

This is the final Sunday in a series of messages based on questions many of you posed in response to the Advent invitation: “If you could God ask anything, what one question would you ask?” Based on more than 50 questions that were emailed, I settled on 6 questions for the series, and in most cases, these 6 questions combined multiple questions with similar themes and concerns. Over the last 5 weeks we’ve looked at, “God, How Can You Stand Me?” “Why Do You Allow So Much Evil and Suffering?” “How Should I Read the Bible?” “How Do You Handle My Prayers?” And “What Are the Limits of Your Grace?”

Today’s question was framed this way, “God, I feel Your pull, where do we go from here?” Before jumping into that question, I’d like to go back to a commitment I shared on the first Sunday of this series. I said: “it goes without saying God’s actual answers to your questions would be more satisfying than my responses. My intention is to offer faithful, helpful, and heartfelt responses to your questions. I will [I said] do my best to ground these sermons first, in the testimony of scripture, second, in prayerful theological reflection, and third, as one who hopes what I share will glorify the God we all long to know better.” I kept this intention before me throughout, but along the way, I often felt strongly and prayerfully led by the guidance of the Holy Spirit. I hope this came through, and that you sensed God’s Spirit stirring in your own heart because this leads us into today’s focus.

As I already said, the final question is, “God, I feel Your pull, where do we go from here?” I like the compelling way this question is phrased. “I feel your pull... I” is a very personal statement, and so it would have been logical to ask, “where do *I* go from here?” or even, “where do You want *me* to go from here?” But the question moves from the singular and personal recognition of God’s call, into a question posed in the plural, “where do *we* go from here?”

I am certain that the person asking the question used ‘we’ to indicate that any forward movement was one this person wants to take *with God*. But as a church, the ‘we’ also includes the body of

Christ; the ‘we’ bound together and sustained by the loving grace of Jesus. As individual disciples, ‘we’ move forward with our Triune God and with our brothers and sisters. Keeping both of these aspects of ‘we’ is vital to our call as disciples.

Our Gospel reading from Luke 9 helps point us in the right direction as we assess and consider how to faithfully respond to God’s call when we’re discerning, “where do we go from here?” And today, I have three points!

First, when we’re trying to discern our next step with God, we do well to consider the ways we are currently ‘out of step’ with God. In Luke 9, as Jesus and his disciples begin their journey to Jerusalem, they look to stop and rest in a Samaritan village. But when the Samaritans decline to receive them, two disciples -- James and John -- ask Jesus’ permission to rain down hell-fire upon village.

But what does Jesus do when they ask this? He rebukes them. Notice that he doesn’t just say, ‘Guys, not a good idea right now. Maybe later.’ No. Jesus rebukes them! Why is Jesus so harsh? Because such a violent response is inconsistent with their call; it’s incompatible with what Jesus has taught them already: “I say to you, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who abuse you.” (Luke 6:27)

We know this from experience, right? That we can talk ourselves out of our call to follow Jesus, and that we can make excuses for avoiding our call pretty easily... But in a way we are luckier than Jesus’ earliest followers, because we have the testimony of scripture to help us discern how we are currently ‘out of step’ with God’s call. We can go back and read Jesus’ teachings in a way his original followers could not! And so we can make course corrections when we are ‘out of step’ with God’s call!

Second, even as we assess how we are out of step with God (and with Jesus), we also need to consider the ways we are ‘in step’ with God’s call; already being faithful and true disciples! Our reading from Luke 9:57-62 reveals that Jesus is continuing to call people to follow him as he makes his way to Jerusalem, right? And there are

a couple people who he calls who seem to make excuses to avoid the invitation. (In fact, I'd say that the excuses seem pretty reasonable.) But let's not overlook something... even as Jesus had just strongly rebuked James and John, where are they? They are still with him... on the way to Jerusalem... all the way to Jerusalem... and all the way to his resurrection.

Sometimes we get so focused on self-criticism, so negatively engrossed with how we are falling short, that we forget how much we are 'in step' with God. We don't see how far we've already come on this journey. And this negative self-assessment can be paralyzing. We stop moving forward and get stuck in self-judgements that do nothing to further God's kingdom. But James and John don't stop moving even when they've fallen 'out of step' with their Rabbi.

One of my favorite pieces of wisdom is this: Guilt is useless if it lasts more than 10 seconds. I happen to think feelings of guilt and shame are appropriate, because only sociopaths and psychopaths don't feel guilt and shame. But if we haven't decided what to do about feelings of guilt in 10 seconds, we are wasting God's grace; we are wasting the redemptive possibilities that God is calling us to once we decide how to deal with appropriate guilt and shame.

Third, after we consider how we're 'out of step' with God's call, and after we've assessed how we are 'in step' with God's call, we are finally ready to discern our 'next forward step.'

Yesterday I attended an event for Pastors at Pt. Loma Nazarene College. Dr. Leonard Sweet was the key speaker. For some time Dr. Sweet was the dean of Drew Theological Seminary and he is a prolific author and speaker – usually speaking to Christian pastors and leaders as he did on Friday. One of the things he pointed out was that the Protestant reformation started 500 years ago when Martin Luther posted 95 theses on the door of the Wittenburg Church in Germany. (Think of that: the first Protestant sermon had 95 points!)

In doing this, Luther famously said, "Here I stand." And for this, Luther was eventually excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church. But we laud him for his courageous

stance against the abuses he perceived within the church. Ever since, Protestants have been 'taking stands,' often in theological fights with other Protestants, Catholics, atheists, scientists, and other religions. And I often hear this in some circles: "We need to take stand!"

Dr. Sweet suggested that it may be time for a new reformation. And the key phrase for this new reformation would not be "Here I stand", but rather, "Let's get going."

This is a quote I wrote down and I will be pondering for some time (so I hope I got it right)! Dr. Sweet said, "You can stand on principle or you can walk in relationship." And walking in relationship with God and neighbor is what Jesus called us to when he beckoned us saying "Follow me." Isn't that what Jesus says is the greatest commandment when he was asked? To love God and love neighbor! (There's that 'we' again!)

The question we need to ask as we discern our next forward step with God is: "What is the next thing I can do to grow in love of God and love of neighbor?" When this is our question, we can be confident that our next forward steps will be taken with God.

...
Back in October, I shared a prayer written by Thomas Merton that I think is again, an appropriate prayer for us whenever we are discerning our next step forward in discipleship:

"My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that [my] desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road... Therefore, I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost in the valley of the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face [] peril alone."

Sisters and brothers in Christ, God is calling us. Let's get going...

Amen.