

Psalm 22:1-8
Romans 7:14-25a

“Outlasting Tough Questions”

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November 17, 2013

The late Boston Cardinal Richard Cushing told a group of Protestant clergy that when he was a brand new parish priest, while in a department store he was summoned to a man who had suddenly collapsed. He was asked to give the man ‘last rites’ (just in case), as they waited for the ambulance to arrive.

Following the customs of the Roman Catholic Church, he knelt nervously beside the man, looked up ‘last rites’ in the little black book he was carrying, and asked the man in a quivering voice, “Do you believe in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit?” He said the man stirred a bit, and opened his eyes. Then looking at the people standing around him, the man said, “Here I am dying, and HE asks me a riddle....”

Riddles and questions, questions and riddles ... life is just chock full of questions to be answered, isn’t it? Some of our questions can be answered through our experience, others by our attained knowledge. Many more questions we will probably never be able to answer. Oh, how we wish we could answer them all ... But so much of life has to be lived with at least some degree of uncertainty.

Psychologists tell us that the ability to life with uncertainty is a measure of good mental health. Highly disturbed mental health patients cannot live with unanswered questions – they dread uncertainty. So in order to deal with the unanswerable questions in our reality, they created their own reality, where they have all the answers to their questions. Thus they construct a life as they wish it could be through fantasy. As noted psychologist Carl Jung stated, “The greatest and most important questions of life are all insoluble. They can never be solved, but only outgrown.”

The ability to live with unanswered questions – to live with a degree of ambiguity – is also a good measure for one’s spiritual health. We people of faith are always being invited to probe in the unknown questions of faith, seeking answers to what we do not know, just as in every aspect of life. Yet, the spiritually mature know that there is no quick and easy path to the ‘on-switch’ of theological understanding. Clear, fast, decisive and definitive answers are rarely that obvious or available. Yet God has equipped us with minds with which we are allowed, and even invited to probe and grapple as we move toward understanding and acceptance. That ability to think, to reason and to question is a gift from God.

Sure, we wish life could be simply “cut and dry,” “yes or no,” “black or white.”

We wish we could be free of all uncertainty – the gray areas. But God did not create our lives that way, and the un-knowing is what differentiates us from God. Life for us is designed to be mysterious, and it is the unanswered and unanswerable questions which actually continue to draw us to seek God.

In the cloud of human uncertainty there is a hidden temptation to follow any leader, join any sect, and cling to any position that promises to have “the answers.” Yet, history’s pathway is littered with the refuse of empty promises and inappropriate answers as too often the “blind follow the blind.” Folks have followed numerous religious and political demagogues if they promise to provide the right answers: Remember the victims of Jonestown, the “family” of Charles Manson, the Branch Davidians? Prophets and politicians of every ilk have claimed to have “all the right answers,” and have attracted their share of followers. But notice, that when those leaders come into power and claim ‘absolute certainty’, or claim to have THE answers, then the first thing they do to followers who dare to question them, is to punish or persecute them.

Actually, it is far wiser to accept the Apostle Paul’s diagnosis of the human predicament concerning the difficult questions of life. As he states in his first letter to Corinth: *“For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we shall see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.”* It is a frank and honest admission on his part: riddles and questions – religious or otherwise – a part all of what it means to be human.

Winston Churchill once characterized Russia (the U.S.S.R.) as “a riddle wrapped up in a mystery inside of an enigma.” And that statement might characterize a good part of life in general. Life itself can be a riddle, a mystery, an enigma. Therefore spiritual maturity and mental health are measured by one’s ability to accept and live with the constant reality of the unknown, and the unknowable.

Even the complexity of our own human natures leaves us with additional unanswerable questions. Again, the Apostle Paul honestly addresses that complexity within himself. Paul, the great sinner and saint confesses that he is often baffled by his own behavior – and who of us is not? How often have we too identified with Paul’s honest confession: *“I do not understand my own actions! For I do not do what I want, but DO the very things I hate.”*

That statement certainly captures the essence of one of the supreme riddles of life. We often innately know the right thing to do – we innately know what is good; yet so often we ignore it and disregard it. It is that persistent contradiction between will and act – that burdensome plight hanging over all humankind. Our

moral standards force us to ask why: why, when our will knows and desires good, why do we ACT in ways that are selfish and destructive, and just plain sinful?

This paradox is the constant inner conflict that is experienced by anyone with any sense of morals, anyone with a sense of conscience. Paul personifies sin as an evil power that enters human life and brings a person into “the slavery of its rule.” Sin is that which permeates not only our physical nature, but also enters our thinking so that it infects our whole being.

For Paul, sin in the flesh is an external power alien to our created and God-intended human nature. *“It is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells in me,”* he says. But these words do not mean that we are not somehow responsible for our actions and behavior. This is not that Flip Wilson, “the devil made me do it” brand of theology. No, Paul writes in the very first chapter of his letter to the Romans, *“Therefore you have no excuse – the judgment of God falls upon those who do such (evil things.)”* Thus Paul is confronting the tragedy of the divided, defeated self – that frustration in wondering ‘why we do the harmful and selfish things we do **not** want to do.’

One of the most paradoxical riddles of life is the nature of humanity: we are at the very same moment the composite of proven sinner and potential saint. Pascal built his entire philosophy around this dual nature of humanity: *“Man is the pride and the refuse of the universe;”* he wrote, *“... a reed, but a thinking reed; worm of the earth, yet depository of truth.”*

That is precisely the point that Paul is making in the chapter from Romans we are addressing. He faces the truth about himself, and that includes all of us when he writes: *“I delight in the law of God after the inward man; but I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into the captivity of sin.”* Paul has masterfully expressed our own frustration: Don’t we too question the source, the necessity, and the purpose of this inner struggle between the will and the act. Don’t we also want to know why we have to be caught between this eternal struggle between evil and good?

Paul honestly confronts the paradox of our human natures as he bares his soul in this letter to fellow Christians in Rome. And then he offers them and us an answer: The answer to the paradox of our divided human nature is found in the equal paradox of God’ gift of Jesus Christ – an undeserved gift that doesn’t make sense.

Thus, in the wisdom and grace of God we have been given one paradox as the answer to another paradox. For in Christ Jesus we have one who was paradoxically at the same time, fully human and fully divine: He was crucified in

weakness and raised in power. He is the Judge of our sin; yet the Redeemer of the sinner. What this may suggest to us is that the best way to answer the unanswerable questions of life is to ask even deeper questions....

The Biblical record shows that, in good rabbinical fashion, our Lord was a master at posing deep, rhetorical questions. The Pharisees once asked him, "By what authority are you doing these things and who gives you this authority? To which Jesus replies by asking a question of his own: "The baptism of John, from whence did it come? from heaven, or from him? Thus a difficult question concerning authority is to be answered by an even deeper question of authority.....

Some years ago a bright, young college student became inexplicably ill and died. He was the son of parents who had already lost their only other child while she was an infant to SIDS. These were poor, simple folks and this son was the crown of their lives. They had sacrificed for years to give him every opportunity, including a college education. He was a successful student and had great potential – but now, he was gone. One of the mourners came up to the minister who was officiating the funeral service and asked with an irritated tone, "Was it God who did this, or the devil?"

That question plumbs into the very depths of the mysterious and paradoxical workings of the providence of God. Reformed theology might answer that God did not cause this young man's death, but God did allow it because of the gift of our free will. Free will means we humans have the ability to choose, including choosing between righteousness and sin. When we choose to sin, which we all do, including that young man – the wages of those choices is death. So death is part of the human reality; yet paradoxically, God through the grace of Jesus Christ has also given new life.

All of this means that Jesus Christ is the answer God provides to the human predicament and the human paradox. As Paul states it, the solution is "God through the intervention of Christ." Christ alone brings a satisfactory answer to the eternal questions; he alone brings new life as the answer to the unanswered and unanswerable in this present life.

God in Christ has done for us what we could have never accomplished for ourselves. God has answered the paradox of our sinful natures by the gift of grace. Paul declares the reality of that divine intervention: God has sent us a Redeemer in the person of Jesus Christ. And notice that all of this begins with God's action – the answer was already given to us 2,000 years ago, even before we asked the questions.

During the last national census, a census-taker knocked on the door of a remote cabin in Montana. When the door opened she was greeted by a kind, elderly man. She carefully explained why she was there saying, *“Every ten years the government wants to know, how many people there are in the United States.”* The man replied, *“Lordy, honey ... I don’t know!”* That response is often the only answer any of can offer to so many of the difficult questions of life: we don’t know!

Numerous questions of life will not only remain complex, but more often than not, unanswerable. *“But beware of the terrible simplifiers,”* wrote Swiss historian Jacob Bernhardt, *“for it is they that do the most harm in the long run.”* Life is not simple, and we human beings are not simple creatures. When we treat life as such we do an injustice to the Master Mind, our Creator God. There is a sense in which the questions may be just as valuable to us as the answers are, because when we don’t know we are driven seek dependence upon God who knows all ... a God ‘knows all good things for us.’

We believers have an edge however. For not only is Christ God’s answer to our human dilemma, but he is the One who assures us that all the answers are known and held by a loving, forgiving and graceful God. Faith doesn’t mean we will find a solution; rather faith provides a means by which we WITH-stand, even when we don’t UNDER-stand.

As someone wisely remarked, *“Maturity is the ability to live with ambiguity indefinitely.”* So as those who move toward maturity in faith, Paul calls us to be *“faithful stewards of the mysteries of God”* - until that time *“when we shall see face to face.”* Amen.