

“Answerizing”

1 Corinthians 13:12-13

First Presbyterian Church

September 13, 2020

Bible Reading

¹²For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. ¹³And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Sermon

A pastor calls the kids to the front of the sanctuary for yet another children's sermon and says: "I am thinking of something that is brown, has a bushy tail, and every fall gathers acorns to itself. What am I thinking of?" After a long silence, a young child pipes up: "Pastor, I'm sure the RIGHT answer is Jesus, but it sure sounds like a squirrel to me."

This joke has DEFINITELY made the rounds among preachers... and my guess is you've heard it as well. Some tell it to expose the triviality of certain children's sermons... and others tell it to illustrate a tendency that has been driving people apart for very long time: that tendency is the belief that we know what the right answer is. Regardless of the question being asked or the issue being addressed, we know the right answer.¹ Writer David James Duncan has invented a name for this attitude – he calls it "answerizing." "Answerizing" as opposed "to answerING." It springs from the conviction that the only right way to handle any question is to offer "The One Correct Answer" – and Duncan suggests that the relationship of "answerizing" to truly answering is like the relationship of memorizing the phone book to truly loving every flesh and blood person whose name it contains." He goes on to note: "Questions that tap into our mortality, our pain, our selfishness, our basic needs, questions that arise from the immeasurable darkness, lightness or mystery of our lives, require more than mere Answerization." But in today's world it seems that answerizing is all that is offered.

Well my friends, we will need to prepare ourselves for a huge dose of "answerizing" over the next seven weeks. With the help of pollsters and consultants, both sides have by now mostly formulated the talking points... they have rehearsed the answers they will offer regardless of the question being asked... and no matter what, staying "on message" will be key.

But it's not only politicians, is it? Most families run into answerizing... mine certainly does. When with your spouse or children you find that discussion is no longer necessary... when you find everybody's mind is already made up and everybody already knows what the other person will say... when no matter what goes wrong, it's always "his fault" or "her fault," answerizing has made its home in your home.

¹ L. Gregory Jones in his "Faith Matters" reflection, Christian Century, November 18, 1998.

And lest we forget, we church folk play this game as well. There are fundamentalists on the right and on the left. On one side, people are convinced that the right answer is Jesus, even if the question sounds like the answer ought to be a squirrel. On the other side, people are convinced the only right answer is to condemn some "ism," regardless of whether the question or issue can really be so neatly explained.

What we must realize is that such deep and difficult questions - whether in politics or families or churches – require real conversation... over a long period of time... with a willingness to listen and speak with one another in ways that acknowledge the complexity of our lives.

I think about Job's friends (you remember Job's friends?) They came to him ostensibly to comfort and support him... and that they did! But it turns out they were experts at "answerizing." When they looked at him they just couldn't bear the complexity and mystery of his suffering. And they were so sure there had to be One Correct Answer to his predicament... and that they had it. Well, as you know, Job rebuts their answers – insisting that his suffering remains a mystery - and in the end, we know with whom God sides in that story. Yet we fall prey to the same thing – answerizing - in our politics and our families and our churches.

Two thousand years ago, the apostle Paul wrote a letter to a small group of people who lived in the city of Corinth. And in that letter, Paul employs eight simple words to speak a truth as profound today as it was then. Those eight words? "... for now we see through a mirror, dimly..." For now we see through a mirror, dimly... meaning that not a one of us sees everything... not one of us knows everything... and even if there is One Correct Answer, you and I cannot know it.

This is not to say that we know nothing... or that we have no wisdom or insight or understanding. We do! And Paul assures his friends there'll come a time when we know more. "The time will come," he writes, "when we will know fully, even as we are fully known (by God)." But that time is not now... and it does not serve us well to claim it is... to claim we see more than we actually do... to claim we are wiser than we actually are. What WILL serve us well... and what I believe is the most important virtue for this time in our collective lives... is "humility." Being humble about what we do not know is far better than the arrogance of believing we are always right. And besides, Paul says... remember that love is more important than anything else.

As you surely know, there is debate these days over whether or not this experiment in democracy we call the United States of America can survive the testing of our day. Our diversity and pluralism... our racial and political divisiveness... our lack of a common purpose and identity... these all beg the question: can America be a genuinely pluralistic, diverse, and free society?

Well, though some folks hearken back to time when things weren't like they are today... others look at history – both the history of democracy itself and the history of this nation – and say that with some exceptions, we never have been a nation where people who deeply differ with one another actually respect each other... where people whose views offend one another nonetheless hear each other out.

Instead, they say, this country has always been a place where those who have held the reins of cultural power — the great academic centers... the powerful corporations... the halls of government... the media — those who have held cultural power have always excluded unpopular voices and minority views.² And as we have seen of late, unpopular voices and minority views are not only being excluded, but the actual people who hold them are being “canceled.”

So, if this is the culture in which we are living right now, what will it take to offer a counter-cultural witness to another way? And who can we look to for guidance and encouragement on what seems to be a very difficult journey?

This week in preparing for this sermon, I re-watched the recording of an event held at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City... it was titled “Civility in the Public Square.” And in one of the presentations, the speaker called for us to come together with our neighbors (and especially those we disagree with) around what he calls “aspirations” – qualities or virtues that we should aspire to. And he named three: *tolerance, humility, and patience*.³

Tolerance. Tolerance is not indifference. In fact, we may be appalled at the other person’s views. And tolerance is not acceptance. We must never surrender our pursuit of truth and truthfulness.⁴ But if both parties are committed to finding and telling the truth... then the victory will go not just to the best speaker or the most powerful or the one who yells the loudest... the victory will go to all who gain a deeper understanding of the mystery and complexity of life on this earth. So, tolerance looks like the willingness of a devoted MSNBC viewer to spend time on FOX News... it looks like the willingness of a New York Times reader to also read the Wall Street Journal... and even more, it looks like the willingness to treat another person with respect... to be in relationship with another person even if we find his or her ideas difficult to endure. Tolerance.

Humility. Humility emphasizes what Paul has already taught us – that “we see but through a glass darkly.” In some contexts, it’s important to affirm what we DO see... we must say and defend what we believe to be true. But it’s also important to recognize what we do not know... and that there is no way to prove that we are totally and completely right... and that each of us actually need others who differ to help deepen our understanding of the mystery of life and of God.⁵ Humility.

And finally, patience. Patience doesn’t mean being passive in the face of injustice or evil. Yet tolerance and humility should also lead us to be slow to assign motives to another person’s beliefs... quick to see the other’s views in the best light possible... they should lead us to take the time needed to both communicate our own point of view and to listen and understand and empathize with another’s. Patience.

² Timothy Keller, *Civility in the Public Square*, October 6, 2016

³ John Isazu, *Confident Pluralism: Surviving and Thriving through Deep Difference* (University of Chicago Press, 2016).

⁴ In addition to humility, Mark Schwehn has suggested two additional virtues in his book, *Exiles from Eden: truthfulness and interpretive charity*.

⁵ Jones again.

Of course, there are many good reasons to wonder if any of this is possible in today's world. In our present state of affairs, there is plenty reason for skepticism... plenty reason to ask if there's any hope that we can move forward into genuine pluralism. As one who loves this nation... who loves his family... who loves the church... I do hope so. But I don't know. What I do know is what Christians can do... and what I as your pastor will continue to encourage our church to do.⁶ We in this church can intentionally try to be people who are capable of tolerance, humility, and patience. We can practice the confession of our sins - in our worship... in our individual prayer lives... and in our relationships with one another – we can practice confession because confession is based on the awareness that we are frail and fallible human beings (that we see as through a mirror, dimly). This confession, if genuine, will help us grow in humility. We can remember how praying in worship for our neighbors... and even for those neighbors who seem like our enemies – when we pray for them in light of the cross... in light of Jesus' costly forgiveness of us... when we pray for them in light of his power that was made known powerLESSness... we can remember how that praying can create both tolerance and patience in each of us.

Friends, it is my passion and my prayer that this church might be a place where deep and difficult questions can be addressed head on by people willing to listen and speak with one another respectfully... and in ways that acknowledge the complexity of our lives. And that this might be a community which above all understands that now we see as in a mirror, dimly... and because of that, love is the most important thing.

⁶ James K.A. Smith's proposal in his June 2016, Bavinck Lecture at Kampen titled "Reforming Public Theology."