

WHAT IS EASIEST TO SAY?

Steve Zeisler

When Adam and Eve had fallen into sin and were hiding from the Lord God among the trees of the garden, he came seeking them not with a rebuke but with a question: "Where are you?" (Genesis 3:9.) Obviously, divine questions are never asked to get information. God knew where they were, they didn't hide so well that he couldn't find them. So the question "Where are you?" was meant to be answered on a deeper level. He asked the question because he wanted Adam and Eve to discover things that they were hiding from themselves.

Answering God's questions teaches us truths about ourselves that we would otherwise not know. The penetrating questions of God prepare us to hear the rest of what he will say, the words of comfort, challenge, warning, correction, promise, prophecy, salvation, and hope. We live in a culture awash in possessions and drowning in information, but with a profound sickness of soul. I propose that we spend some weeks this summer considering diagnostic questions posed by the Physician, who came to care for damaged souls.

The gospel of Mark is the most vivid and dramatic of the gospels. It doesn't have long teaching sections such as the Sermon on the Mount, which is in Matthew. Mark is a shorter gospel in which events move quickly. Often we find one of Jesus' penetrating questions at the heart of Mark's description of events. These questions in this gospel will be our focus in this sermon series.

Let's read Mark 2:1-12:

A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. So many gathered that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them. Some men came, bringing to him a paralytic, carried by four of them. Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus and, after digging through it, lowered the mat the paralyzed man was lying on. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, "Why does this fellow talk like that? he's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, "Why are you thinking these things? Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins...." He said to the paralytic, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God....

The first part of Jesus' two-part question in this passage is "Why are you thinking these things?" The second part is "Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'?"

As illustrated earlier by God's question to Adam and Eve when they were hiding in the Garden, Jesus didn't ask the teachers of the law, "Why are you thinking these things?" because he didn't know. Rather, he wanted them to answer the question, to consider why it was that what they believed about God led them to anger and rejection of the possibility of forgiveness of sins rather than hope. Put another way, he was asking them, "What is it you believe about God? What sort of God do you serve?" Many people who have a religious heritage, who are familiar with "church," possess a distorted view of the grace of God. That is at the root of Jesus' question, "Why are you thinking these things?"

The second part of Jesus' question is more logic-based. He asked them to draw a conclusion, and then he acted to prove the point: "If I can do the apparently more difficult, visible, thing, then doesn't it seem that I

can also do the invisible thing?"

THE CIRCUMSTANCES OBSERVED

Before we concentrate on these questions, let's make some observations about the story. In Mark 2:1, we are told that Jesus was at home in Capernaum. Some translations say, "in the house," but it's probably an idiom that means "at home." We know that Jesus grew up in Nazareth. Capernaum and Nazareth are not far from each other. Luke 4:16 tells us that Jesus returned to his hometown, Nazareth, after his baptism and temptation in the wilderness, but was then so thoroughly rejected by the people with whom he grew up that he left Nazareth and made Capernaum, a fishing village on the Sea of Galilee, his home base for the three years of his public ministry.

Commentators are uncertain of exactly what the notion of Jesus' being "at home" means. Perhaps his mother and brothers had also moved to Capernaum, and it was their home in which he had a room. It may have been the home of Simon Peter's family, as mentioned in chapter 1, where Jesus lived. He may have had his own place, not one that he owned, but one that was made available to him for use as needed.

In verse 11 the paralytic was told to take his mat and "go home," which may suggest that he was also from Capernaum or nearby.

Verse 4 tells us that these four companions dug through the roof to lower their paralyzed friend to Jesus, bringing us to the questions of the physical circumstances in which this event took place. I recently visited Capernaum with a group on a study trip to Israel. Our group included a couple of folks in wheelchairs. I noticed that even today, Capernaum is not an easy place in which to maneuver if you are disabled. The roads are not paved smoothly, stairs and vertical rises make it difficult to get around, and you must rely on your friends to help you travel there if you're not ambulatory.

The homes were small. The crowd filling this home might have numbered fifty, at most one hundred, and we know they were spilling out into the street. The walls were made of stone, but the roofs had beams across them, between which straw and thatch were packed together with clay. Most homes had stairways leading to the rooftops so people could ascend on hot evenings and enjoy the breeze, using the roof as a sort of porch. Apparently what these men did was climb up the exterior stairway to the roof, dig out the clay and the thatch from between the beams to open a hole in the roof, and lower their friend down to Jesus.

WHAT DOES FAITH LOOK LIKE?

Another observation to make is that Jesus reacted to the faith of this paralyzed man and his four friends (verse 5). Jesus discovered faith everywhere. He had a wonderful way of seeing faith when people might not have even been aware of it in themselves.

Let's consider why Jesus concluded that he was seeing faith as this man descended before him from the hole in the roof. If you were going to visit a famous rabbi who had a large following, who possessed some degree of prominence, and if you wanted to treat the rabbi respectfully, as Jews were taught to do, and in addition you wanted him to heal your friend, you would certainly try to make a good impression by treating him well. The last thing you would do is tear up his house! It is completely counterintuitive that you would destroy this rabbi's house and then ask him for a favor, that you would expect him to treat you well after that. It is that exact counter-intuitiveness, I believe, that Jesus read as faith.

These men evidently had heard him talk about himself. He said the Son of Man had come to seek and to save that which was lost. He said the Shepherd would leave the ninety-nine in the pen and go out and find the one that was still lost and desperate. He said he was the Physician who had come for the sick rather than for the well. I am sure that throughout his teaching in these opening days in the Galilean ministry, Jesus repeatedly made the point that needy, broken, hurting, and desperate people were the very ones for whom he had come and on whom his ministry was focused, that he was God's representative to meet their need.

And these men were audacious enough to believe him! They were boldly saying, "If you say so, we are going

to trust that you care more about people than buildings, and we are going to tear a hole in your roof and put before you one of the very kinds of people you said you have come to help." They believed the things that he had said about himself and they acted on their belief. They were willing to go to lengths that other people would question.

That illustrates a point about how we experience the Christian life. Is there anything bold about your faith? Jacob wrestled with the angel, the preincarnate Jesus. He held on all night and said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me" (Genesis 32:26). We can have a passion for God based on believing his promises, that is willing to break out of ruts and do the extravagant thing.

When we are asked to describe our relationship with God, if the first adjective that springs to our minds is "polite," then we have a problem. It means that we are not listening. There needs to be a boldness with which we confront the Lord, and insist in his presence that we are going to take his word seriously and we likewise expect him to take us seriously.

A hole in the roof was no problem for Jesus. People have always been, and remain, more important than buildings to him. So he saw faith in the choices made by these five men.

HOPE AND DESPERATION

Let's take a further step back and look not at the details, but at the whole, rather peculiar story. There are a number of unaddressed questions in this passage. For one, how did the paralyzed man's situation come to be so urgent? Jesus was at home. He had been traveling, but was now home with no indication that he would be going anywhere soon. The paralytic evidently also lived in Capernaum, which was not a very big town, and he was not likely to be going anywhere. The condition of being paralyzed is the opposite of an emergency. The very physical condition meant that his circumstance didn't change, which was one of the things that made it awful.

Joni Eareckson Tada has told the story of her paralysis: she was a young woman who dived into a lake, broke her neck, and became a quadriplegic. She spent a long time after her injury filled with anger and despair that her life would ever amount to anything. She acknowledged that one of the things that most infuriated her about her condition in those early months was that she was physically unable even to commit suicide.

The circumstances for this man were going to be the same the next day, and the next. So we need to ask how his friends came to decide, "This is so important that we can't wait a moment longer. "They could not wait for Jesus' teaching to end and for the crowd to disperse."

The urgency in this case was not the man's physical condition. Later, when Jesus was invited to come and heal a synagogue official's daughter, the official pleaded, "Hurry, she's dying, there's not a moment to lose!" (Mark 5:23). When Lazarus was dying, his sisters sent word, "Please come and help, he's on the verge of death. It's a crisis!" (John 11). But in Capernaum that day, it was not a life-or-death situation, yet these men felt tremendous pressure to accomplish quickly the concern that brought them to Jesus. Why would that be?

I believe the lame man was in spiritual crisis. Hebrews 4:7 offers us a warning: "Therefore God again set a certain day, calling it Today..."

'Today, if you hear his voice,

do not harden your hearts.'"

There comes a time in every relationship when a decision must be made that will change everything. And when God himself draws near and we hear his voice, postponement leads to a hard heart. The Holy Spirit was speaking to the lame man and the man could not wait till later to know what Jesus would say to him. His despair, depression, bitterness, perhaps years of having blamed God for his paralysis, the way he treated people around him, the sorrows he experienced, all had finally become so heavy that he realized he could not go on anymore without some response from the man of God. And so his friends assisted him with this urgent visit.

Another peculiarity about this story is that nobody talked about the obvious. I can be distracted by sitting next to a wiggly child in church; and here these people were having a Bible study with Jesus when a hole opened in the roof, with falling dust and straw and noise. Not one person asked, "Why in the Sam Hill are you putting a hole in the roof? Who do you think you are?" There was no indignation, no anger, no question, no order to get off the roof, nothing! It was as though nobody noticed.

Another thing nobody appeared to notice was that the man was paralyzed. His friends lowered him down, and, being immobilized, all he could do was stare up into Jesus' eyes, yet nobody said, "This poor man-what a horrible life he must live." There was no expression of compassion or sympathy.

The two most obvious things in the story went completely unaddressed. Now that's an odd story, but it's odd on purpose, isn't it? Again, the missing elements tell us something. The need this man had was for his sins to be forgiven. The paralysis was not the main point, and the hole in the roof was not something that concerned Jesus, because people were more important to him than buildings. Jesus' focus, then and now, is on what is important, not on the curiosities of the moment.

WHAT SORT OF GOD DO YOU SERVE?

Finally, let's return to the two questions that Jesus asked the teachers of the law. He had forgiven the paralytic's sins and given him relief from his desperation over all the things he had done to drive a wedge between himself and God. The man was free of his urgent spiritual burden. The knocking of a hole in the roof was of no consequence to Jesus. He had looked at the man and called him "Son," or "my child," a very tender endearment. Then Jesus asked the first of two questions of the experts in the law: "Why are you thinking these things?"

What are we to learn from this? Remember that he was not asking because he wanted information. He already knew what they were thinking in their hearts and why they were thinking it: "Why, this man is a blasphemer. He is claiming to do what only God can do!" "How dare he?" He's flippant about things that God takes very seriously!" Knowing all of that, Jesus still asked them the question, "Why?" I believe what he was truly asking was, "What kind of God do you serve?"

Jesus had driven demons from people. He had been teaching extraordinary truths. We know from chapter 1 that he taught with authority, unlike other teachers, and that great crowds of people were following him to hear what he had to say. John the Baptist, a man of undoubted prophetic credentials, had proclaimed him the Messiah, "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29.) What the teachers of the law ought to have asked him, even if they could not yet believe, was, "What do you mean? How can these things be? What new thing might God be doing from which we can learn?" But they did not ask those things, because they had already concluded that God does not forgive sins so easily.

It is the kind of problem religious people always have: The more knowledge we gain, and the more we are involved in churches and Bible studies and Christian groups and so on, the more we learn to hide sin rather than see it forgiven. The more acquainted we are with religious hypocrisy, the more certain we are that God does not want sins out in the open, that he does not want them forgiven, that he does not want to relieve people of burdens. The weight of sinfulness and uncertainty and hypocrisy often make people excellent church members.

One of the ways religious institutions manipulate people is by keeping them uncertain of their forgiveness. No one should utter such a simple statement. In one sentence the entire burden of a lifetime of failure is lifted: "Child, your sins are forgiven." It cannot be that easy. What will the great institutions built around religious performance do if forgiveness is so easily obtained?

The simple point is, Do we serve a God who is passionate about forgiving sins, who loves to remove burdens from people, who is generous with grace and mercy, who characteristically does good for us rather than raising his eyebrow at us and remaining distant? *Of course* . Of course his Son will speak of mercy and love, the removal of burdens, and the giving of life. That is God's nature. I believe the problem these teachers of

the law had was the problem that folks like us have, so it is worth asking, "Why do we have so much trouble forgiving ourselves? Why do we have so much trouble welcoming hardened sinners or difficult people and sharing with them a word of forgiveness? Why are we more comfortable with performance? Why would we rather live with cover-up than with forgiveness?" Ultimately, the answer to all of that is that underneath we don't truly believe God is gracious. We think such speech is blasphemy.

DOES JESUS HAVE AUTHORITY TO FORGIVE?

Jesus' other question is one of logic: "If I can do the more difficult, external, visible thing, isn't it likely that I can also do the invisible thing?" This addresses the question of whether Jesus Christ has the authority to declare, "Your sins are forgiven. The struggle is over. You and God are in perfect relationship again. There is nothing from your past that clings to you any longer." If Jesus has the authority to forgive sins, then who has the authority to bind them to us? What voice inside us has the right to put guilt trips back on us? Where does that voice come from? If Jesus himself says we are forgiven, on what basis should anyone else claim we are not?

Jesus has the authority to forgive sins because he is God the Son, born into the human family. He lived a sinless life. At his baptism his Father spoke from heaven and said, "You are My son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). At his Transfiguration his Father spoke from heaven and said, "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!" (Mark 9:7.) He gave up his life voluntarily as the sin-bearer and was raised again on the third day. That is why he has the authority to tell people like us that our sins are forgiven, and no one has the right to challenge him. The guilt trips that we hold on to are a denial of his authority to set us free.

Jesus said, "Child, your sins are forgiven." This is his message to people like us-people who are aware of our failure, who know there are things about us that we would be ashamed if anyone else ever knew, who long for some relief from the struggle, who want to believe that God will be for us, not against us, who want to start today's battle with a sense that God is on our side, not removed from us by some distance or barrier, who need the hope that goes along with forgiveness.

Jesus has the authority to forgive sins. Let us shake off paralysis, pick up our mats, and walk.

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Steve Zeisler
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