

Dr. Jack Causey
August 16, 2009
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Craving for Clarity - John 10:22-30

When I was growing up in Mississippi, my dad was the treasurer of a large wholesale grocery business. Sometimes on Saturdays he would go down to his office when it was quiet and nobody was around to catch up on some of his work.

Some Saturdays I would go with him. In the warehouse there were stacks of boxed canned goods, and sacks of flour, rice and beans all around, which made it a great place to play. I could hide from marauding Indians and kill bad men for hours on end.

One Saturday afternoon after dad had finished his work, we started home. We got to the busy intersection of 8th Street and 28th Avenue. The light turned green giving us permission to go through the intersection. Just as we started across the street, a little boy riding a bicycle dashed in front of our car. My dad slammed on his brakes. Too late! Our car's left front fender caught the back wheel of his bike and spun him to the ground.

I turned to my dad and he was ashen white. His hands were trembling and his voice quivered as he told me to remain in the car. To this day I am not sure who was more frightened, my dad or that little boy. But when my dad got out of our car, the little boy had gotten up and was trying to get back on his broken bike.

The police quickly arrived and started getting eyewitness accounts. Of the five people they heard from, all gave different and conflicting reports of the accident.

The policemen knew my dad, so he got the necessary contact information from him, assured him he would take the boy to the hospital to make sure he was okay and dad said that he would buy him a new bike.

I began to learn an important lesson that Saturday afternoon at twelve years of age. Truth is truth, but truth can be illusive.

Just when we think we have the truth, some new evidence, new argument, new insight comes along and we aren't sure anymore. We hunger for truth; to have things nailed down; to know for certain. We want the facts in hand. Ernest Campbell, from whom I got the thought for this sermon, once said: "We have a craving for clarity."

In our religious faith, we often have questions and are always searching for clarity. That's why we go to conferences, read books, attend Sunday School classes and listen, hopefully, to preachers from time to time.

We are like the "would be followers of Jesus" in the incident that is told to us by John in the tenth chapter of his Gospel. It is winter and the disciples, with Jesus, gather under Solomon's Porch for refuge. It is the time of the Feast of Dedication; a high hour of worship. Suddenly Jesus is hemmed in by religious leaders who ask Him: "How long will you keep us in suspense? Clarify for us who you really are. If you are the Christ, the Messiah, tell us plainly." Now the Greek word that we have translated "plainly" is a favorite of John's. He uses it no less than ten times in his Gospel. It literally means "without the obscurity of a parable."

Whether the question was meant to trap Jesus or to find out who He really was, it's still a good question. It's pivotal for our faith journey. We need to know for ourselves who Jesus actually is!

It also is a great springboard for some other questions. There are questions I would like to ask God to answer or clarify for me, questions of theology that have bothered me through the years. I would like to ask, "God, tell me plainly about some things that have been bothering me about the Christian faith."

1. Clarify for me, God, the problem of suffering in the world.

Now this is not merely an intellectual question that has been fascinating my inquisitive mind. As Ernest Campbell would say, "I am not interested in mental gymnastics." Clarify for me why people suffer from time to time with illness and accidents for no apparent reason.

Take Bill White for example. When he was almost sixty, he got out his ladder to climb up on the roof of his house to clean the leaves out from the gutters. His wife, Polly, came out and asked him not to because after all he was not as young as he used to be. Her words were meant to be a caution, but Bill took them as a challenge.

He climbed the ladder, got up on the roof and began to clean the leaves out of the gutters. We don't know what happened, but Bill fell off of the roof. He landed on his back in the place where a limb grows out from the trunk of the tree and his spine was severed. The fall thrust him forward, causing him to land face first on the ground with such force that one of his lungs collapsed and several ribs were broken. He didn't die, but he was an invalid, paralyzed from his chest down, for the rest of his life. He suffered for years, not just physically, but also emotionally and mentally.

I want to know, God, why do good people suffer like that?

2. And that's not all. Clarify for me, God, your teachings on petitionary and intercessory prayer.

You said we could pray for anything and believing we would receive it. You said, "Ask and it shall be given you; seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you." Well, we ask, but we don't always receive what we ask for.

When Emily was nine years old she was diagnosed with leukemia. We all prayed for little Emily. She was cute, bright and full of life. As she got weaker, she had to stay home from school. I would go by to visit her from time to time. We would laugh, play some silly game and then we would get serious. Emily would ask me questions I could not answer and then we would pray.

We all prayed for Emily. For a long year we prayed for her. And then she died.

Someone said it was Your will and I categorically reject that.

Someone else said You permitted it to happen. Then why did

You permit it to happen when we prayed to spare her?

Clarify this for me, God.

And the list goes on and on. I'm like so many other Christians, I'm searching for clarity. Not that I haven't been given answers. The church and its theologians, both common and extraordinary, liberal and fundamental, have given me all kinds of answers.

Some were over simplistic; others too complex for me to understand. They often time left me with more confusion than clarity.

Let's go back to Solomon's Porch and hear again what Jesus said to those would be followers when they were seeking clarity. In essence, to paraphrase Him, Jesus said:

"I've TOLD you and you don't believe me. I've SHOWN you and you still don't believe me. I can't TELL you any more than I already have. I can't DO any more for you than I have already done. You can't expect to have everything explained to you BEFORE you believe. You can't expect to know everything AFTER you come to believe. I will tell you all that you need to know, all that you can understand and comprehend. And that should be enough."

Two things come to my mind from these words of Jesus.

1. Clarity is not always to be found.

There is a sense in which our search for clarity in matters of faith is a craving that should not and cannot be completely satisfied. Some of our questions should not be answered because to do so would be to unveil the mystery of God.

Most of us want what one theologian calls "computer clarity." Remember the computer joke a few years back. A technician stood in front of a computer and asked, "Is there a god?" The computer answered, "There is now." We cannot make computers our gods, nor can we expect God to act like some giant computer spitting our answers to our theological questions.

Computers are eminently helpful with questions of fact and quantity. Then there are questions that partake of mystery because they deal with relationships and meanings. The church is always tempted to give easy answers to hard questions, to succumb to the heresy of orthodoxy, to oversimplify answers to life's tough questions and to nail things down.

As Carlyle Marney once put it: "We Protestants are always trying to nail down insights not meant for nails." We can't always say, "The Bible says it. I believe it and that's it." The Bible is not an almanac nor are ministers people with easy answers. There are questions of the heart that cannot be answered with the plainness of a TV commercial or a political sound bite.

Sometimes we must approach life as a poet, not as a scientist. In an article in the *Saturday Review* a mother asked how she should answer her preschool daughter's question: "Where was I when you were a little girl?" One answer offered a simple biological response. A teaching nun in Missouri wrote: "You were in the mind of God." Both were right, but the nun's answer retained the mystery of life.

Clarity cannot always be found because we are too finite to comprehend it. Jesus said: "I have told you. You have just not heard or understood." They didn't and we can't either.

Sometimes as young boys we would ask Mr. Whitaker, our Sunday School teacher, some tough questions. He would often respond with, "We can't know that." I figured he just didn't know. Later I decided that he was just copping out. Now that I have gotten older and a bit wiser, I have decided he was right. We are not gods and there are things we cannot know.

2. The lack of clarity is the gateway to faith.

When we cannot explain the unexplainable; when our search for clarity is not met, we are left either to drown in a sea of doubt or to take what Soren Kierkegaard described as a "leap of faith." We are left either to throw up our arms in despair or to put our trust in God who is filled with mystery. It is a willingness to say, "I don't know anything else to do, but to trust God."

That's what faith is all about. We trust God when we cannot be sure.

Remember the marvelous Old Testament story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. The king threatened to throw them into the fiery furnace if they did not bow down to his statue when the band began to play. They refused. Then, the only time we hear from them, they said that God would save them, but added that if He didn't, they would still trust Him! Now that is real trust.

Lack of clarity is the gateway to faith.

But it is not as though this is a blind leap into the unknown. It is rather a leap into the arms of a loving God Who created us for Himself and desires the best for us.

It is difficult to understand God's love from the perspective of His mystery. The two are seemingly incompatible, but really they are complimentary. As Philip Yancey puts it in Reaching for the Invisible God: "A parent stands tall to instill respect in his child and then stoops down low for hugs and affection."

As the Father, God stands high above us, mysterious and awesome. As the Christ, God has bent down to embrace us with love and grace.

Don Cole was a successful businessman with a great sense of humor, a compassion for others and a deep faith in God. He was diagnosed with liver cancer. As the months progressed, he got weaker and weaker.

One day his wife Frances came by the church. I heard and recognized her voice and went out to speak to her. She told me that Don was out in the car.

I went out to see him. I slid into the driver's seat and we talked a bit. I asked Don how he was doing. He didn't want to use the word "death," but he said, "Whatever happens to me, I am grateful for the life that I have had and am confident that God will take care of me and my family."

After Don's death a few weeks later, Frances put on the face of faith while grieving on the inside. She oversaw the weddings of both of her children; times of celebration and sadness.

After her “first Christmas” without Don, Frances went to her favorite getaway place at the beach. When I saw her later, she said she learned two things at the beach. First of all, she learned that using a good wool coat to sit on at the beach in the dead of winter will ruin a good wool coat. Secondly, she learned that her questions and her grief had led her to a deeper faith in God than she had ever had before. While she had not found answers to her questions, she had found the Presence and the peace of God.

You see, her questions called not for clarity, but for empathy.

God offers us not clarity or answers for our questions, but He offers Himself in love and grace ... the essence of faith! This makes Him the Good Shepherd of our lives!