

“Asking the right questions”

- If you’ve been reading the Sword for the last two weeks, or if you have participated in the adult education class at 9am last week
 - You may have seen a little piece I wrote recounting my first visit to an Episcopal Church
 - As a part of Mother Lisa’s class this fall, I believe she collected several experiences together to discuss the church’s worship
 - You’ve heard bits of this story before...
 - I remember it vividly- St. Peter’s was the first church in which I saw a real, working pipe organ used in worship. IT WAS GLORIOUS
 - First time I had seen a processional cross, or vestments, candles that were not in a wedding
 - And the first time I witnessed a female priest.
 - It also was the first time in my life that I had given money to a church- willingly, happily, and without cynicism
 - I am sure you have figured it out...
 - St Michael’s is entering our stewardship season this year- we started last week with an announcement and mailings
 - We will continue that this week, and today is my opportunity to talk with you as your rector about our upcoming financial year
 - You have likely already received your pledge card, and I ask each of you to sit down with that little piece of paper in the next week or two,
 - Realize what it means, what it represents
 - And ask the right questions.¹
- I mentioned earlier that stumbling into the Episcopal church for the first time was a game changer for me
 - And it was
 - I had grown up in church, every Sunday, most Sunday nights, and most Wednesdays
 - It was not uncommon for us to attend Revivals, where we had church every night for a week
 - And as a Baptist what that meant was that every night for a week we heard a sermon that was about 45 minutes long

¹ <https://www.episcopalcafe.com/the-wrong-questions/>

- And we were there.
- As most kids do, somewhere around 15 years old I had begun to have my own questions about faith, God, and church
- And asking questions, even the good kind, was not well received
- Of course it did not help that at 16 I was pretty sure I knew everything already, or it was just a matter of time before I figured it out.
- I grew more distant, more bitter, and more cynical
- I remember one instance, after getting my first job at a local grocery store
- I was called out publicly in my Sunday School class because I had not given any money to the church from my new job
- I will tell you- public shame and peer pressure did not make me want to give money.
- The question, and it was not the best one back then, was “Why should I?” And it was asked with the most critical and suspicious eye.
- Honestly, it was really rhetorical because I already knew there was good reason
- It was my job. My paycheck. It’s mine to enjoy and none of anyone else’s business.
- In hindsight the obvious problem with that is that there was zero consideration to what God wanted
- Or what God wanted from me.
- Of how money does affect, in a very significant way, our spiritual lives
- Perhaps I knew all of the answers back then, but I had only begun to ask the good questions
- But here we were in the Episcopal Church, and before long Katy and I were attending it because it was *our* church.
 - Do you know what I mean?
 - Not because our mothers wanted it, not because we were trained and raised to do it, not out of guilt
 - But because this church was our church, we belonged, we missed it when we traveled, and we had some great friends there
 - We felt God there.
 - It was not long before the next stewardship season rolled around, and our questions changed a bit
 - We wanted to help, we wanted to support our church’s budget
 - We wanted to do our share, and we wanted to do what God wanted us to do.
 - It was our duty, obligation, and a joyful one- no longer the bitterness and cynicism from my teenage years

- We happily asked a new question, what does God want us to give?
- What must I do?
- Now this is where I think we can bring in our Gospel for today
- The story of the young man, or the rich young man, or even the rich young ruler, depending on which Gospel you're reading
- He had the same question: What must I do?
- Or put another way, what does God want from me?
- Now, first things first, this piece of the gospel of Mark is not a stewardship text.
- It is not really about the money, even though the lectionary helpfully places it in October because most of us do our annual giving drive around this time
- This is about asking the right question
- This successful young man comes to Jesus and asks him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"
- From everything we can read here, this man was being genuine
- He sought out Jesus, he knelt, and he called him Good Teacher-
- Nothing here suggests that he has an ulterior motive other than the face value of his question
- Jesus answers with the classics- names six commandments
- It is worth noting that Jesus substitutes defrauding instead of coveting- maybe this means something ²
 - Perhaps the young man has acquired his wealth in fraudulent ways, that would really change the meaning here, but we just don't know
 - We can say that based on the disciples reaction later to what Jesus tells the man,
 - they do not suspect it either- they are shocked at what Jesus says!
- Jesus also, in listing the commandments, skips the first four
- That is what I find most helpful in understanding this interaction... he skips:
 - Have no other God's before me, no graven images, don't use God's name in vain, remember the sabbath...
- These are the ones Jesus did not mention when he was speaking with the young man
- These are the matters of the heart, of our relationship to God, of who we are, and they are missing from the conversation so far
- There's the hint.

² <http://www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/october-14-2012.html>

- I think even in the asking of the question, Jesus just went straight to the core of the matter for this young man
 - Salvation is not something we *can* do
- It is not something we can accomplish- that is impossible
- Instead, it is a gift, and only possible through God's love and sacrifice for us.
- It is received not by doing, but by being. Being a follower of Christ and being in relationship with God our creator.
- It's about the first four commandments before it is about the second six
- Jesus sees that this man is trying to achieve salvation
- So Jesus names the other things this man has achieved, earned, accomplished, and that are important to him
 - His wealth, status, success- and tells him he has to give it all away
- Now I read this passage much the same way I read another, you know the one where where Jesus tells us to pluck out our eye if it offends-
 - Don't do that
 - It's not about the eye, but about the heart
- Here he says give away all your money-
 - it's not about the money, it's about the heart.
- If the young man had been able to let go of what he had achieved, his status, his self-image,
 - Maybe he could start to see salvation differently, as unearned
- And this simple question Jesus asked has unearthed a much bigger connection- our money as it relates to our relationship with God
 - They are intimately connected to one another
- The problem was that this young man was asking the question, what must I do?
- And Jesus' answer was about, Who does God want me to become? ³
- What kind of person is a citizen in the Kingdom of God, and how do I get there?
- And that is a much different question, isn't it?
- A better question, I think, not only for this young man talking with Jesus
- But for us as we contemplate our own questions of giving
- I will admit that we are effectively now talking about my own spiritual growth edge
 - Of asking a better question- it's a life long journey, not a destination
 - Over time, Katy and I did eventually become pledgers, then tithers

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- And a lot of that was driven by the same question this young man asked- what must we do?
- I want to do what God wants me to do- so what is it?
- But there's been an unexpected side effect to our giving that hints at a much larger thing, maybe more of what Jesus was talking about
- Each month, when Katy and I sit down with our budget- we use a digital envelop method
- We sit down each month and allocate money to all of the places we will need it
- And our pledge is one them
- We do it in part because it is our obligation and duty, our part of keeping the church running, and paying its bills
- We do it in part because, as standards go, a tithe seems like a good one to have, a good answer to the question "What must I do?"
- But I like to believe that we also write that check each month because of what Jesus is trying to get this young man to see
- That our relationship to God goes beyond what we must do, beyond the requirements we must satisfy
- It is a lot more about what kind of person is God calling me to be, what kind of person do I want to be?
- I believe God is calling us all to be kinder people, people with a giving heart,
- People who have good, holy relationships to other Christians in a church.
- In Matthew, Jesus says that where your treasure is, there your heart will be also
- I'm convinced that one of the tools we have for getting our heart to where God wants it, is by using our treasure to lead it there
- Who is God calling us to be? That's the right question!
- Once we start walking down that road, of loving God with all our heart, and loving our neighbor as ourselves
- The the questions of what we should do get easier, and it is no longer duty, accomplishment, or obligation that drives us
- But belonging, love, and gratitude- if for nothing else, than simply the time God has given us on this earth
- We become giving people, caring people, open-hearted people
- That's the journey we are all on, regardless of which side of the altar you sit on

- I admit that this sermon is a little more auto-biographical than most, and there would be a few preaching professors who would mark me down for it
 - But I do not know a better way to talk about something like money without just being honest about it, and about my own struggle with it
 - Sure, the church has a budget, and here at St. Michael's it is overwhelming created and sustained by our gifts and pledges
 - If the pledges go down, the budget goes down
 - Most of you were at the annual meeting last year, and you know that St. Michael's has its challenges ahead, some of those are financial
 - And the work we do collectively often is made possible through that budget- the budget keeps the lights, keeps the building warm and dry, and makes it possible to have staff here during the week and on call
 - All of that serves as a catalyst for ministry and opportunity and pastoral care
 - It's fertile ground for what is often so lacking in today's world:
 - A place of relationship to people who differ from us
 - Where we love one another not because we agree, or are similar, but because Jesus tells us to
 - Places like this are getting fewer in our society, and society is getting lonelier and less connected as a result
 - So please consider that when you pledge- consider all of what that pledge does- consider our opportunities
 - And we will take whatever you give and use it to the fullest- whether it is \$100,000 or 1 million- we will push it to the limits
 - And we will be a faithful, vital church who is good stewards of the gifts we receive.
 - But I also want you to ask the right question- beyond what should I do- there's no guilt here, I already know from experience that does not work
 - But I do know that God is calling us, through all aspects of our lives, and especially through our financial ones
 - To grow in our faith,
 - To become more like the Jesus Christ whom we follow
 - Who is God calling us to become? And how do we get there?
 - That's asking the right questions.

Amen.