

“Don’t Ask”

The Rev. Ryan Wiksell



September 22, 2024

18th Sunday after Pentecost

St. Michael’s Episcopal Church

Independence, MO

May I speak with the Breath of God, from the Word of God, in the Name of God, Amen.

- Funny Questions kids ask in church:
 - Did God mean for the giraffe to look like that or was it an accident?
 - How come God hasn't invented any new animals lately? We still have just all the old ones.
 - I went to this wedding and they kissed right in church. Is that ok?
- But there are serious questions too...
 - Who created God?
 - Do I have to be nice to everyone? What about strangers?
 - What about kids who never hear about Jesus? Do they still go to heaven?
- Those first few questions are fun to laugh at. And not too hard to answer.
- But the second set of questions are trickier. We may even answer by saying "Go ask your mother."
 - In other words: Don't ask me that.

- One time when Asher and Anya were three years old, we were playing at the little playground on our seminary campus
 - And Anya spotted a dead bird underneath the equipment
 - Anya *loves* birds...
 - The moment almost felt like a seminary exam question.
 - And I was starting to sweat, not knowing how to explain this to a 3-year old
 - But just then, a professor of mine came walking out of her house and passing by, so I asked her if she could explain it.
 - She was perhaps the most pastoral professor on campus
 - And I wish I could remember what she said. But whatever it was, the twins accepted it, and didn't lose their minds like I thought they might.
- But in that moment, I didn't want them to see that dead bird. Because I didn't want to handle the questions. Just don't ask.
- But kids always ask, don't they?
 - Unless they've been traumatized, God forbid... kids are not afraid to ask questions, no matter how afraid we might be to try and answer them.

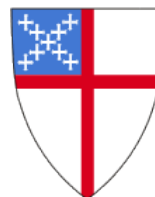
- Just a few months later the murder of George Floyd was all over the news, and since there were protests and posters everywhere, we made the decision to tell them about it.
- And that raised many, many questions. For months.
- It was so intense we started to wonder if we'd made the right decision.
- Because kids are not afraid to ask.
- Are you afraid to ask hard questions? I definitely can be.
 - James touches on this in his letter, where he writes
 - “You do not have because you do not ask.”
 - If a question is bothering you for years and years, maybe that's because you're afraid to ask it.
- Jesus' disciples were afraid to ask him what he meant by being killed, and after three days rising again.
 - Because they were more comfortable with their delusions of victory, than the suffering of Jesus. They were looking forward to being vindicated, but they were afraid Jesus was saying they would not be vindicated, but subjugated.
- Or... maybe you're afraid to ask because you've been burned before.

- You asked a hard question and were scolded even for asking.
- Or told that it was simply “a mystery”. Or that you need to stop doubting and just “have faith”
- I hope no one is ever afraid to ask me a question.
 - I’ve tried to model this here at St. Michael’s
 - But just so it’s as clear as possible...
 - I will never make you feel bad for asking a question
 - And I will always answer it honestly.
 - As long as it’s *my truth* to tell, I will tell you.
 - Sometimes an honest answer would betray confidentiality,
 - Or it would be too personal. We all have our own agency in that regard.
 - But I will always tell you what I actually believe
 - And sometimes the answer is “I don’t know” or “I’m still working on that” but I will discuss it with you and offer some resources to keep exploring.
- Maybe your question isn’t about God or Christianity
 - Maybe you want to ask if you can take on a certain role
 - Or maybe you want to let go of a certain role
 - But you’re afraid to ask

- We need a lot of work in this area, as a culture.
- The other day I asked a long-time parishioner if she would contribute to Coffee Hour refreshments on a monthly basis
 - I had never asked this particular person to do anything before, so frankly I was a little nervous to ask. But I did anyway.
 - And she said no. But she was gracious, and went out of her way to show me why she needed to say no.
 - And I felt loved and respected by this interaction.
 - That should be our model here.
 - Don't be afraid to ask. And don't be afraid to say no.
- So how do we get better at this? By improving our relationships
 - And that's the point of these affirmations
 - Often we assume the people around us are suspicious of us, or annoyed by us
 - And the love we have in our hearts for each other stays hidden.
- You might have some questions about today's readings that I didn't get to:
 - Why are we reading a proverb about the perfect wife? Aren't we past that kind of thinking?

- And I would answer... yes, I suppose we are. But I see Proverbs 31 as an ancient love letter from an ancient husband. It's not God telling us how all women should behave (it's wildly unreasonable). It's an over-the-top valentine that might just as well be in Song of Solomon as in Proverbs.
- Or... How can you stand up there and call yourself our priest, when Jesus says you should strive to be last?
 - And I would answer... yes, that bothers me sometimes. But Jesus didn't shy away from leadership. He still taught with authority, and invited people to follow him. But he wanted to show them a completely different picture of what leadership means.
- And I hope we can all grow into a different picture of what being a community means.
 - A place where we are not afraid to ask. And not afraid to answer honestly.
 - And if you need a teacher in this regard... somebody to model fearless asking and honest answering...
 - Just look for a little kid.
- Amen.

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the
Sunday closest to September 21



Proper 20
Year B
RCL

<i>Track 1</i>	<i>or</i>	<i>Track 2</i>
Proverbs 31:10-31		Wisdom of Solomon 1:16-2:1, 12-22
Psalms 1		<i>or</i> Jeremiah 11:18-20
James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a		Psalms 54
Mark 9:30-37		James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a
		Mark 9:30-37

The Collect

Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Old Testament

Proverbs 31:10-31

A capable wife who can find?
She is far more precious than jewels.
The heart of her husband trusts in her,
and he will have no lack of gain.
She does him good, and not harm,
all the days of her life.

She seeks wool and flax,
and works with willing hands.
She is like the ships of the merchant,
she brings her food from far away.
She rises while it is still night
and provides food for her household
and tasks for her servant-girls.
She considers a field and buys it;
with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.
She girds herself with strength,
and makes her arms strong.
She perceives that her merchandise is profitable.
Her lamp does not go out at night.
She puts her hands to the distaff,
and her hands hold the spindle.
She opens her hand to the poor,
and reaches out her hands to the needy.
She is not afraid for her household when it snows,
for all her household are clothed in crimson.
She makes herself coverings;
her clothing is fine linen and purple.
Her husband is known in the city gates,
taking his seat among the elders of the land.
She makes linen garments and sells them;
she supplies the merchant with sashes.
Strength and dignity are her clothing,
and she laughs at the time to come.
She opens her mouth with wisdom,
and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.
She looks well to the ways of her household,
and does not eat the bread of idleness.

Her children rise up and call her happy;
her husband too, and he praises her:

“Many women have done excellently,
but you surpass them all.”

Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain,
but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.

Give her a share in the fruit of her hands,
and let her works praise her in the city gates.

The Psalm

Psalm 1

Beatus vir qui non abiit

- 1 Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked, *
nor lingered in the way of sinners,
nor sat in the seats of the scornful!
- 2 Their delight is in the law of the LORD, *
and they meditate on his law day and night.
- 3 They are like trees planted by streams of water,
bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither; *
everything they do shall prosper.
- 4 It is not so with the wicked; *
they are like chaff which the wind blows away.
- 5 Therefore the wicked shall not stand upright when judgment comes, *
nor the sinner in the council of the righteous.
- 6 For the LORD knows the way of the righteous, *
but the way of the wicked is doomed.

The Epistle

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, **willing to yield**, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, **because you do not ask**. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

The Gospel

Mark 9:30-37

Jesus and his disciples passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” But they did not understand what he was saying and were **afraid to ask him**.

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” But **they were silent**, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last

of all and servant of all.” Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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