

Sermon: Let Me Ask a Question

Year C, the Fourth Sunday of Easter

[Acts 9:36-43](#); [Psalm 23](#); [Revelation 7:9-17](#); [John 10:22-30](#)

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Let me ask a question, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.” (John 10:24) We get it. We know why they want to know. Because if Jesus is the Messiah, there’s a whole protocol, a whole procedure, to go through. They need to verify that he’s from the line of David, clear up the confusion about why everyone thinks he’s from Nazareth when everyone *knows* that the Messiah will come from Bethlehem where David’s people live. Then there’s the war to throw out the Romans, plus whatever armed combat follows to keep all the other surrounding empires out of the newly liberated Israel. Then they’ll need to get Jerusalem all spiffed up and ready to receive all the tribute that will pour in from all the other nations on earth as their gods bow down to the God of Abraham.

Of course that’s not why they’re asking. They want to know if God has sent a warrior or a political leader to lead them out of bondage. Certainly from the bondage to the Romans. But also to the self-imposed constraints they are now living in that seem to be strangling the promises of justice and right relationship with God that they long for.

The trouble is, they are asking this question as if they just needed more data.¹ If Jesus would just give a straight answer, then they would know what to do. And he tells them that not only has he already told them, multiple times, he has showed them as well. It’s not a data question. Or rather, it’s not a data answer. Or rather, it’s not the data to the question they are asking. Jesus has provided the answer to the question the members of his community are asking.

How long do you wanna be loved? Is forever enough? Cause I’m never, never giving up on you.

The community that the Gospel of John is written to and for is a community that is being shut out of more and more places. They have been exiled from the Jewish community they thought they were a part of. Once they’re out from under the umbrella of the Jewish community then they are exceedingly vulnerable to limitations placed on them by the Romans. The Romans were deeply conservative, didn’t like many new things at all. And one of the things they liked least of all was a new religion. Particularly in a region that was in armed revolt against them.

The not-even-calling-themselves-Christians-yet Christian community was not overly concerned about who they ruled out of their community. They were mostly concerned about how to articulate who was in their community. When you don’t have power, you don’t worry about kicking people out. You need to find a way to leverage and multiply the strength you do have.

One strength the Gospel of John clearly perceives is that asking questions about the things of God will not result in straightforward answers.² You can ask if Jesus is the Messiah, but you’re not getting a “yes” or “no” answer. You’re going to get blind men whose sight is restored.

¹ Charles B. Cousar, “Fourth Sunday of Easter: John 10:22-30” in *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year C*, ed. Charles B. Cousar et al. [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994], 303.

² Gary D. Jones, “Fourth Sunday of Easter, Pastoral Perspective, John 10:22-30” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 2*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009], 444.

You're going to get blessings for Samaritan women who have been married seven times. You're going to get people like Lazarus brought back from the dead. You're going to drown in a sea of words about shepherds and sheep. None of which is "yes" or "no". But it is the way God works.

Could it possibly be that we simply can't believe that this unconditional kind of love would be enough to take a filthy wretch like this and wrap her up in righteousness? No matter the bumps, no matter the bruises, no matter the scars, still the truth is: the cross has made, the cross has made you flawless.

Another strength in the community that brought forth the Gospel of John is the understanding that faith is not simply a human deed. Faith includes the action of God.³ God seeks us out long before we seek God.⁴ Christ makes us his sheep; we don't make him our shepherd.⁵

As a species, we like to belong to a group; it helps us combat our sense of loneliness and isolation.⁶ We like to believe we have control over what groups we join. What are the dues? How often to you have to eat in the clubhouse? When do you have to come to events? What hats to you have to wear on opening day?

Somehow the Gospel of John managed to put into words the understanding that being part of the Christian community means that you have accepted that God chose you.⁷ God may choose all sorts of other people. Many of them are profoundly annoying. God may have chosen all sorts of people, maybe they know it, maybe they don't, maybe they call God by all sorts of different names or no name at all. In any event, don't worry about them. Worry about you. Because once you have accepted that God chose you, then the human part of faith kicks in. You have to act like it. You have to love God and you have to love your neighbors. There isn't a rule book or a punch list or some Cosmo quiz where scoring 80% or higher makes you a flawless Christian.

Could it possibly be that we simply can't believe that this unconditional kind of love would be enough to take a filthy wretch like this and wrap her up in righteousness? No matter the bumps, no matter the bruises, no matter the scars, still the truth is: the cross has made, the cross has made you flawless.

Preaching on Mother's Day is tricky. Because we are so completely surrounded by the images of loving mothers and children. But Jesus calls us to live in the real world and in the real world, not all mothers are loving, not all children are loving. We send the message that if your relationship doesn't fit in the Hallmark mould, then there is something wrong with you. We don't seem to make allowances that even if we were great at mothers and kids at one point, we may not fit so well together at other points. We may not be able to make allowances that some moms are doing ten times better than their mothers, but their mothers were dealt such a tough hand that a 10x improvement isn't really enough. Throw in the understanding that Jesus was fully human and was able to love unconditionally, so why aren't the rest of us up to the challenge?

³ Lewis R. Donelson, "Fourth Sunday of Easter, Exegetical Perspective, John 10:22-30" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 2*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009], 447.

⁴ Thomas H. Troeger, "Fourth Sunday of Easter, Homiletical Perspective, John 10:22-30" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 2*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009], 449.

⁵ Troeger, 449.

⁶ Robert Dean Kysar, "John 10:22-30." *Interpretation* 43, no. 1 (1989): 70.

⁷ Kysar, 69.

And if we do have a good relationship with our moms and our kids, we should really keep our mouths shut because it takes so little for the whole thing to go off the rails.

So let me ask this: *How long do you wanna be loved? Is forever enough? Could it possibly be that we simply can't believe that this unconditional kind of love would be enough to take a filthy wretch like this and wrap us up in righteousness?*

Because no matter what we do in and with our human relationships yesterday, today, tomorrow, Jesus, our good shepherd, has assured us that he has given us eternal life, and that we will never perish. No one will snatch us out of his hand. (John 10:28) And the same goes for our kids. And our mothers. If we cannot love them the way they need, if they cannot love us the way we need, God can. God has loved them before we did, God loves them now, God will love them when all memory of us has faded from this earth. God is never, never giving up on them, on us. God knows that no matter the bumps, no matter the bruises, no matter the scars, we are still flawless.

However smooth or tangled our relationships are with our mothers and our children, they already have the greatest love of all. If you want to know "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.", let me ask this, "how much more plain can Jesus make it? Nothing can separate you from the love of God. That is the message and sign of the Messiah."