

“Questions of Faith”
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November 10, 2013 – Laity Sunday

Luke 20:27-38

The verses from Luke that were just read, referring to the questions from the Sadducees, was one that I struggled to understand. From what I can tell, Jesus was stirring the pot during this time frame. There were a number of people, priests, scholars and other leaders that were trying to figure out if he was the “real deal,” trying to trip him up with questions, testing his credentials. Jesus turned these questions back into questions, which in turn, infuriated those questioning him. The group of the Sadducees, who did not believe in resurrection were asking him questions directly related to resurrection. They were also trying to stump Jesus by asking him an impossible question. And, Jesus responded by trying to shift the focus again. I picture Jesus shaking his head in frustration basically saying “you are asking the wrong questions.”

Are the Sadducees’ that far from us? Do we ask the wrong questions from time to time? Do we look for the loop holes in the stories? Do we question faith? I know I have, many times.

I can only imagine that each of us has questioned faith, asked why God would let something happen to someone close, or wonder why some disaster could possibly be part of anyone’s plan, especially an all loving, all forgiving God that we are all taught about.

As a college freshman, four hours away from home for the first time, I met a friend who I didn’t know would change my life. Jane was everything you would want in a friend. Kind, loving, and boatloads of fun. We quickly became close friends, as we were the only two on our floor from the lovely and exotic state of CT. On our trip back to school from our March break, Jane complained of a pain in her side. When it continued back on campus, we insisted she visit the campus health office. There, Jane was brushed off and told that it could be an ulcer and to take some aspirin. Although we were lowly freshmen, we did know that that was not the best advice, and determined that the staff at the health center might not be the best place for Jane, and took her to a well-known doctor in town. This doctor wisely admitted that she didn’t know what was wrong with Jane and advised her to return home to see her regular physician. She did and was diagnosed with a tumor on her ovaries that had turned gangrene. It wasn’t until the hysterectomy that they found the cancer. I remember being more upset about the hysterectomy than the cancer at that point, because friends of mine didn’t die of cancer, and Jane was wild about children and babies. Also remember trying to make a deal, with God or anyone, at that point to switch places with Jane. You see, I didn’t want children, I wanted ponies and puppies and polar bears. Remember when you were innocent and didn’t remember that the polar bears would eat the puppies and ponies? I was in that kind of denial. In retrospect, I’m so very grateful that I couldn’t make that trade, and not because Jane did lose her battle with the cancer that fall, but because then I would never have had the honor of knowing the most important people in the world to me, my family.

At Jane’s funeral, I was angry. I couldn’t understand a God that would take someone so uniquely generous and precious as my friend Jane. She was way too young and I didn’t understand why God would let this happen.

Flash forward 30 some years. I am now very happily married with two of the most amazing young people that I can proudly call my children as well as a very fulfilling career as a middle school guidance counselor.

At work, I meet a great deal of students and families with a huge number of issues that I couldn’t even begin to understand. Many times when I would come home, mentally drained from work and the struggles of my students, my own children would say to me “Mom, your

school is really messed up” to which I would respond “So is yours, you just don’t know it.” Through my work, I’ve learned that one of my talents is working with these students in their time of grief. So many times I’ve wished or dreamt that my talent could be the ability to sing, paint or do something significant with some form of art. Instead I can knit and I can work with kids when they are their most wounded. I have accompanied many of them to wakes and funerals, I’ve been there during vigils and wiped their tears when they have returned to school.

Last December, when a young man entered Sandy Hook Elementary School and killed 26 women and children, before taking his own life. Just like many of you, I felt that I needed to do something to help. Within a day or two, the CT school counseling association put out the word looking for school counselors to help with the overwhelming task of putting this community back together. I volunteered without thinking. I was assigned to the counseling center at the intermediate school for that Wednesday night. Tuesday night, I didn’t sleep much at all. I remember waking up that Wednesday morning and thinking “oh man, what did I get myself into? I can’t do this; I’m not trained for this.” I prayed hard that day and finally came to the conclusion that no one is really trained for that kind of a tragedy.

I was almost physically ill as I drove into Newtown that afternoon and passed one of many funeral processions. That night, I worked with a family of a 1st grader who learned on that day that the cops were his friends, and not the bad guys that so often visited his house and had taken his father away. He was reluctant to talk about that day, but was able to draw me a picture of the cops, the bad guy with a gun, and one of his friends, dead on the floor. On another day, I met a family whose daughter was pulled out of the hallway by a teacher as a bullet just missed her. On the day I worked with her family, she appeared fine, her father was impeccably dressed in a pressed shirt and jeans, but her mother clearly dissolving into herself, in her sweats and bulky coat, trying to hide from the world. She couldn’t understand how she was supposed to take care of her children when she almost lost them all to something so totally out of her control. I can imagine that we all went through this, struggling to fathom how to protect our children from such unimaginable horror. While her family survived, this mother will never be the same. Neither will many of us. I’m sure many of you did as I did and almost cried whenever you saw a child of that same age in the grocery store, in Church, at home and were both filled with gratitude that your child was still with us, but also the guilt that another family was having to experience grief that was so raw and unexplainable. How do we move forward? How could this have happened? Why? There are no answers to these questions.

I questioned faith a great deal last winter. Throughout the next few weeks, I split my time between Newtown, home, work and my father who was dying of a degenerative lung disease. We knew his health was tenuous for a while. My faith was restored each day when I walked in with a big bowl of ice cream for him and was blessed with his smile and his comment that I was “alright.” High compliments, for sure. When he passed in late February, among my many blessings, I counted those months that my family shared with him, and being given the chance to tell him I loved him. As I sat with Rev. Liz to work on this sermon, it was only then that I realized how that time with Dad was the healing that my faith needed. For the first time in years, I spent quality time with my Dad, Mom, sisters and brother. We were a family again, and the best gift I could give my Dad was having him see us all as compassionate, and at times - intelligent - adults who loved him and each other. This was why my Dad’s passing helped to heal the wounds that Newtown dealt to my faith, because I was given the gift of time and love.

I tell you about Jane, my time in Newtown and with Dad, with difficulty, especially about my time in Newtown. I don’t want anyone to think that I did anything special or difficult on those days, it felt more like putting a band aide on a gushing wound. Newtown will now be forever remembered by its tragedy, like Oklahoma City, Columbine and other places that are defined by something horrendous. These are damaged towns that will be forever linked with tragedy. The reason that I tell you these stories today is to let you know that we all have our

stories, and that we all question faith and what God's plan is for us. For you it may be a cancer diagnosis, divorce, loss of job that makes you think what's the point?

In a way, I feel angry at the Sadducees. Think of it, they had Jesus right there in the flesh, and yet the mystery of faith still eluded them. I just hope that if I was in their shoes (or sandals) that I would have had the intelligence, or maybe just compassion enough to know that I was in the presence of greatness. But would I? Would you? These men were just looking to their faith to guide them.

So, yes, I believe we all question faith, but I also feel that it brings us closer to God when we do this. Jane, Newtown, Dad, they all brought me closer to God in some way. And your children, the ones that I work with in Wednesday School or on mission trips, they restore my faith each and every day I spend with them. They are an amazing group of young people. My family, and my bigger family know as South Church brings me closer every day. I feel extremely fortunate to have been blessed to live the life I live.