvell*, edited by W. H. Auden and Norman Holmes Peterson (1950; New York: Viking Press, 1973), 395.

3. Helen Keller, *My Religion* (1927; New York: Swedenborg Foundation, 1986 printing), 110.

4. Audre Lorde, meditation 587, "We Were Never Meant to Survive," in *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press/Unitarian Universalist Association, 1993), n.p.

5. Leo Booth, *When God Becomes a Drug: Breaking the Chains of Religious Addiction and Abuse* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1991), 60–61.

6. W. H. Auden and Louis Kronenberger, *The Viking Book of Aphorisms: A Personal Selection* (New York: Viking Press, 1962), 111.



#### KING OF WOUNDS

He lived on our place  
since before I was born;  
more uncle than hired hand.  
Pawnee, he changed his name  
to King Of Wounds after Korea  
part as joke, part serious  
because he believed fighting  
the Chinese had changed  
his vision forever at Chosin:  
the vision he had at fourteen  
of an owl flying loop-the-loops  
in a circle of red moon, talons  
clutching a shrieking white  
rabbit. His name then had been  
Johnny No-Horses but after Korea  
he came home with a box of medals,  
as scarred as Frankenstein and enough  
of a disability pension it didn't matter no  
one was hiring Indians.

Until my father hired him.

King of Wounds. Odd even among  
men reluctant to judge. He rode his  
circuit of fence at night because that's  
when cattle break out or men in;  
he looked upon insomnia as a blessing  
because he loved stars and meteor showers.  
A beautiful woman once tried to get him  
to go to the city—tried everything.  
They had a good time and King Of Wounds  
wore the pearl button shirts she bought  
but at last she went home alone.  
When I asked him about it all he said was  
*upon those barren islands  
they die, blamed and blaming.*

—SEAN BRENDAN-BROWN