

Sermon 2009 Pentecost 9
8-2-09
Text: John 6: 22-35
Theme: "Ask the Right Question"

One of the great theologians of our day is the Australian, Norman Nagel who was the Dean of Chapel at Valparaiso for many years, Chairman of Systematics at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis and is now retired. He has a wonderful gift of leading people to think through a situation from all sides before coming to a conclusion. Too often Christians jump to spouting off with theological rhetoric instead of struggling to engage the issue at hand with precise and straightforward questions. For instance, we hear that kind of theological spouting from both the Pro-Life and Pro-Choice camps in Christendom.

One day, a student was truly struggling with an issue and Dr. Nagel kept offering more pieces of the puzzle instead of an answer to his dilemma. Finally in frustration, the student asked,

"Dr. Nagel, why can't you ever just give a straight answer?"

Dr. Nagel looked thoughtfully at the student and then answered,

"I'll give you the right answer just as soon as you ask me the right question." See we so often want the answer, but we

don't want to have to really think out the question. People were angry with Jesus for the same reason. The Gospel according to John seems to portray Jesus as the Riddler, never giving a straight answer and always speaking in stories and asking seemingly obtuse questions. But Jesus too wants us to think through what we are asking and why we are asking it and in so doing, we will discover the answer.

He had fed 5,000 men and their families and then quietly disappeared to be by himself. The crowd went looking for him and when they found him, they did not ask the real question on their minds, which was "hey Lord, what's for dinner – and by the way I have this sore shoulder, oh, and my brother really needs a job, and by the way Bread King...and by the way – since the boats were all left on the opposite side, HOW did you get here?" Jesus knew why they came looking for him and he knew that the question "Rabbi, when did you get here?" was not the right question. They were not even concerned about how he got there because they were not looking for a Messiah to save them from

their sins but a sugar daddy to relieve them from work and the stresses of life.

Material things, whether they be food, possessions or even people have always been our downfall. Adam and Eve chose the fruit over God. The people of the Exodus made an idol of everything from gold to food and water. What is that hole within our being that so craves to be filled and yet we so often miss what fills it because it is not what we think we want. Instead, we frantically accumulate. Children have huge collections of all manner of things and no matter how much they have, it is never enough: action figures, legos, baseball cards, for me it was bottle caps. Adults collect things that give them status in their own minds: luxury items, bigger and better jobs, trophy spouses. Even the patients suffering from dementia in the nursing home will be found with drawers full of other people's dentures. Why do we do this? I think it is because we are asking wrong questions.

We decide what will make us happy and then we ask the Lord to give it to us. We decide what we need to do and then

proceed without asking for the Lord's advice. In the movie "This Christmas," there's a great line. As the matriarch of the family deals with all the challenges of hosting Christmas for 6 adult children and their families, she says,

"Wanna make the Lord laugh? Just tell him what you're gonna do."

So how do we come up with the right question, so that we can get a right answer? I think it has something to do with integration of our Spiritual selves with our Material selves. Jesus proves to us that he is fully capable of providing for our every material need. He is even able to raise to life our dead bodies and he demonstrates for us his care and concern for even our most simple needs, like the need for food and water. But he always reminds us that Spiritual matters always supersede Material matters. Of course you need food and water and shelter and work and people who love you – that's a given – don't worry about it. Jesus' death on the cross for you and resurrection from the dead proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that he has ultimate

love for you and ultimate power to provide EVERYTHING – even eternal life.

But then we focus all of our attention on petty things like bread and water and all those things we love to collect. Folks, Jesus is not your uncle Max who works at the Cell and get you free hot dogs and a seat upgrade. He is the Lord of all and if he intercedes in your life with respect to material things it is for His greater glory and to equip you to complete your calling not to give you a peachy life because you are such a great Christian.

The right questions are questions such as,

“Lord, what are you teaching me? What is the lesson here?”

“Lord, how can I better use this gift to serve you and help others?” Now those are right questions and when asked, be prepared for always exciting, sometimes startling and very pointed answers. AMEN.