

Ask the Hard Questions  
2 Kings 2:1-15; Acts 16:16-34; John 17:20-26

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Our Old Testament and Acts Lessons this morning are wonderful, wonderful stories. I'm sure many of us know them well.

Elijah and Elisha, slowly making their way to the Jordan. A great chariot of fire swings low, and Elijah is taken home. 'Swing low, sweet chariot'.

Our Acts lesson picks up where last week's leaves off. Paul and Silas are in Philippi, what is today Northeastern Greece. They run afoul of some local businessmen who have them arrested and beaten on trumped up charges. At midnight they are in jail, singing hymns and praying to God. 'Paul and Silas sittin' in jail, got no one for to pay their bail. Put your hand on the plow, hold on.'

They're wonderful, moving stories about the power of God and what God can do in our lives. But there's also something disturbing about them, something deeply unsettling. You see, both stories challenge the status quo. They subvert the dominant paradigm. They ask hard questions about how things are done.

Three times, Elijah tells Elisha to stay put. Three times the master tells the servant what to do. This is hierarchy. This is patriarchy. Everyone would have told Elisha to do what Elijah said. But three times, Elisha refuses to do as he's told. Three times, Elisha challenges the status quo. He subverts the dominant paradigm. Three times, Elisha asks a very hard question. 'When do you obey your master, and when do you not?' When do you obey your master, and when do you not?

Paul and Silas are in jail. An earthquake sets them free. If it had been me, I'd have been out of there. Falsely accused, beaten with rods, nothing but a kangaroo court in your future. I'd have been gone and everyone in Philippi would have agreed. Get out while you can.

But Paul and Silas don't do what everyone else would do. They don't follow the herd. They challenge the status quo. They

subvert the dominant paradigm. They ask a very hard question. 'When do you follow public opinion and do what everyone else does, and when do you not?' When do you follow public opinion, and when do you not?

Elisha, Paul and Silas are not the only ones asking hard questions. The Bible is full of people asking hard questions. Jesus himself is constantly questioning the wisdom of the pharisees and the religious elite. Jesus is constantly questioning, debating back and forth with those around him.

And we who worship God, we who follow Jesus, that's what we do, too. We challenge the status quo. We subvert the dominant paradigm. We ask hard questions.

One of the issues with our culture, even with the world as a whole, is there is too much certainty. Too much, 'I'm right, you're wrong.' Too much 'This is what we've always done.' Too much 'Don't ask questions.' There are too few people and too little space to ask hard questions.

One of the gifts we Christians can give the world is asking hard questions and providing space for others to ask hard questions. This is especially true for us as Presbyterians. We are a thoughtful people. We think things through. We are not afraid of asking hard questions.

Is abortion always wrong? Is abortion always a valid option? Is abortion wrong in some instances but a loving, viable alternative in others? It's a hard question. A gift we can give is asking it.

Is America a Christian nation? We say we are one nation under God, and in God we trust, but do we live up to the teachings of Christ? Is a nation where young children are increasingly violently murdered by strangers with guns a Christian nation? Is America perhaps not yet a Christian nation but aspires to be a Christian nation? It's a hard question. A gift we can give is space to ask it.

Did Jesus really do miracles? Did Jesus really multiply loaves and fishes and walk on water? Or are those just stories, allegories made up to signify something greater? It's a hard question. A gift we can give is honestly, thoughtfully and reverently asking it.

Does God really love me? When my relationships have crumbled, when my job is being downsized, when the doctor clears

her throat before delivering the news, does God really love me? It's a hard question. A gift we can offer is space to ask it.

As Easter people, a gift we can give the world is the chance to ask hard questions, space for asking the questions the powers and principalities don't want us to ask. Not just to be contrarian or stir up trouble. We ask questions because in asking and answering we learn more about ourselves. We learn more about God. We grow closer to God and become more like God.

In The Institutes of the Christian Religion, John Calvin says, "Without knowledge of self, there is no knowledge of God. Nearly all wisdom consists of two parts: knowledge of God and of ourselves. But ... which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern."

Calvin's point is the more we know ourselves, the more we know how much God loves us. The more we know how much God loves us, the more we know ourselves. To become more like God, we need to know more about ourselves. One way to do that is by asking hard questions.

Being more like God is what Jesus is talking about in his prayer in our Gospel lesson. "As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us.... The glory you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me."

By daring to ask hard questions, we learn more about ourselves and God. By daring to ask hard questions we grow closer to God and live the way God wants us to live. We become more and more like God. By asking hard questions, we can become more and more like God.

In this life we will never get it right 100% of the time. We are flawed. We are fallen, sinful. But we can minister to the world, and become more like God, by daring to ask hard questions. When we, like Elisha, like Paul and Silas, like Jesus himself, dare to challenge the status quo, subvert the dominant paradigm, ask hard questions about what we've always believed and what we've always done.

By God's grace, may we ask hard questions.

By God's grace, may we do it well. Amen.