

May 10, 2020
Matthew 7:24-27
Luke 12:16-21

Sermon: And So, We Live the Questions ...

One of my favorite books of all time is a slender volume called “Letters to a Young Poet,” first published in 1927. I’ve read it countless times. And I consider it the best graduation gift one can give to a young student.

Its author, Rainer Maria Rilke, lived in Germany and in Paris in the years leading up to the First World War. The correspondence recorded in this little volume is a series of letters he wrote to a young friend – maybe his nephew – who was about to enter the war as a German soldier. We have used a quote from one of those letters many times in our worship services as a unison reading ...

“Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart
And try to love the questions themselves...
Do not seek the answers that cannot be given you because
You would not be able to live them
And the point is to *live everything*
Live the questions now

Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”

In this time of Coronavirus, we are indeed *living the questions*. We don’t know when the practice of social distancing will safely end. We don’t know what the summer will look like in terms of our ability to gather with friends or family, or to travel. Most of us don’t know if we’ve already had the virus but been unaware. Or if, having had the virus, we are now immune to its return. We don’t know when a vaccine will be available, or when treatments to lessen the severity will become reliable. We don’t know *how* – or *if* – life will return to some semblance of the old concept of “normal.”

And I’ll add something I hope you’re willing to explore with me: we don’t know if, ultimately, we’ll **WANT** life to return to what we used to consider “*normal*.”

These are unsettling times. The questions we are living are real and important. And we are, like it or not, *living the questions*.

One of the questions we are busy *living* is this: what is the origin of the Coronavirus? What is it about our ecological systems that has led to the rise of viruses worldwide – like SARS or WEST NILE or Ebola? Or CORONA?

We know that the natural world is a precious, fragile ecosystem. Forests filter the water we drink, and birds and bees pollinate crops. The leaves on our trees give us oxygen. Our wetlands sustain life and perform the critical task of mitigating carbon. We know that when we build a

dam or a road, or clear a forest to build more houses, we disturb a system of the natural world that is laced with critical interdependence.

Have you ever seen a spider web holding the early morning dew as the bright sun hits it? It is arresting in its beauty. Well – that’s the kind of beautiful, fragile, intricate, interdependent lace-work that connects everything (**everything**) in the natural world. But we just can’t **see** it – like you see that beautiful spider web. Disturb a section of that delicate web and it all might fall.

Lyme disease is very much a product of human disturbances to the fragile web of the environment. It’s a result of the reduction and fragmentation of large, contiguous forests; the forests in which our Native American forebearers thrived. As we chopped down the forests, our development chased off predators – wolves and foxes and owls and hawks. Without predators to eat them, the population of white-footed mice exploded. These mice happen to be great “reservoirs” for the Lyme disease bacteria. The tick bites a mouse whose blood carries the Lyme bacteria, and now that tick is a transporter of the bacteria. The tick then hitchhikes till he finds a deer – or a human being – to nibble on. Ironically, if that bacteria had remained only within the blood stream of little mice – we might never have even known it existed. It wouldn’t have affected – or **infected** – us.

And to add to the problem, the mice got an enormous boost when Japanese barberry was brought to our region as a lush ornamental plant that has now escaped and invaded the understory of our woodlands. Parts of our local forests are a veritable “mouse heaven” thanks to the invasive species, Japanese barberry.

More houses. Less hawks and foxes. More mice. More and more and more Lyme disease. Here I’d like to plug the documentary “The Biggest Little Farm.” You can rent it on Amazon Prime. The photography is stunning and the lessons are enduring. It’s a feel-good movie which is good medicine for all of us right now.

Coronavirus, we are quite sure, is the result of humankind disturbing, abusing, exploiting the natural world – that fragile web that interlaces all of creation.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says to his followers: If you build your lives on the values I have taught you – it will be like building a house on a strong rock foundation. But if you build a house on sand, it will ultimately fall.

What we have often called **progress** has come at a great cost to the fragile ecosystem of the natural world. And maybe for a long time people have thought we could “get away with it.” But it turns out, there is a price to pay if we build on sand – if our values are distorted and we ignore the science implicit in the web of life.

We are witnessing some of the return of the lustiness of the natural world right now. The stars are brighter because there is less pollution. Dolphins have returned to the canals in Venice because their water is cleaner. The air is clear over Los Angeles. The most robust Coyote I have ever seen visits our yard occasionally on these cool mornings. I am hoping his favorite breakfast is the white-footed mouse!

It's as if the critters in the natural world are saying, "The humans are inside their homes now so we are safe to explore." There is an element of the magical to all of this. And I am grateful.

But I fear that society will, for the most part, return to its old patterns of consumption and domination. That will surely be tempting - and easy. I fervently hope we'll take this time to *live the questions* the virus has raised about how to be better citizens of the natural world. How much do I really **need** to consume? How much do I really **need** to travel? How much am I *willing to destroy* to have what I want, and get it quickly and cheaply? How can I live in harmony with the natural world - and not fracture its web of life.

How can I build my life on a rock foundation, with the values inherent in the life and teachings of Jesus? Building our lives carelessly - on sand - has cost us dearly.

Some of the other questions we are living right now - are the questions about how we relate to one another. Enforced isolation has made us achingly, painfully, aware of how precious human contact is. And it's been very hard. Hard on all of us. But as we **live the questions** that arise in our solitude, I hope we'll ask ourselves some of the tough questions about the importance of taking care of one another. Because the ever-rising individualism that has become endemic to the way our society operates, turns out to have its drawbacks. And we see this very clearly right now. If my neighbor coughs "into his elbow" as he talks with me, he is helping me preserve my health. So, you see, even in a time of near-isolation, we are deeply, deeply interdependent.

In many ways, we have built our society on sand. Isn't it ironic that right now some of the people whose labor is most valuable to us are the people who have been chronically underpaid. And they are the folks for whom the current economic paralysis is very likely to be the most lastingly harmful.

Grocery store and pharmacy workers - ambulance drivers and firefighters - those who carry our mail - nurses and health care workers of all description - these are our heroes. And thankfully we hear some of their stories on the nightly news so that - right now - they know how much their sacrifices are being valued. But virtually none of these people lived a life of economic luxury before the Corona virus came to our shores. And unless we keep boldly asking *questions* they won't live in comfort when this crisis passes.

In our scripture lesson today we read that haunting story of the rich man who is so successful that he keeps building bigger and bigger barns to house the crops which are abundant way beyond his needs. "And if your life ends, this night? What then?" asks God. Barns can burn down, stocks can slide downward, banks can fail. Food stored in a barn can rot. "Why not share from your abundance?" is the implicit question God asks. "Why not share?"

In my long relationship with the people of South Africa, one of the blessings I have cherished most is the understanding they have given me of the term UBUNTU. From the very depths of their indigenous faiths - even before Christianity was carried by missionaries to the southern regions of Africa, they knew that the fabric of our humanity is a delicate, fragile web of

connection and inter-dependence. I've often speculated that the reason Christianity flourished so quickly in southern Africa was that the teachings of Jesus were essentially very close to what they had known to be true for generations: my well-being as an individual depends on the well-being of others. My humanity is inextricably linked to the humanity of others. Our empathy and our solidarity are the essence of what makes us **human**.

Why **not** share? Why build bigger and bigger barns? Those are the questions we ought to be **living** right now.

Jesus often told stories – parables – as a way of opening the doors to truths that people cannot easily grasp. Scattered throughout the gospels you'll find mention of Jesus saying, at the end of telling a parable – “He who has ears – let him hear.”

Jesus knew that not everyone would comprehend what he was saying. Not everyone would change their lives and “follow the way.” But he also knew that some people who heard him would keep telling and re-telling those stories and seeking their own truths from the depths of his teachings.

Maybe the Coronavirus will serve as a kind of parable that we will keep turning over and over in our minds; finding deeper and deeper truths and lessons.

Living these questions will not be easy. I suspect each of us is getting tired of being alone. We're hungry for companionship – and for live theatre and music. We'd like to be able to invite someone *into* our house for a change – or give or receive a hug from a child. Speaking personally, for a moment, I'd like to tell you that preaching into an empty Meetinghouse is strangely disorienting, and it's sad. I want you to know that I have a good imagination and I **DO** try to imagine your faces here – filling the pews. But I want you to hear that I miss you. I miss this congregation filling this wonderful Meetinghouse. The fellowship of this church community has always been a vital part of my mental health.

So I don't want you to think for a minute that I am minimizing the pain that this virus is causing all around and about us. The death toll – hearing the sheer numbers of the death toll each day - leaves me nauseous and fearful.

But I do think we will endure. And that life will be more colorful and full and rich again someday. And we will all tell our stories of the days of CORONA. We don't really have a choice – but to do our best.

The parable of the corona virus continues to be a work in progress. We've got to keep **asking the questions**. Maybe we'll have to ask them louder and louder for our political leaders to hear us. We have been building our lives – our whole society – on sand. And those of us whose ears have been opened have an opportunity and a responsibility. There is a chance we can at least begin to reconstruct our foundations.

You know, Jesus had a relatively small number of followers when his life ended. And his life ended, in essence, because those in power felt threatened by the truths he told and retold. But

those who believed in his teachings kept telling his stories. And the values that he preached have held the truths that have inspired and guided people for over two thousand years. More and more people have told and retold his stories – for over two thousand years! For two thousand years the houses built on that rock foundation have had the best chance of enduring – or that’s what I like to believe.

As a people of faith we are called to imagine a better world. And as citizens of this world we are called to roll up our sleeves, and raise our voices and show by our own actions that there is a better way. We can do *better* than to build on sand. There is a foundation that will withstand the storms.

Every act of compassion or generosity heals us from the false story of our separation one from another. Every act of compassion or generosity makes manifest to both the giver and the receiver the truth that we are not alone.

You are not alone. I am not alone. Because we stand together. Amen.

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