

A couple of weeks ago, you may recall,
I noted the folly of the disciples being afraid to ask Jesus questions.
I even gave us time during the sermon to write our questions
on little yellow slips of papers distributed by the ushers.

So maybe I'm contradicting myself
when I point out that in today's gospel they do ask, well,
a DUMB question.

Here's the set-up.
Jesus has just told them – for the *third* time, mind you --
that he will be handed over to the Gentiles and
mocked and spit upon and flogged and killed.
He's that graphic
in the verses that come right before what we just read.

Three times they've heard this from Jesus,
each with greater detail and urgency:
Jesus isn't a glorious political Messiah
who swoops down to make everything all better.
Jesus is a servant who suffers for what he believes in,
and bears and redeems the suffering of others.
Jesus is a servant leader who walks *with* us,
helping us carry the burdens we bear,
and upholds us as we do the same for others --
as we serve, not wait to be served.

But do the disciples get this?
Not a chance.
The disciples James and John ask to sit back and bask in glory.
“Grant us,” they ask, “to sit one at your right hand and one
at your left, in your glory.”

Jesus shoots back with an even better question: Are you sure?

Now, if the disciples James and John
 who walked this earth and talked with Jesus in the flesh,
 didn't know what they were asking him,
 how can we?
 Despite my comments of just a couple weeks ago,
 how can we really know what to ask Jesus?

Last Saturday we had about forty people downstairs in Wilkinson Hall
 for a workshop on healing prayer.
 Nearly forty of us giving up a Saturday morning to learn about prayer!
 If there was any negative feedback,
 it was only that people wanted more information, more specifics.

Maybe all this raises the most vexing question of all:
 Why pray?
 Why talk to/communicate with/seek out God at all?

Julian of Norwich, the late 14th Century English mystic,
 is one of the greatest spiritual teachers in the Christian tradition.
 "The whole reason we pray," she says, "is to be united to the vision ...
 of [the One] to whom we pray."
 We pray, according to Julian,
 in order to make our souls "supple" –
 agile, flexible, adaptable, more *open* -- to God in Christ.

Another great spiritual leader, an American of the late 20th Century,
 makes a similar point.
 Her name was Rose Dodd.
 And, yes, you guessed it, she was my mother.
 "Debra," she'd say to me,
 "You don't have to pray for anything ... but a clear head."

The irony of this is that my mother was known to be a little scattered.
 She knew first-hand that the clarity of mind she sought

was only hers by the grace of God.

“Debra, you don’t have to pray for anything . . . but a clear head.

That sounds nice enough, I suppose,
but can a “clear head” and a couple of bucks
even get you a cup of coffee these days?

If you or someone you love
are burdened by physical or mental illness,
how’s a “clear head” going to help?

If you’re haunted by a broken relationship,
where’s a “clear head” going to get you?

Or if you’re troubled by the avalanche of problems in the world,
relentless gun violence,
the foreboding march of ISIS,
our country digging deeper into Afghanistan,
or name-your-tragedy,
what difference can a “clear head” make?

My mother may have easily lost track of time or
where she’d left her car keys,
but she knew that a “clear head” was a gift of God.
Whatever the question, she knew that a “clear head” was the answer.

And when she lay dying of cancer,
she showed me that a “clear head” – that *suppleness* to God’s vision –
could bring a type of healing into this mortal life
as well as the one to come.

A “clear head” – an *openness* to God’s vision --
is the answer to those old hurts that haunt us.
It may not be the answer we want,
for clarity of vision reveals that because

we are already forgiven by the mercies of God
then we should be the first to offer forgiveness to others.

A “clear head” is the answer – the *only* answer –
to help us make sense of the suffering of this world,
be it the dear students in Newtown or the community college in Oregon,
be it victims of ISIS,
or be it our military families stretched to the limit and taken for granted
in repeated sacrifices for us all.

For it is with a “clear head” – the agility to be at one with God –
that we begin to find the places where we can make a difference,
where we can serve as Jesus serves,
where we can *serve as Jesus*.

And it is a “clear head” – adapting to God’s vision –
that gives us the grace to take the long view
to find God amid the suffering
and sow hope where there is despair.

You don’t need to pray for much of anything but a clear head.

We don’t need to hand God an agenda.
We don’t need to know exactly what to ask.
And, God bless those disciples,
sometimes it just might be better to listen
than to ask anything at all.

All we really need is a clear-headed desire
to be united with God,
and the grace to let go of our expectations long enough
for God to surprise and delight us.

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