

## Good Questions

Questions are obviously an important part of the reading from Matthew's gospel as Jesus poses two of them to his disciples. And I am sure that since we encounter this passage every three years, even before it was read this morning, you have heard those questions before and know the answers that the disciples gave to the first, and probably more specifically the answer that Peter, known as Simon at this point, gave to the second question. We also seem to focus on that second answer, don't we? I am not sure that anyone often realizes that in the passage from Romans that is paired with this reading there is also a question for us to answer. So I have been thinking about the nature of questions and their answers recently; especially in relation to what is going on in our society today and the questions which these situations seem to be asking of us; the questions about the answers we have given to our identity in the form of choices we have made about the structures we have built and institutions that exist in our society. I clearly remember often being told in many classes by many different teachers at many levels as I progressed through educational systems that there were no dumb questions. I was never sure about that because it seemed like that someone in the class was always trying to show off by the questions they asked; that they weren't really seeking to gain any knowledge with what they asked. However, putting that aside, I do believe that if you ask questions with an open mind, seeking knowledge, then most of the questions asked, will indeed be good questions. But really good questions often don't come with easy answers. They don't come with simple answers. They often come with some hard work and some challenges. In Matthew's gospel, the first question Jesus asks is about the reputation that he has gained as he has been traveling about the countryside teaching and healing. Matthew's text doesn't give us many time points about the length of Jesus' ministry, but we do know that Jesus has gained a following. He has become well known and has already generated some opposition among the religious leaders at this point in the narrative. So this first question is like a survey question he poses to see what type of reputation his actions have given him among the people: "*Who do people say that the Son of Man is?*" Now Son of Man is the title with which Jesus refers to himself within Matthew's narrative. There is a chorus of answers recorded to this question. The disciples as a group respond: "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." Who volunteers these suggestions is not given individually, but all of these are names are reflections of an association with someone who was known to be a man of God according to their tradition. Jesus is not recorded as responding to these answers directly, but instead he gives them that second question. "He said to them, 'But **who do you say that I am?**'" Famously only Simon Peter's answer is recorded here. "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." That's quite a high point for Peter as he here receives great praise for this insight. "And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven, and I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.'" And this is where Simon becomes Simon Peter for the meaning of Peter is rock; and what follows is the basis for many things in our church history, both good and bad. That primacy of Peter, the keys to the kingdom, etc. crop up again and again. Much of that probably has more to do with what follows among the developing groups of believers that what our Lord said or intended. For example, it is interesting to note that at the time Jesus spoke there was no such thing as a

“church” which is what our translations use for the Greek word *ἐκκλησία* which also means communities or assemblies, which sounds more like what Jesus was gathering. It describes a group of people surrounding him who would become citizens of the reign of God following God’s ways. But that’s my understanding of our Lord’s tendency to gather people to come to him, not to build buildings; to welcome and gather those who would come, not to make gates is also at play in this comment that I am making. But back to the issue of those good questions and their answers found in these passages. Jesus’ second question is a question not just for Simon Peter and those disciples, but it is a question for each and every one of us. It is also not really a simple question. Despite the correctness of Simon Peter’s answer, which Jesus affirms, it turns out that it was only partially correct. The declaration was correct. Jesus was and is the Messiah, the anointed one of God. However, Peter did not know what that meant. His understanding of the true role of the Messiah would be challenged quickly when Jesus begins to explain it. It would begin to evolve, painfully evolve, on the journey to Jerusalem and the cross. When Jesus asks us, “Who do **you** say that I am?” the answer we give is not the same each time we hear it. When I first encountered the question, that I remember, I was probably about six years old. The answer I gave was one I had been taught in Sunday School. Jesus is my savior. Jesus had come to save me. That is actually a very simple answer. That, unfortunately is the answer that many people give no matter what age they are. As I grew older, I learned the additional truth that God sent Jesus into the world to save the world; because God loved the world so much. This meant that not only was Jesus sent to save me, but also other people, but mostly it still seemed to be about me. After all, if Jesus was my savior that was what mattered most, right? Of course, the more I learned, I discovered that Jesus wanted me to do things that helped those others he had come to save, but it was not what was the most important, was it? It seemed that most often the refrain was still that Jesus was my savior. Yet, as I grew older, I kept hearing that Jesus came to give us the good news and that we were to share it...this good news...and if it were good news for everyone...then it wasn’t really all about me...right? This is where we begin to look at what we find the Apostle Paul telling the believers in Rome. If your answer is the same as Peter’s was. If your answer is truly that Jesus is your savior who redeemed your life. What is your response to such a gift? It is central to the message found in Romans that Jesus’ life was a very special gift revealing God’s love for the world. Through Jesus, God reconciled the world and the world was redeemed by Jesus’ obedience. Where mankind had been disobedient through Adam, through Jesus’ obedience, mankind was reconciled to God. This was a gift, an unmerited, free gift of God’s grace. This question was posed this way in a seminary lecture by Professor Gerhard Forde and bears repeating exactly as I found it in a commentary: “Now that you don’t have to do anything for salvation, what are you going to do?” We believe we are justified by our faith, not by our works...yet doesn’t that leave us with this very beautiful and also very aggravating question...nothing we do will “earn” us anything more...all we need is a gift of God’s mercy and grace...so now what are we supposed to do? As I said, good questions often give us challenges not easy to answer. Within today’s Roman’s passage we have Paul’s answer: Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith God has assigned. For as in one body we have many

members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another.” Some two thousand plus years after Jesus asked that second question of that first group that he had gathered, and they first began to discover for themselves that the answer would not be a simple one; that it would challenge many things that they thought that they knew. We still are facing that question. Who do we think that Jesus is? We face that question as individuals. We face that question in the way that we make decisions about how we spend our money, about what groups we support, about the things we say and do. We face that question in how those choices we make and the identity that we claim show that identity to the society and community around us. So both of these questions are important for how we live our lives. Jesus asks us: “Who do you say that I am?” And if we believe, as Paul writes in Romans and as we confess in our doctrine that he is the Messiah, that we are justified by our faith, “Now what are we supposed to do?” In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.