A Questioning Mind

"Now so it was that after three days they found Jesus in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions."

Luke 2:46

A Sermon by Rev. Derek Elphick

Our text today provides a rare glimpse into the Lord's life prior to His public ministry. We're given a few details; the Lord was twelve years of age...and we're reminded that He's still under the care and supervision of His parents.

> And what was He doing?
> Sitting in the temple *listening* to the teachers and asking them *questions!*

The Lord continued this practice of asking questions throughout His public ministry. All told, the gospels record roughly 300 of them.

> These were not casual questions like,
> "What time is it?" or "What are you having for dinner?"

The Lord's questions are, perhaps unsurprisingly, *revelatory* and *instructional.* They have depth - they make you stop and *think* when He asks you:

> "Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothing?" (Mt. 6:25).
> "What does it profit a person if they gain the whole world but lose their soul? (Mt. 16:26).

Sometimes the Lord's questions *challenge* you when He asks,

> "Why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?" (Mt. 7:3).
> "O you of little faith, why are you so afraid?" (Mt. 8:2

Some of the Lord's questions to us are deeply *personal*. Here are a few examples:

> "Do you believe I am able to do this?" (Mt. 9:28)
> "Do you still not understand?" (Mt. 16:9)
> "Who do you say I am?" (Mt. 16:15)
> "What is it you want?" (Mt. 20:21)
> "What do you want Me to do for you?" (Mt. 20:32).
> "Why are you thinking these things?" (Mk. 2:8).
> "Do you want to get well?" (Jn. 5:6).

This is an important topic to explore because we can get to a stage in life when we *stop* asking questions, at least the ones that matter, like our relationship with God, and each other, and the nature of good and evil, and why it's important to persevere despite all our setbacks and disappointments. **As we will see in this sermon, staying curious and inquisitive about life is as important to our spiritual health and well-being as the air we breathe into our lungs.**

We tend to think of our youth as the peak period in our lives when we were naturally curious and asked a lot of questions. We say to ourselves:

> "Well, it was in school and during my formal education that I *needed* to ask a lot of questions, especially if I wanted to get a good grade and get a degree."
>
> "I also had many questions when I started my job, my new career, and when I first started dating, and got married and raised a family."

But *after* all those "firsts," a "been there, done that" mindset takes root. We start to lose our desire to question and seek answers; we start to lose our childhood innocence and curiosity which contained such a strong and vibrant sense of wonder and adventure.

There can be all sorts of reasons why we start to lose our inquisitive spirit.

One reason is because questions by their very nature can put us on the spot - they cut to the heart of the matter...like, "Why are you doing that?" "What are you saying?" "What do you want?"

(And we often learn *more* from the question than we do the answer!)

Questions can be very personal - and hit a nerve.
Questions can be confrontational, so much so that we simply avoid them.
Questions can reveal answers we don't like.
Questioning things opens up uncertainty - some questions don't have a simple answer or at least can't be fully explained or proven and our natural "scientific" mind gets uncomfortable with that.

Well, the Lord has given us a *questioning mind* for a reason - the recitation we recited together this morning reminds us that we've been created to *ask* questions, to *seek* answers, and to *knock* on doors until new ways of seeing things are opened up to us (Mt. 7:7).

We are to ask, seek and knock, not once or twice or just a handful of times, but *always...*

Why? Because it is by means of a questioning mind that we grow and mature, that the impossible becomes possible.

The teachings of our church point to some very powerful, hidden reasons why we lose our childhood sense of wonder. They also give us practical tools to rekindle it. As you we see, it has a lot to do with understanding what it is that *causes* us to doubt what the Lord teaches in His Word.

Listen to this teaching from Secrets of Heaven:

The truths that people *eagerly* learn and believe in their earliest years when they are a child but ***which later on they either confirm, have doubts about, or deny*** are these in particular: that there is a God, and He is one; that He created everything; that He rewards the good and punishes the evil; that there is a life

> after death when the evil go to hell and the good go to heaven, and so there is a hell and a heaven; that the life after death lasts forever; also, that people ought to pray every day and do so in a humble way; that they ought to keep the sabbath day holy, honor their parents, and not commit adultery, kill or steal, and many other truths like these.
>
> **Secrets of Heaven 5135:3**

As children, we had no problem believing in God, heaven and hell, the Ten Commandments, praying, loving our neighbor. These were all spiritual realities we eagerly, cheerfully accepted and believed.

But the teaching goes on to say that as adults, we gradually put what we learned in childhood into one of three "buckets:"

> **we either *accept* those spiritual truths** (as we often do)
> **or we have our *doubts* about them** (as we often do)
> **or we *deny* them** (which the hells are trying to get us to do)

In one of our readings this morning, we learned about the concept of "positive doubt." It sounds like a contradiction in that we don't typically view "doubts" about God, faith and religion as ever leading to a positive outcome, and yet this is precisely what we're encouraged to think and do.

Let's read that teaching again:

> There are two basic attitudes of mind. One leads to folly and insanity; the other, to all understanding and wisdom. The first is to deny everything. It is to say in our hearts, "I cannot believe these things until I am convinced of them by what I understand or sense." This principle that leads to complete folly and insanity, and it should be called the negative principle. The other is to affirm the teachings of doctrine that come from the Word, or to think and believe inside oneself that they are true because the Lord has said so. This is the principle that leads to all understanding and wisdom, and it should be called the affirmative principle.

The teaching ends with these powerful words:

> There are people who doubt and then deny, and there are people who doubt before accepting affirmatively. People who doubt and then deny are those who lean toward living an evil life. ***When this life sweeps them away***, then the more they think on such subjects, **the more negative they become.** People who doubt but then affirm, though, are those who lean toward living a good life. ***When they allow the Lord to bend them toward this kind of life***, then the more they think about such subjects, **the more affirmative they become**.
>
> **Secrets of Heaven 2568:4,6**

This is such an important teaching to absorb. In the context of today's sermon, we sometimes dare not ask the questions we want to ask because we fear the answer, and so we say,

> "I tried that already."
> "It didn't work."
> "What's the point?"
> "Nothing's going to change."

Where does this fear and negativity come from?

It comes from hell.

> Think about evil spirits - they're not inquisitive. They have no interest in higher things, in causes and purposes greater than themselves!
>
> They're interested in only one thing - self.
>
> This is why we need to be on our guard against the negativity they spew into our minds. They are the ones who seek to destroy our innocence, our curiosity, our questioning minds!

> Whenever we get wrapped up in ourselves or in worldly, material concerns we start to lose interest in everything outside ourselves - other people, events, ideas, etc. And since, as one teaching says, **"evil desires never unite with true thinking"** (AC 2689:3) their influence makes it so that we're not interested in God, in spiritual things, in pushing forward to create and innovate and make the world a better place.

Swedenborg interviewed evil spirits in the spiritual world many times. He was shocked to learn how *uninterested* they were in everything (except themselves) - God, religion, a life of charity and faith. They had no interest in other people (unless they promise to serve them in some way).

And so it is the presence of evil in and around us that shuts down our inquisitiveness for as we read today, ***"the real cause of the doubts and eventually of the negative thinking people develop originates in a life of evil"*** (AC 2689:3).

When we stop asking questions, we lose all forward motion.

> We develop a *"fixed mindset"* instead of a *"growth mindset."*
> We decide, perhaps unintentionally, that we're done "learning" and settle for the "status quo" and put our life on "autopilot."

And yet, how else can we navigate life, and ultimately the path toward heaven, without seeking greater clarity and understanding? How else can we break through our doubts and fears, without asking questions?

So the point of today's sermon is that questions are a powerful tool to get us unstuck.

The Lord asks us questions in His Word to help us re-frame our thinking.

The Lord expects us to have our doubts - think of Thomas. Just because we doubt something doesn't mean we're going to deny it. That's the power of positive doubt.

All that is required, as we read today, is that we "lean in the direction" of living a good life for then the Lord can "bend" us more and more in that direction and then despite the hard questions and difficult conversations we may have with the Lord in His Word, the more **"affirmative we [will] become"** (AC 2568:6).

Take, for example, the four steps of repentance. These can be turned into an affirmative activity simply by turning them into questions:

1. Am I examining myself?
2. Am I recognizing and acknowledging my sins?
3. Am I praying for help?
4. Have I begun a new life (see TC 530).

We tend to think of the Lord's Word as a series of stories and parables, as a series of commandments and teachings which, of course, is true but it's also important to pay special attention to the questions the Lord is asking us in His Word.

Let us not be afraid to answer those questions.

Let us re-capture the innocence and curiosity of our youth by accepting the Lord's invitation to become like a little child again.

Every day you can accept the Lord's invitation to ask, "and it will be given to you." You can accept the Lord's invitation to seek, "and you will find." And you can knock, and "it will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7).

AMEN.

Lessons: Luke 2:41-50; CL 183:2; AC 2568:4,6, 2689