

*Questions on the Way*  
30<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time  
Reformation Sunday  
October 25, 2020  
Trinity Bixby  
Rev. Lucus Levy Keppel

[Matthew 22:23-46](#)  
[Psalm 90:1-6, 12-15](#)

I once heard the Protestant Reformation described as “organizing the sock drawer.” No, really! In this analogy, Martin Luther took the sock drawer of Catholicism and sought out anything that wasn’t a pair of socks. Coupons for free socks? Throw them out of the drawer, they’re not a sock! Indulgences? Out of the Reformation, it’s not Biblical. Lockboxes of tithes? Not socks, and not Biblical. And so on. Calvin comes along after Luther, and looks at the new sock drawer a little differently. “Hey,” thinks Calvin, “While we’re organizing the drawer, let’s open every pair of socks and check to make sure they’re matched, and also not full of holes.” So, Calvin works to set up the Institutes of Christian Religion – a sort of guide-to-the-sock-drawer that helps folks sort through the socks. In the meanwhile, the sock drawer is a lot more organized, and thanks to the Institutes and to the guidance of the new confessions – the Heidelberg Catechism and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Helvetic Confession, to be specific – there was a good chance of the drawer staying organized. Lastly, a number of people independently tossed the whole sock drawer onto the floor, and started putting back in socks that were already matched. This group, called the Anabaptist movement, was loosely affiliated by what they chose to put back in the drawer. “We’ll keep this matched set of primacy of scripture, but I’m not so sure about the sacramental nature of baptism and communion.”

Yes, it gets a bit silly – but the sock drawer analogy is helpful for us in understanding the big themes of reformation. You see, each part of the Reformation chose to ask a different question of their faith: Luther asked, “What needs to be removed?” Calvin asked, “What needs to be repaired?” and the Anabaptists asked, “What must we keep?” Unfortunately, they also failed to recognize the importance

of the questions the others were asking, and ended up fighting – not just with the Catholics, but also with each other. Sadly, the history of the protestant reformation is filled with as many missteps as steps forward.

Even so, it is important to ask questions of our faith! All the way back to Abraham, each leader of God’s people has asked some specific questions. Abraham asked, “What does it mean to trust and believe in God?” Jacob asked, “What does it mean to struggle with God?” Moses asked, “How should we follow God’s Way?” Deborah asked, “Where is justice to be found?” Samuel asked, “If we must have a king, O God, who do you choose?” Isaiah asked, “How can we make up for our brokenness?” Esther asked, “How can I keep the people safe in exile?” Daniel asked, “Is God with us, wherever we are?”

I’m sure you could come up with questions for more Biblical figures – this is only the beginning of questions that people of faith ask in the Bible. Each one of the questions provides a new unfolding of God for the people – a new revelation of the Way that God sets before us. It’s not that each question provides *answers*, either – but instead, the question itself prompts a new way of understanding, and, yes, a new set of questions. As the musician Dan Bern puts it, “Who needs answers? One good question would be a relief.”<sup>1</sup>

Each new question, each new reformation, each new reorganization of the sock drawer of faith – it is a withering and a blooming, a letting go and a letting come. As the Psalmist describes, God must view the whole of human experience as a constant cycle of withering and blooming.<sup>2</sup> In Psalm 90, the Psalmist asks God to “come back to us”, to our perspective, “filling us with faithful love every morning, so we can rejoice and celebrate our whole life long.” Indeed, the Psalmist asks that God blesses us for the same amount of time we have been afflicted – to know our difficulties, our challenges, and to provide love enough – and more than enough – to get us through.

By Jesus’ time, the people of Israel had been through many cycles of reform

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<sup>1</sup> (Bern 2006)

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 90:5-6

and change. Each new question prompted new exploration – but, then as now, it was often felt that there were no great discoveries left. After all, whether you were a Sadducee or Pharisee, a Samaritan or even a Zealot, the scriptures were set. Sure, the Sadducees and the Samaritans agreed that only the first 5 books – the Torah – were religiously valid, while the Pharisees and Zealots claimed all of the prophets and writings – but either way, there was nothing new to be added.

Except... except that “one who was teaching with authority” was showing a new Way of understanding God. Is it any wonder that Sadducees and Pharisees came to ask questions of this new teacher, this Jesus? In our passage this morning, it’s the Sadducees who step up to bat first, fielding a curveball about resurrection. Following the laws of Levirate marriage, if a married couple do not produce heirs, and the husband dies, it falls to his brothers to try to produce a child. That child would be heir to the late husband, providing a family line to care for the widow. It’s not clear if this was still being practiced in Jesus’ day, but this is the basis on which this particular Sadducee approaches Jesus. “Assuming that a woman’s husband dies, and each of his brothers in turn marries the woman and dies without an heir, in heaven, who is the woman married to?”

In asking this question, which leads to some absurd places, quite frankly, this Sadducee is likely trying to embarrass Jesus, or show how belief in resurrection is absurd. It’s also likely something of a stock question, since this argument was frequent between Pharisees and Sadducees. But, Jesus points out, their question relies on a flawed understanding of resurrection. Because there is no need for family legacy, when people have eternal life,<sup>3</sup> there is no need to produce heirs – so the whole practice of levirate marriage is meaningless in the resurrection. He doesn’t answer the question they ask, but turns the concept over in a new way. Similarly, when Jesus responds about the question of resurrection itself, he relies on a text that the Sadducees hold with authority – the book of Exodus. There, he points out, God refers to Godself as “I am God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of

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<sup>3</sup> Vs 30: “At the resurrection people won’t marry nor will they be given in marriage. Instead, they will be like angels from God.” (ie, have eternal life)

Jacob.” Not “I *was* the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” – but “I *am*.” It’s a beautiful use of a source text to reveal questions about God’s way. It’s a reformational statement!

Additionally, after Jesus statement floors the Sadducees and the crowd, the Pharisees show up to ask questions and be asked questions in turn. And again, Jesus uses the techniques and the texts of the people he’s meeting with. Knowing that many among the Pharisees use the Psalms of David as prophesy about the Messiah, he uses Psalm 110 to show that there’s more to know, more to ponder, more to understand. Sometimes, the socks we thought were matched – they’re actually a match for other socks in the drawer.

As we look for the Holy Spirit to continue with reformation in the church, we know that whatever happens, the questions to come are as important as the questions that have already been asked. Questions are a signpost on the Way – a marker that leads us onward in a different direction than we expected. Just as Protestant Reformers asked questions and found a Way connected to what had come before – and yet offering a different discipline of discipleship, divergent from the path they’d always imagined – we too are called to ask questions, to look deeply at our belief, and listen for God’s guidance on the Way.

May the Holy Spirit guide us to the right questions. May Jesus answer the questions we never knew to ask. May God’s love unfold the Way before us, renewing us each and every morning. Amen.

## Works Cited

Bern, Dan. "Feel Like a Man." *Breathe*. 2006.