

It only uses three letters: **w h y**. Yet, it is probably one of the most widely used questions in the English language. Kids are famous for using it. It is time to go to bed. Why? It is time to do your homework. Why? Clean your room. Why? And then it is used to begin a whole series of questions: Why is the sky blue? Why don't cows fly? Why can't I go, everyone else is? We often cringe, as parents, when any question begins with those three letters: **w h y**.

As we grow older the only change is that our questions become far more difficult and sophisticated. The answers often become more philosophical or theological. Still most of them begin with those three letters: **w h y**.

Our two Scripture passages today are used in response to the "why" question. The first is an historical account of the preparations for the celebration of Passover. Today it is used as a part of the explanation to the Passover celebration. At the beginning of the meal the youngest male present asks: "Why is this night so special above all others?" "Why do we celebrate this night?" The story of God's redemption of Israel from Egyptian bondage is again told. The Exodus passage is a portion of the answer—this is a feast, a memorial for future generations lest they forget God's redemption, God's grace, and God's love. It is a celebration of the past with a look forward to a future hope: God will again redeem in the future. This is what makes this night so special. This is the answer to your: why.

Jesus and his disciples are not following in the tradition of the Pharisees and John's disciples. John's disciples and the Pharisees observe times of fasting and prayer. The crowd has noted that Jesus and his disciples do not. Why? "We have this tradition and you and your disciples are not following it." Why? They want to know what makes Jesus and his disciples different from John's and the Pharisees.

It is an honest question. A question formed from observation about how Jesus and his disciples live. I do not see any animosity in it. It is not a question to trap Jesus. Jesus is different. His teaching style is different. He is not like other rabbis. He speaks as one with authority. This is what we have observed. Why?

I was talking with someone the other day and they found out that I was a Baptist. Their next question was if I was a Southern Baptist. When I told them, "No," they then asked what the difference was between American Baptists and Southern Baptists. The questioner was from the south and their only encounter with Baptist has been with Southern Baptists. It was an honest inquiry. They wanted to know the difference between us. How are you different? We had a great conversation. I wish more people felt free to ask such questions. It gave us both an opportunity to discover things about each other. I got their view of Southern Baptists and they got to understand some of the differences between us. It was an opportunity to teach and learn.

This is what I see in this response of Jesus to the question asked. It is an opportunity for Jesus to teach. It gives Jesus an opportunity to share again who he is and what his mission and message is about. This is the same for the Passover

question. It gives an opportunity for the story to be told again. It is an opportunity to teach and to learn.

Questions are especially important for us today. Especially questions that deal with Jesus and our faith. We are living in a day when there are literally generations that know nothing about Jesus other than his is a name that they hear on the streets. I remember standing outside one of the churches I served in Maine getting ready to head home. There was a young man there who asked: "What kind of a building is this?" I told him it was a church and he wanted to go inside. He had never been in a church building before. He had tons of questions about what it was there for, etc. Those of us who have been raised in the church have a difficult time believing such people exist but they are out there. There are people who have no real idea who Jesus was and is. People who have no concept of what the church is and should be about.

We have students in our seminaries who know something about Jesus but who have little or no background in the rich stories of our faith. They have come to Christ in college or later in life and have felt a call to serve. Yet, they may never have read the Old Testament and maybe not even the New. We cannot assume that the stories we are familiar with will be familiar to them. We need to be ready to tell the stories of Jesus. We need to be ready and prepared to answer their "why" questions.

This is simply what Jesus is doing in this passage. He is answering their "why" question. Now, Jesus does it with some illustrations: illustrations that would be familiar to them, a part of their everyday life. "Do you fast at wedding celebrations?" Of course not! Especially in Jesus' day. Wedding celebrations could last for days. It was a time of celebration. The bridegroom was present; the bride was there; this was a time for feasting and celebration. There will be other times for fasting but not while the wedding feast is taking place. "Do you patch old garments with new cloth?" No, the materials will not hold together. "Do you put new wine in old wineskins?" No, the fermentation process of the new wine will burst the old wineskins. Something new is happening. Watch, listen, see what is taking place before your very eyes.

Our world needs a place where questions can be asked and honest answers given. Often, as I have said, they ask because they don't know the story. They don't know the traditions of our faith and faith practice. They don't have any ulterior motives, they just don't know. What if you came here today and had never been in a worship service before. Would you wonder why we have this table in the front, covered with a white cloth and napkins? What would you say if someone asked what was going on?

The Church needs to be a place where faith questions can be asked. Yet, it is amazing how often we quickly respond negatively to such questions. We wonder why someone would even ask them. We see them as an affront to our faith. We get offended that they ask. Surely they should know. Doesn't everyone know? We forget the questions we had as we journeyed to the place where we now are in

our faith. We respond before we even find why/what they were asking. We often respond in a way that makes them stop asking the questions.

It was the day after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. We were at the Freedom Foundation in Valley Forge, PA. Diane's brother was with us and he was looking at a large black wreath on the door. He asked, "What is this?" Immediately a woman standing nearby took us to task for our stupidity. Did we not know that MLK, Jr. had been assassinated and so on and so on. She gave a stern lecture of our insincerity, our lack of grief, etc. What she did not know or did not even care to ask is what the question really was. There was a wonderful, strange bug on the wreath. My brother-in-law was asking about the bug, not the wreath. I often feel this is the way the church responds when we are asked such questions.

We need to notice how Jesus responded to the question asked. He reminds us that questions are okay. He does not respond in judgment. He does not respond as if the question is inappropriate. He gives a simple explanation using images they will understand. There is no anger that people asked questions. He gives the explanation and then leaves the decision up to them. How they respond is up to them. Do you notice that Jesus never forces an answer? Maybe we need to learn more from him!

Questions must be always welcomed. We may want to find out the reason why are asked. It may be different than what we first assume, but we must allow them to be asked. They really may not know the story or our traditions. One of the questions I asked when I came here was, "Why do you stand for the reading of the Gospel?" The response was, "One of our pastors said we should." I was not trying to cause trouble. This is the first Baptist church in the States that I have been at that stands for the reading of the Gospel. I just wondered why.

Questions are built into our faith. "Why is this night so special above all others?" "Why this Table?" It is not a meal. It is not even a hardy snack! It is for us a symbol of the Upper Room, of Jesus' last earthly meal. The bread represents his body broken for us. The cup represents his blood shed for the remission of our sins. We gather and remember because we believe this is what he told us to do. We do this in remembrance lest we forget the depth of God's love and grace: the cost of our redemption.

Why's are a part of who we are. We must never stop allowing the questions to be asked. We must never stop listening to them, discerning them and giving our responses. And, then we let God do the rest.