

Jesus had this maddening tendency to give opaque answers to really clear questions, answers that instead of answering anything actually created more questions. It's amazing to me that we Christians have developed a religion that has so many answers when Jesus himself seldom did. His usual response to straight-forward questions was to tell a story that left the inquirer scratching his head. Like when his disciples asked him what the kingdom of God was like and he said it's like having 100 sheep and one goes missing and the shepherd leaves the 99 and goes after that 1. Huh? Or to Martha's question of why isn't Mary helping in the kitchen and Jesus says "only one thing is needed Martha and Mary has chosen the better portion? Huh? Or when Pilate says "are you the King of the Jews" and Jesus says "you say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and came into the world – to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who hears this truth listens to my voice." What? Or today's scripture is another case in point. To the question of whether James and John get the favored positions on Jesus' left and right in the world to come, Jesus says "whoever would be great among you must be your servant and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all." What?

Jesus seldom gave hard fast answers. Stories that made you wonder, he gave all the time, but answers that made the questioner say "oh, I see, that makes sense!", he seldom ever gave. And so that famous question "what would Jesus do?" sounds like a good question at first until you remember that most all of what Jesus *did* throughout the Gospels were things that no one seemed to get. They who walked with Jesus couldn't even tell you what Jesus would do, so shocking was most of what he did and said, like in response to that terrible tax collector, for instance, who is making life miserable for the most vulnerable of his own people and getting rich off of them. I bet Peter wouldn't have guessed in a million years that "what Jesus would do" was to invite himself over for dinner at the guys place.

And there's a reason Jesus was so unpredictable and so baffling to so many people and continues to be so today – love your enemy, judge not lest ye be judged, sell all your wealth and give your money to the poor – Jesus was so baffling because Jesus was not interested in and focused upon what most everyone else was interested in and

focused upon. He was not interested in matters of politics and social structures and the important issues of the day. He was not interested in standing with who was right against whoever was wrong. He was not interested in solving problems and creating institutions or organizations to make society better. Rather he was interested solely in matters of the soul. Or I could say it this way: he seemed to only be interested in matters of politics and society in so far as they bore upon the matters of the soul. Jesus' primary focus and end was the soul, not the nation or his Jewish people or his religion or his own physical well-being obviously but only matters of the soul. The soul was the point and if you look you'll find that he was constantly calling people on the carpet for placing religion or politics or sacred and civil laws over the soul.

The Quaker writer, Parker Palmer, often says, the soul is always and only to be honored as an end in itself. The soul will never show up, he says, if we approach it as a means to some other end. So to the issue of the occupation of Israel by Rome, where some held the position that the Jews should fight against Rome and others believed they should nonviolently resist them or others pushed for simply acquiescing and waiting things out, Jesus had no opinion. Even though it was as hot a religious and political issue as any we confront today. What would Jesus do? Jesus had nothing to say about it because the deeper issue, the issues of the soul would be there and probably be much the same whether they were liberated from Rome or not.

There are problems to be solved in our lives and in the world. Like what do we do about our crumbling steeple, which we don't have enough money to fix right now. That's a problem to solve. And there are questions that have answers, like if $350 \text{ over } 7,800 \text{ equals } x \text{ over } 100$, what is the value of x ? And there are broken things that need to be fixed like what do we do about the 47 million people in our country who don't have healthcare coverage. BUT when it comes to matters of the soul, such solving and answering and fixing is irrelevant. And when we do try to fix and answer definitively matters of the soul we often end up making more of a mess of things than we had on our hands or in our souls in the first place.

The way that the Franciscan priest Richard Rohr describes it is that our minds are naturally dualistic, discerning right from wrong, this from that, us from them, over here versus over there, while our souls are naturally non-dualistic or unitive. Take love for

example. When you love someone, which is a matter of the soul, all the categories that our minds can devise that separate and distinguish and discern really cease to mean anything, right? Love is a matter of the soul. Which is the fastest route to Burlington from Charlotte is a matter of the mind.

So you know what the difference is between a soul friend and a regular old friend? This Tuesday we have Soul Friend groups within the congregation who will be meeting for a second time and one critical rule in the soul friends groups is – no fixing. And that’s the difference between a regular ole friend and a soul friend. A soul is one who listen with an ear towards simply listening and not with an ear towards fixing. It’s the dualistic mind that’s always searching in our relating to others for how we can fix things, it’s the soul that is in the business of listening for listening’s sake. And so in these soul friend groups you are not allowed to listen to what’s going on for another person with an ear or eye towards how are you going to help them fix it. You are not to listen from here (the head) but from here (the heart). You can ask questions so you can hear better what the person is saying, but otherwise you just gotta listen. Isn’t that a remarkable concept! It accomplishes at least 2 things - it really makes it about the other person. If I am listening to your struggle, to your sharing with an ear towards how can I help you then really it becomes more about me than about you, doesn’t it? And secondly such an approach assumes that whatever answers or ways forward there are to be found are ultimately discovered within you, not by us saviors outside of you. Listening without judging or analyzing or fixing is one of the pathways into the soul and to free the soul up to finally come out of its hiding. How many of us are listened to in that way in our lives? And how many of us are able to listen to others in that way?

The disciples were jockeying for position in our scripture this morning. They were using their dualistic minds and getting worked up about who was in and who was out, who was right and who was wrong, who was up and who was down. And Jesus doesn’t even say “you know, you shouldn’t do that. You are wrong to do that and it would be best to do this instead.” Instead he says “to be greatest you must be least and to be first you must be slave of all.” He won’t meet them at the level of their dualistic minds but crosses the wires in their thinking to force them into a different kind of consciousness, a more unitive consciousness where the first is last and the last first and

they are us and we are they, and what seemed up is actually down and beneath is above and so on... for that is the way it is in the territory of our souls.

So maybe the question for us this morning in the issues and struggles and conflicts and problems of our lives is not so much “what would Jesus do” as much as “is this a matter of the soul.” And if it’s a matter of the soul rather than simply an issue for our minds to resolve then we are going to need to find a way to get beyond the processes of our mind to that deeper consciousness. We are going to have to stop trying to figure it out, if it’s a matter of the soul, and we are going to need to listen more, to be present to it more, to allow more of an unfolding of it rather than fix it. Is this a matter of the soul?

Thomas Merton, the hermit who lived and wrote at a monastery in Gethsemani, KY was all about getting beneath the dualistic mind, getting beneath the false self he called it and into the true self, the unitive self that is aligned and in union with God’s spirit and one of his ways of doing this was to write poetry. I’d like to end my sermon and lead us into a time of prayer by singing to you one of his poems because I think the words draw us to that place of deeper consciousness. He asks us to be still and listen to the stone of the wall, to be silent as they try to speak your name. Now from the perspective of the dualistic mind that’s impossible. Rocks don’t talk. We aren’t going to hear them speak our names. And yet when it comes to the soul a rock might just have as much to speak to us as a preacher on Sunday morning... maybe even more. “Be still and listen to the living walls, who are you, who are you, whose silence are you?”