

## When Things Don't Make Sense, Ask the "Who" Question – Matt Zahniser

When Things Don't Make Sense, Ask the "Who" Question: Lord, to Whom can we go? You have the Words of Eternal Life. (John 6: 68)

2 Samuel 18:1-9, 15, 31-33; John 6: 35, 41-51

In my seminary days at Asbury Theological Seminary, students went out among rural people and practiced evangelism. One story was told this way. A seminary student found a Kentucky mountain man sitting on his front porch in a rocker. A bit awkwardly the student asked the man, "Are you lost?" The man replied in a puzzled tone. "I have lived around here all my life, hunted, fished, and tramped all over this valley; I don't reckon I'm lost." The student tried again, "No, what I mean is do you have religion?" Again the man was puzzled, but answered as best he could: "Well, I do have a pain in my lower back that is very pesky; I've always thought it was rheumatism; but it could be religion." Finally the student asked the man point blank, "Are you ready for the judgment?" The man leaned forward in his rocker and asked, "When is it?" The student gaining confidence replied, "It could be today; it could be tomorrow." His confidence dissolved, however, when the man answered in lowered tones, "Don't tell my wife; she'll want to go both days."

The young evangelist's questions did not work. They were the wrong questions. Yet we all know questions are important. Good questions indicate good children and good students; and good questions make good teachers, good parents, and good spouses.

In Bible study, circling question marks bears fruit, because questions are important. In our Gospel reading today two question marks occur, both for questions asked by "the Jews": "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven?'" (6:42). Good Bible study also involves careful attention to context.

Looking back through the chapter, we circle another set of question marks, indicating questions asked by a group called "the crowd": "What must we do to perform the works of God?" (v. 28) and "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you?" (v. 30)

The crowd follows Jesus around because he multiplied the loaves and fishes. They follow Jesus for benefit. When he urges them to seek after the bread that does not perish, they want to know what they must do to get in on this superbread? When Jesus answers in essence, you need to believe in me. Their "what" question of benefit now gives way to a "what" question of guarantee: "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you?" We suggest more bread (6:25-34).

Looking to the next paragraph in the verses for next week we discover another “how” question also asked by the Jews among themselves: “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” Now, we have a set of “what” questions asked by the crowd and a set of “how” questions asked by the Jews.

Looking even further to the lesson of week after next, we find another group called “disciples” with another set of questions. Jesus’ disciples ask, “This teaching is difficult, who can listen to it?” When some of his disciples give up on him, Jesus asks his twelve disciples, “Do you also wish to go away?” These more tenacious disciples, represented by Peter, ask the second “who” question: “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life” (60-69).

Three groups in the story: the crowd, the Jews, and the disciples. Three types of questions: “what” questions about benefit and guarantee; “how” questions about challenges to accepted knowledge; and “who” questions about Jesus and his disciples. This structural symmetry suggests these questions are important.

Our assignment for today is the “how” question. The question you ask when things do not make sense. Or when you are in trouble.

“The Jews,” meaning the Jewish leaders from Galilee (Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, Anchor Bible, 2 vols. [New York: Doubleday, 1966], 1.lxxi and 270), ask these questions. “How” questions are often leadership questions. These leaders seem to get Jesus’ meaning when he talks about himself as “the bread of life come down from heaven”; because what he says about himself immediately challenges what they already know about him: “Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, I have come down from heaven?” (41-42) “How” questions are questions about sense making; they are raised by incongruity and contradiction, raised by challenges to custom, tradition, and worldview. Thus they are leadership questions.

Take your professor. You say to your professor, “God spoke to me in a dream; maybe she will say to you, or at least think to herself, “You dreamed God spoke to you.” Maybe the worldview of your professor, based on what she has come to know, excludes God speaking to anyone. She might as well say, “How can you say God spoke to you in a dream? God never spoke to me in a dream or in anything else.”

After noting that these leaders should have been taught by God, drawn to him, Jesus goes on with talking about bread, “I am the bread of life . . . Whoever eats of this bread will live forever.” Then he adds this striking claim: “and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh” (48-51).

Among the leaders a flurry of “how” questioning irrupts and boils down to: “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” If they have ever heard of cannibalism, they do not expect it to be advocated by even a radical Jewish teacher. Although the enormous variety of cannibalism

defies categorizing it by motive (Paula Brown, “Cannibalism,” Encyclopedia of Religion, 1987 ed., 3.60-62), some cannibals, at least the ones I have known ☺, do not eat the flesh of humans because they are hungry, they do not eat the flesh of people they despise. They eat the flesh of people they admire and wish to emulate.

The flesh and blood as bread and wine—food and drink—may be clear to us; but it certainly was not clear to the common folk, the leadership, or even the disciples whom we meet in this chapter. The Jewish leaders stand for all three groups and for us when we encounter features of the teaching of scripture that puzzle and maybe even scandalize us.

A “how” question is a legitimate question. Just as the Jews found Jesus’ claims puzzling at best and threatening at worst. We also find ourselves with puzzles and troubles in everyday life.

Maybe you have believed, defended, and suffered ostracism for your strong belief in the inerrancy of Christian scripture. Then you read in one passage in Samuel (2 Sam 24:1) that God incited David to take a census of all the people of Israel and Judah. You notice a cross reference to a passage in Chronicles (1 Chro 21:1) and, when you look it up, you find “Satan . . . incited David to count the people of Israel”—the very same census now inspired by Satan! “How” can this be?” You have a right to ask. This is a “how” question.

You have received assurance in prayer that a friend who has fallen off a roof will be healed; but he remains a quadriplegic. “How” can this be? What good are divine promises?

You have been to multiple healing services with masses of people praying and in spite of deep and uncritical faith on your part your life threatening neural disease persists and increases. “How” can this be? Meanwhile you husband has been miraculously healed of lower back pain. How is this a proper divine set of priorities?

Parents who think they have done their best to raise children properly, to give them constructive guidance, and to exemplify sound biblical and godly living before them—if not consistently, at least predominantly—sometimes have a child who rebels against them and ends up on drugs, in jail or in some other trouble. This too does not make sense. God: “How” can this be? Where are the promises? What about the proverb my grandmother kept quoting: “train children in the right way, and when old they will not stray” (Proverbs 22:6)? Three of her four children did not take her way of faith? “How can this be?”

David counts as one of these “how- question” parents. “O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O my son Absalom, my son, my son!” (33).

Our Samuel reading for today takes us into the very heart of David the king. David’s son Absalom has by trickery and stealth stolen the kingship of Israel out from under his father, forcing David to flee from his throne and Jerusalem. When David, God’s anointed, sends his military leaders out to defeat this son in battle, he asks them to, “Deal gently for my sake with

the young man Absalom” (2 Sam 18:5). He sends his warriors out to risk their lives in a battle against Absalom, a traitor to his own father, his kingdom, and his people, a battle against a substantial guerilla army, a battle that will result in 20,000 casualties (18:7-8). Yet he can say, “Deal gently . . . with the young man Absalom?”

Do you feel his pain—the agony he feels? “How can this be happening to me?” As king he cannot stand by and let a rebellious son get away with stealing his kingdom. He has profound respect for God’s anointed, he showed that when Saul fell into his hands in a cave. He could easily have killed Saul who was seeking to kill him; but instead he tore a bit off of Saul’s robe as evidence that he had respect for God’s anointed (1 Sam 23:15-24:22; see also 1 Sam 26:1-25).

Yet his intense love for Absalom comes out strongly in the parts of the chapter we read. Even his son’s “complete apostasy” (The New Oxford Annotated Bible [NRSV], Bruce M. Metzger, and Roland E. Murphy, eds. [New York: Oxford University Press, 1991], note to 18:5) cannot quench his intense love for Absalom. He asks his generals to deal gently with “the young man Absalom,” a traitor to the nation and to the kingdom! That must have been a “how” moment for the generals too.

There were 20,000 casualties plus one beloved son, Absalom, left hanging by his head from an oak tree—completely vulnerable. Even his mule ran on and deserted him. Joab, one of David’s three commanders, ordered a subordinate to finish Absalom off; but the servant refused to disobey the king’s impassioned command to “deal gently with the young man, Absalom.” So Joab himself sent three spears through the chest of the young man Absalom and a gaggle of armor bearers put him out of his misery and took him down.

When a Cushite, an Ethiopian slave (NOAB n. to 18:31-33), delivers the good tidings of victory to David, the king asks, “Is it well with the young man, Absalom?” Even the Ethiopian’s, euphemistic answer offers no help to a distraught father: “May the enemies of my Lord the king, and all who rise up to do you harm, be like that young man” (18:32). Wasting no time rejoicing in victory, David, repairs to his chamber to weep, lamenting as he goes: “O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom, my son, my son” (v. 33). The grief of the king eclipsed the joy of victory.

The troops, hearing about the king’s grief stole back into the city as though in the shame of defeat; Joab had to talk the king into ignoring his feelings as a grieving father and to go out and review his troops as a victorious king (2 Sam 19:1-8a).

So we have been talking about questions, especially “how” questions; hard questions that challenge what we know and believe, especially raised by trouble, trouble such as Absalom raised for David. So what about answers?

Answers to “how” questions are difficult. Take the sin of the model king David in having Uriah the Hittite killed, in order to camouflage his own sin and steal Uriah’s wife. The writer of Chronicles answers this “how” question by leaving the whole incident out along with the chain of trouble

leading up to the death of the young man Absalom. Then we have the answer laid out for us by Pastor Wayman just two weeks ago: see David as a fallible human being; look to Jesus as your ideal king.

This is a good place to return to John 6, and the disciples asking “who” questions. The first “who” question might as well be a “how” question: “This is a difficult word, who can listen to it?” (6:60). They are following the way of the Jewish leaders. In fact, some followers of Jesus are so offended at his difficult claims they go away—the “how”-“who” question, “Who can listen to this difficult teaching?” having become unbearable for some of Jesus’ disciples. This is the Chroniclers answer. But when Jesus asks the twelve, “Will you also go away?” Peter answers the tenacious twelve “To whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life” (6:66-69). That’s the answer of the book of Samuel (1 & 2 Sam) (Stanley D. Walters, *The Book of Reversals: An Essay on the Organization and Purpose of Samuel* [Privately printed Courtice, Ontario: Manthano Press, 1990], 27-40 ). It is also the answer of Pastor Wayman: look to Jesus for your ideal.

The “who” question is the answer. Jesus shares our trouble; he inhabits our dilemma’s. When we take up our crosses, he carries them.

I see Jesus, son of David, himself hanging between heaven and earth, between two insurrectionists, in the place of the young insurrectionist Absalom. That vision does not answer all my questions, but it does show that, while Jesus is not always the answer, he is often the question itself, sharing its agony, even uttering his own “how” question: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34).

I am drawn back to the extreme statement of George Butterfield, “Hold fast to Christ and in everything else be totally uncommitted” (*Christianity and History* [New York, Scribner, 1950], ).

To whom else can we go, you have the words of eternal life.

Or the prayer of Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdicheve (Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, 2 vols. [New York : Schocken Books, 1975], 1.212 [I am not sure this is the correct edition and our library does not have the book]).

Where I wander—You!  
Where I ponder—You!  
You! You! You!  
When I am gladdened—You!  
When I am saddened—You!  
You! You! You!

Sky is you! Earth is you!  
You above, You below!

In every trend, at every end,  
Only You, You Again, always You!  
You! You! You!

Perhaps the early Hasid will permit me to add:  
Food is You! Drink is You!  
You the light, You the life  
You the answer, You the question  
You, You, You!

“To whom else can we go, you have the words of eternal life.”

Amen!