

## Sermons from Park Hill: July 27, 2008

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**Sermons from  
Park Hill Congregational UCC  
Denver, Colorado**

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**July 27, 2008**

**1<sup>st</sup> Kings 3: 5-12  
“A Different Question”**

About 10 years ago I began to think about what I wanted to do for my first sabbatical. My best friend had just returned from her 3 months of sabbatical in Southern Africa working with an AIDS ministry in a remote, rural area. Another friend had spent his 3 months in Washington, DC, doing justice advocacy work. Others stayed at home and did a combination of things, including study and volunteering. Those things were appealing, but nothing stood out as an obvious choice for me. And if I was going to be on sabbatical, it had to be three months away from home because I lived six feet out the front the door of the church, surrounded on the other sides by the church parking lot. The minute I stepped back into my house, I would be back at work.

But where did I want to go? A few months later I was reading a book by Kathleen Norris about her experience as a lay woman who began regularly visiting a Benedictine monastery in North Dakota. I was primarily interested in her writing because of her

connection to North Dakota and her accurate descriptions of the people and life on the Great Plains. I could relate. But as I continued reading, all of a sudden I realized that *that* was what I was supposed to do. Spending my sabbatical in a monastery was the last thing I would have imagined for me. I knew practically nothing about monastic life – what do you even do in there? – or anything about Benedictines. I didn't even know much about Catholicism. I called a Benedictine monastery near Santa Fe and asked if I could spend two months with them. I wasn't even sure if something like that could be done. But, I made all the arrangements and on May 1<sup>st</sup> started driving across the country.

On the day I was to enter, I went a few miles beyond the gates, further up the canyon. There was a turn-off so I stopped and saw this huge boulder sticking out into the Pecos River. The other side of this 15 foot wide river was a sheer canyon wall. I sat on that boulder and said, “OK God. I'm here. What do you want me to do here?” And just like someone was on the other end of the line having a conversation, I heard back, “I want you know that I love you.” I was a little perturbed by that answer. “I already know that. What else?” But silence – like a dead cell phone. “Can you hear me now?” But nothing on the other end. I just had to be ready to take whatever came.

I left there two months later a changed person. Not because of anything I did or because I got any answers, but because I was given a new question. After a few weeks in this completely strange environment that had started to feel like a home, the question I was supposed to ask came to me. “Who am I becoming?” It wasn't, “What am I supposed to do?” And it wasn't the answer that transformed me. It was the question. And it's a question that is never finished. It can never be fully answered. If my

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question is about doing – should I do this or should I do that – there is a right and a wrong answer, or at least shades of right and wrong. “I was clearly not supposed to do that!” But failure is just as valuable to “becoming” as making the “right” decision.

There are a couple of reasons why this story occurred to me while thinking about the text from 1<sup>st</sup> Kings. One is that Solomon asked for wisdom, not three wishes for riches or a long life or even the death of his enemies. He asked for understanding to discern, or in another translation, he asked for a “listening heart.” Discernment is about developing a “listening heart.” The second reason this passage spoke to me is that we have begun a 5 year planning process, developing a strategic plan. The Church Council has directed a few people to begin meeting to help develop a process. But after several meetings we have found ourselves floundering a bit. It’s hard to know where to start such an awesome task. Perhaps we should be asking different questions of ourselves. Instead of “What do we want to be doing in 2014,” or even “Who do we want to be?” maybe there’s another question. I’m not suggesting we ask, “Who are we becoming.” That was my particular question. Maybe we need to be thinking about *who* we are asking.

One of my observations since coming here has been that we are a very engaged congregation. We care deeply about the church and there are many people who truly sacrifice for the church with their time and treasure. What I’ve noticed, however, is that we don’t often use “God-language.” It’s not a fault and it’s not even that unusual for a liberal church that is weary about evangelists who speak too confidently about what God “told” them to do. The icing on the cake of that mess was Oral Roberts proclaiming God would kill him if he didn’t raise \$8 million. He raised

\$9 million, but as the New York Times said, you can’t trot that one out another time.

In the book I’ve been using for my summer book study blog, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, Diana Butler Bass tells about an Episcopal Church in Cincinnati – Church of the Redeemer. It was a classic mainline church. When the new priest began his ministry there he described his priorities as “competent ministry” – develop programming that would meet the requests of his parishioners, provide a pastoral presence for people in need, and raise enough money. Classic mainline church. To participate in the life of the church, you joined a Board - just as members of Church of the Redeemer did in their secular life – the board of the Red Cross, the board of the orchestra.

But then this priest created a congregation-wide process of discernment based on the question “Where is God in your ministry?” It made a lot of people uncomfortable. For one, most people didn’t consider their service on a board to *be* a ministry. It was simply the responsibility of engaged citizens or church members. Secondly, they just weren’t comfortable speaking about God – asking “God questions.” A member of their Vestry (the church Council in an Episcopal Church) recalled that in the beginning it was difficult, to start to do this God-talk. Some thought the priest had “lost it,” while others just went along to humor him.

Perhaps scarier, members of the Vestry were the ones asked to interview the members of all the other boards. The person interviewing was nervous by the awesomeness of the task, the one being interviewed was overwhelmed by the subject. Yet, in their vulnerability, they discovered something about each

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other that was transcendent. After years of exchanging pleasantries about the weather or their children, here were two people actually talking about their spiritual lives *in church*. Not surprising, this totally changed the way people thought about their involvement in the church and their relationship to each other. It began to transform the members and their ministry in powerful, spiritually enriching way. They became excited about possibilities and passionate about what they were doing – or perhaps, who they were becoming together as a church.

In the same book, Frederick Schmidt describes discernment as fundamentally a practice of asking “God-questions” instead of “I-questions.” According to Schmidt, I-questions are driven by the need for self-actualization... What am I going to do? God-questions shift our focus from what *we* do to what *God* is doing, by helping us find our places in God’s hope for the world. (I like the idea of God’s *hopes* for the world; or God’s desires for humankind. For some this is more inviting than God’s will.)

Using God-questions, the focus moves away from what people want from their church – or even what they want their church to do. The focus now becomes “what does God desire for this church?” Not just *from* the church, but *for* this church. At heart of it is God. It is developing an understanding mind and a listening heart. Like Solomon seeking wisdom, not worldly things.

Lots of strategic plans ask the members what they want from the church. They are encouraged to remember better times and ask what was being done more effectively back then. Lots of strategic plans try to find out what members are interested in and what they would give their time to if the church provided

the opportunity. What should the church do? This is better than not asking any questions and just letting the church drift along without any direction. Such a church isn’t preparing for anything. There is little anticipation; and therefore, little hope. Soon that becomes palpable and nothing is being done except to keep the doors open one day a week. But, the question isn’t what do I want my church to do; but how do we discern the wisdom of God for us? How are we inviting God into our lives as the church? Perhaps that should be obvious; perhaps it seems trite.

But, what would happen if someone from the church asked you, “where is God in your ministry?” What if you had to ask someone else, “where is God in your ministry?” Would your first reaction be to run the other way? Or would you be relieved to finally talk with one another in a deeply different way?

Asking a different question can be life-changing. What questions have you been asking in your life? Might you need to ask something different? What would happen if you shifted the focus of your questions from yourself to God? Or if not God, then something outside of yourself; something universal, unmoved by selfish desires. Diana Butler Bass writes that “discernment does not simply confirm our hunches or intuitions. Instead it is a perilous practice that involves self-criticism (not being self-critical, but honest), questions, and risk – and it often redirects our lives.” If we’ll let it. What does God desire for me?

She says that people of faith “believe that human beings have the capacity to hear, see, touch, and feel God – a genuine sense of truth and beauty through which we know God and know” God’s desires, God’s

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hopes. Discernment is a practice that is *intentionally* developed through reflection, questions, prayers, and community. Vital congregations do this with one another regularly – and find themselves in places and with power they couldn't have imagined on their own. That's the problem with trying to do it all on our own – we don't tap into the vastness of all the creative imagination of the Creator of the Universe.

What is a different question for you? What is a question you know you kind-of-know you should be asking but haven't dared to ask yet? Or are you more focused on answers than finding the right questions? I began asking the question "Who am I becoming" almost 10 years ago – and I'm still asking it. I try to remember that it is God who I am asking, not myself. But it's been a rich journey, made richer by remembering it's not about me, and blessed because I'm sharing it with you.