

Lectionary 26 A Pentecost 16A

October 1, 2023

Ezekiel 18:1-4,25-32; Psalm 25:1-9; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, Christ our Savior and the Spirit who opens our hearts and minds to the word.

Perhaps like me you grew up in a time when learning involved a lot of sitting and listening...a lot of reading and writing... and a whole lot of memorizing facts and information. Maybe that's how it still is!

But in those pre-google, pre-smart phone days, memorizing was thought to be the only sure way of accessing information quickly and accurately. And to be sure you'd mastered all those details there was a barrage of tests and quizzes, mostly of the short answer variety: fill in the blank....multiple choice....true or false.

Sometimes the answers came easily.

Fill in the blank: Spain is a country in_____?

Circle the correct answer: Which creature is a mammal:

- a. canary
- b. octopus
- c. elephant
- d. spider.

True or False: John Adams was the first president of the United States.

That was easy right? Each of those had a definite answer, one you could check by looking in the encyclopedia or atlas or almanac....remember now, this is before the internet.

But alas, sometimes the questions were trickier.

The best way to travel to Spain is by_____?

Which creature is found in water?

- a. canary
- b. whale
- c. elephant
- d. spider

True or False: Abraham Lincoln was the best president of the United States.

Now the answer is not so simple. For example, if you want to make getting there a part of your vacation, you might want take a cruise ship to Spain...but if your business conference is tomorrow, well then a plane is best. And, even if they don't live in the water, who hasn't seen elephants splashing around some lake or river on a National Geographic special? Lincoln is indeed rated highly among the list of US presidents, but there could certainly be some competition for best. I mean, is it best known?...best overall?...best foreign policy?... best economics?

Now, even if you chose correctly on all the technical points and matched every answer to the one expected by the giver of the test...scoring 10 out of 10 and meriting a star at the top of your paper and an A on your report card...it doesn't necessarily mean that you understand the geography of Europe and the relationship to that Spain with has to the rest of the continent...or that you will be able to find either a whale or a bathing elephant anywhere near Norwood. And clearly, there is more to understanding political history than a public opinion poll ranking presidents.

A or b? True or false? Yes or no? Sometimes questions are deeper than they first appear, more complex than the yes or no response requested. And often, such questions generate not answers, but instead more questions.

Today it is the Chief Priests and Elders who are attempting to test Jesus: *By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority?* They are upset with Jesus, to put it mildly. This conversation takes place in Jerusalem on the day after Jesus

rides in on a donkey, as the people line his path with palm branches and cloaks and greet him joyfully with hosannas. It comes after he has entered the temple and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold the sacrificial doves, accusing them of turning the temple....*my house of prayer...into a den of robbers*. It comes after he cures the blind and the lame who have followed him inside that beautiful building, a place from which they have previously been excluded.

Clearly he needs to explain himself...to clarify his credentials ...to follow the rules that have been so diligently defined throughout the centuries...to prove himself to them, the appointed authorities who take their position...and more importantly, their power...very seriously.

Alas, their test is cancelled. It is Jesus who puts *them* to the test, posing tricky questions that, like those of a really good teacher, makes us all stop and think.

Jesus begins at the beginning of his ministry which has rattled the establishment all along. In asking them about John the Baptist and the authority behind his baptizing, the question really asks the religious authorities not only to support or deny John's ministry... and therefore Jesus' ministry too...but also to choose to support or displease the crowd that is listening in on this confrontation. You see, if they choose to honor John's ministry as from God, they win the crowd that supports him but condemn themselves and their own stick-to-the-rules reluctance to repent and be baptized by John. In the absence of a safe answer, they throw up their hands and say, I don't know!

And when Jesus asks about the obedience of the two sons to their father in the story about working in the vineyard, he is posing another complicated choice: *both* sons have dishonored their father, one by refusing publicly to listen to his father and the other by not doing what the father asked.

In arranging question so that the publicly "good son" loses and the publicly "bad son" wins, he is also asking those publicly good leaders to look in the mirror and decide if they are really serving God...really leading God's people as God would have them led...or just giving lip service to God's will and actually following their own desires and preferences.

Yes or no? A, B, C? All of the above?

This simple short answer quiz is neither simple nor short. Nor is it meant just for that small group of temple elders. When Jesus asks, *what do you think* -- he is asking us, too...the church today and the people of God wherever we are.

Accepting God's authority and doing God's will involves a lifetime of learning and listening, and a healthy mix of saying and doing. God is always calling us to stop and listen and pray, to change our minds and our hearts and bring them back in line with God's plan for a healthy and holy world.

We can't get comfortable in our modern day temples and with our modern day check lists either. We can't coast on our traditional authority and the correct boxes checked in our constitution and on our personal resume. We can review our mission statement to be sure we have included welcome, witness, worship and spreading God's word. We can memorize the ten commandments, speak the creed word for word without looking, gather faithfully every Sunday rain or shine and fill the offering plate with our generous gifts and we are still not done. The class is not over, the term is not finished, the diploma is not in the mail.

Because, really, Jesus is not giving a short answer quiz, either to the disciples or the religious authorities back then or to us and the church today. Life in Christ is just that...life. It breathes and grows and moves through days and generations, opening doors and welcoming strangers, mending broken bodies and hearts, and picking up the pieces of shattered hopes and dreams and replacing them with lives of truth and justice and promise.

Life in Christ is not confined to one word answers and ovals neatly filled in with number two pencils...or clicked online. It does not stay confined within the walls of this building or limited to the hour from 10 to 11 on Sunday morning, but always moves outward and onward.

Erasers are allowed in the world of Jesus...retakes are encouraged...revised editions of the answer key are issued regularly. The focus is not on acing an exam but on the grace and mercy of the One who asks the questions, the One who wants everyone to pass with flying colors. Knowing who is God, knowing that God loves us and all the world is the essential data...and the best example of a passing grade is the life we live in Jesus' name, with one another, as the people of God, here and now.

Now to be honest, it is a lot simpler to memorize facts or consult the bible for literal definitions than to explain why one answer is better than another. There is something in all of us that wants check lists and minimum daily requirements so we know we are on the right track, but instead we get "Love one another" ...with the who and how and where and when left unsaid. Consensus on moral dilemmas is hard work and always changing, as is "agreeing to disagree" on the non-essentials – like worship styles or communion practices or biblical translations -- so that the core of Christ teaching remains unchanged. Being church together is an ongoing exercise in fine tuning, one that is shaped and reshaped by the One who calls us together and forms us into a living and breathing body...a body that is full of questions:

Who do we welcome and how?

What do we do...or not do to improve the conversation?

When do we step in and when do we let be?

What do we offer, and what do we take?

How do we spend our time, our energy, our money? How do we give back?

So here is a little study guide for the week, for each of us in our daily lives, and for all of us as God's church together, as we explore the answers and navigate the choices we are called to make:

Will this please God or not matter?

Will this help me grow in Christ's love or stifle it?

Will this serve others or hinder them?

Will this care for creation or harm God's earth?

Like good Jesus questions, these are at once simple and complex, and the answer today might be different than the one you give tomorrow. But in any case and in every case, Christ promises to be with us in the conversation, wisdom in hand and love in heart, prepping us for life's choices and filling in all our blanks.

Are you ready? There's no need to be anxious. This is an open book exam, and Jesus has already done all the heavy lifting and the end result is eternal life. There is no time limit and no proctor. We just pick up our prayers instead of pencils...open our eyes and hands and hearts... and begin a new day of life in the kingdom of God.

Amen.

Pastor Carolyn Tryggestad
Emmanuel Luther Church
Norwood, Massachusetts