

Ask the Pastor

February 8, 2015 - 9am

Rev. Dr. Charles Parker

Bob Benn: Today is Ask-the-Pastor Sunday. I come from a church formerly where this was an annual tradition and one year our pastor, who was a tall man with white hair and a beard and a long white robe, asked the children to ask him a question and one of the dear, sweet little ones looked up at him and said, "Are you God?" We're not going to ask you that question this morning. People have been sending questions in over the last couple of weeks and we have questions that we'll hear at the early service, different questions that will be heard at the later service, and yet still different questions in the Great Hall in between. So, there are many opportunities to hear Charlie's insights to these questions. He has not seen nor read these or heard them, and we're going to give him, oh, let's say four minutes per question. I have a watch here to time him, so we'll see how he does.

Question: "Sometimes I feel I live in two different worlds. I have my church life and friends and separately I have a group of long-time friends from my lay life with whom I spend more time, either from college or early career years, and virtually all of them are not believers. They don't attend church and don't appear to have a sense of spirituality, let alone religious institutional orientation. I have occasionally invited some of them to attend events at Metropolitan like *The Messiah*, but do not feel comfortable inviting them to anything more as they don't exhibit a sense of seeking any more and feel fine with their lives as they are. Do you find this to be the experience of other parishioners and do you recommend accepting this dichotomy that each person must live one's own life according to one's own principle or is there something else I should be doing?"

Charles Parker: Did you ever watch *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*? Do you know that movie?

Bob Benn: I know the movie, yes.

Charles Parker: So, there's a scene when Robert Redford is trying to shoot something and he's standing still and he can't hit it and then he says, "Can I move," and he shoots it. I need to move.

Bob Benn: Okay. Please do.

Charles Parker: So, good question. I think it's fairly easy when things are going well and my life is good and all the pieces are in place to get along without a sense of need of God. But I have a very deep conviction that everybody is searching spiritually, and sometimes that searching is more obvious than others. Everybody is seeking a broader sense of meaning in their lives, and sometimes that's not obvious even to them, I think, it becomes obvious often in times of crisis. But I would argue that everybody is searching for a framework of ultimate meaning and that is ultimately a religious quest. And it's not always obvious, and particularly in a social setting, it's easy to just sort of

chit-chat and sort of catch up with people but I have a very deep conviction that everybody is seeking this and it doesn't take too much exploration to get below that to meatier questions.

Actually, one of the fun things about being a Pastor is everybody knows that you're religious, right, and that on some level frees people up to ask questions of meaning in a way that sometimes is not easy in regular day-to-day discourse. So, I think what I would answer is to encourage the questioner to be open and aware and seeking those places to take a conversation to a deeper level, because most people are thirsting for that. When you take the question to a deeper level, you start to get at what the questions of ultimate meaning are.

That's a different thing than saying, "You've got to come to my church." It's a different thing than saying, "Jesus is going to answer all your questions." But it is a way of inviting people to identify what are those places of ultimate meaning. And as we talked about this past fall in our series on stories, to tell how you have found some framework for ultimate meaning in this place and in the context of your faith. That's not about converting but it's about a storytelling so that as people see how you have created or discovered a framework of meaning and a sense of purpose and a sense of God's presence in your life, that that then invites them to do the same and gives them permission to explore that with you. It's very, very hard to talk about questions of ultimate meaning because they're so close to our core so we get very highly defensive around them. But I think if you find those places where you can take the conversation deeper, there is a great hunger to be a little bit more vulnerable and to start to frame what life is about for you and where God is in that for you. Is that four minutes' worth?

Bob Benn: Thank you. Charlie, "what might Jesus have said if he had delivered the recent State of the Union Address?"

Charles Parker: You know, here, Bob, there's always an enormous danger of projecting what you would like Jesus to have said onto what Jesus would have said. And we all spend a lot of time projecting our wants and desires on God. I'm going to say though that when I look at the Gospels and when you look at how Jesus introduced his own ministry, he says, "Here is how you know this is God speaking: The good news is being preached to the poor, that captives are being released, that people who are sick are being healed." And that defined Jesus' ministry. Jesus was always with the people who were most vulnerable in his community, the people who were being ostracized in his community, the people who didn't fit in.

And so, if Jesus is delivering the State of the Union, would anybody clap? No. I think Jesus would highlight in a way that the President did, but I suspect even less nuanced, the way in which the income disparity in our country continues to escalate and the way in which folks that are struggling economically struggle harder and harder and people at the upper echelon get richer and richer, I think that's a very, very profound justice issue that Jesus would want us to pay attention to. And frankly, that's not a Republican or

Democratic issue. This process has continued under Democratic and Republican administrations and it is a slap in the face to the justice of God.

I will also say Jesus spent a lot of time healing people and so, people's physical health was always a priority of God's and of Jesus'. And so, I think that our current administration's emphasis on widening availability of healthcare is a really, really critical piece of the ministry of Christ and would also be something Jesus would highlight.

I'm going to say lastly our care of the environment is a profound concern in that God has given us stewardship of this wondrous creation and we've got lots of work to be done to take care of that better. And that impacts all of who we are. It's an economic issue, it's a social justice issue, it's a racial justice issue, and I think Jesus would speak to that with great power.

Bob Benn: Jesus lived in a small country in a corner of the world that was overtaken by many larger, greater powers. Had he lived today and had access to all of the technology and had such a platform as the State of the Union Address, do you think he would've spoken more broadly, and this is a follow-up question, I'll admit, not just to the people in this country but to the world?

Charles Parker: I guess what I hear in your question is that my answer was sort of focused on our country and their broader issues, and I guess I did that because I think of the State of the Union as about our country and primarily to our country. I do think that Jesus would have challenged us to have a more global perspective because it's not about our particular tribe, and one of the interesting dynamics in the early church is how do we take this message that was given to the tribe of Israel, because Jesus was a Jew and he was preaching to Jews, and make that be applicable to people of all nations. And, of course, that's a process we see in the book of Acts. And a lot of internal wrestling -- you know, how do we take this message that was to a Jewish community and translate that to communities that are not Jewish? So, I think in like manner, I think part of what Jesus would have encouraged us to do is figure out how do we broaden our perspectives so that it's not always about us but it really is about the broad, wondrous wideness and diversity of God's creation and our call to be in ministry to all folks.

Bob Benn: Thank you. The next question, "how could the Methodist church worldwide, of which we are one part, best respond to current strife growing from religious differences including those associated with LGBTQ issues? More broadly, how might the Methodist church as a whole and our own church community respond constructively to what appears to be expanding conflict associated with religious differences?"

Charles Parker: What's the next question?! Okay. So, my friend, Janet Craswell, who with all of our other Pastors are on the women's retreat this week, has continued to raise to me and all of us the idea that our struggles around GLBTQ issues are not frankly around GLBTQ issues. They are around how we understand and interpret scripture, and that to dig into this issue in a way that is healthy and life-giving is going to

involve figuring out how to have healthy dialogue about how we interpret the Bible. And so, I think one of the things we could do in a way that would be very powerful is start as a community here to be able to articulate more clearly how our interpretation of scripture leads us to our reconciling stance.

I don't think we have historically done this very effectively. We, on the reconciling side, have often ceded a lot of the scriptural analysis to folks on the other side of the debate and have been content to say Jesus loved everybody and we need to love everybody. And that doesn't really answer the question, how do you address what the scriptural witness is on this and how do we interpret that.

And I think we would make some huge steps forward if we focus on having a broader denominational discussion about the interpretive tools -- we call this in theology hermeneutics -- that we use to understand scripture, because I think one of the struggles we have is we use one set of interpretive tools for a whole range of issues like divorce or women preaching or any number of other things, and we decide to use a different set of interpretive tools when it comes to looking at GLBTQ stuff. I think we have an opportunity to have a broader conversation about how we understand the Bible and how we interpret the Bible, and I think that will be a huge gift to the church worldwide.

I guess the second part of the question is -- read the second part again.

Bob Benn: "How might United Methodist Church as a whole and our church community respond constructively to what appears to be an expanding conflict associated with religious differences?"

Charles Parker: God is a mystery. God chooses to reveal God's self to us but we can never understand all of who God is, and I think what that should do is impart within us a very deep sense of humility that I can work hard and need to work hard to try to understand who God is and what God is about, and at the same time acknowledge I can never understand all of that, and therefore, need to be open to how other people engage that question.

We are brought together as a community to learn from one another. We are also in a broad world community in which we can learn from one another and I think bringing a sense of humility to our own journey with God is critical to being in healthy dialogue and to deescalating the cycle of violence around this.

I actually think President Obama was very helpful this week at the National Prayer Breakfast to note that while much of the violence we see in the world is revolving around the Muslim community, that there were certainly long periods of our history when most of the religious violence in the world centered around the Christian community and we should bring again some sense of humility to that, that this is a struggle that we have all had and seems to be exacerbated the more certain we are of our views. And so, some sense and some willingness to say, "I don't have all the

answers and I'm willing to listen to your answers." It feels to me like it's at the heart of that problem.

Bob Benn: Thank you. Our final question, Charlie. What is your favorite heresy and why?

Charles Parker: What's my favorite heresy? Okay. That's actually an easier question than you would think. One of the significant heresies of the early church was called Pelagianism. And Pelagius, who was a monk, argued essentially that our salvation was a joint effort between God's love and care for us and our working with God. That was declared a heresy because of the sense that put our salvation in our hands and not in God's hands, that our salvation was at least in part -- and depending on where in the Pelagian history you find yourself, sometimes at quite a great part -- it put our salvation in our hands, it made it our work, the salvific instrument, not God's grace.

And I actually think I and most of us really love that heresy because we love the sense that our salvation rests in our control, that if I just work a little harder, if I pray a little harder, all of this, if I just do it better, I'll get to where God wants me to be. And so, I'm a good Pelagian.

That's my favorite heresy because I want to be in control of my salvation and the reality is, as St. Paul told us and as Martin Luther emphasized, I'm not in control of my salvation, my salvation is solely the work of the Holy Spirit and making available to me the work of Jesus Christ on the cross. So, I am saved by Jesus and by the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, that now makes everything possible. And so, I don't always want to hear that but that is the truth. So, Pelagianism, I'm going to go with. Look it up when you get home.

Bob Benn: Thank you. Ladies and gentlemen, this has been Ask Your Pastor with the Reverend Dr. Charles Parker. Thank you.

Charles Parker: Thank you.