A QUESTIONING FAITH

--a sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
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"After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking questions." (Luke 2:46)

The human simplicity of this scene is captivating. It's as if some parents, of your acquaintance or mine, had taken their high school son to visit a certain college, lost sight of him, and then come upon him sitting in the first row of a large lecture waving his hand and asking questions. Who is he to do that? But, there he is. It's too late to stop him now.

But there's more here that at first meets the eye. This is not just a simple human interest story. It's set in a larger context.

I.

Consider the fact that Jesus poses questions to the teachers in the Temple. This goes against the religious grain of at least some of us. More than a few of us have been taught that our faith, if it is to be genuine faith, should be unquestioning faith. Even those who appear to have a sophisticated faith sometimes get tripped up at this point, I suspect. You still are looking for an unquestioning faith and, to one extent or another, you feel guilty because you have questions. But questions, as we can see in the case of the young man Jesus, belong to the very heart of biblical faith.

Why? First of all because a community of mutually concerned people is presupposed. You can raise any question and that community will still be there to welcome you and to accept you and to befriend you. Your membership in that community does not depend on blind allegiance to a body of doctrines or a set of moral standards. You are a member of that community, first and foremost, because that community loves you as a person.

This is exemplified in family life. The child who has experienced love from his parents is the child who develops what is now called "basic trust." And the child who has this basic trust is the child who can risk standing on his own two feet. He is the child who can pose questions to his elders without fear of rejection or exclusion. In contrast, the child who doesn't experience love very often is the child who is unwilling to put questions to his elders for fear of rejection.

Thus Jesus is here depicted in the midst of Israel, a community of mutally concerned and mutually supporting people. Jesus can walk the tightrope of questions because, come what may, a net of human commitment will uphold him.

II.

But Jesus asks questions not only because he can do so, not only

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because it is safe to do so, but also because biblical faith demands questions. Here there's a certain similarity between biblical faith and the philosophy of Socrates, as Soren Kierkegaard pointed out. For the Bible, as for Socrates, you enter into truth through dialogue. You asked questions and you receive answers. Then you ask more questions.

Our modern propensity is different. For most of us, truth is arrived at through standing at a distance, through observing things, through being cool. At the same time, truth for us tends to be correct information about something. And we can take it or leave it as we please. Not so for the Bible. Not so for Socrates. Truth is a total stance of life which arises through personal involvement, through question and answer.

I am not saying now that there's something sinister about our modern approach to truth. Clearly there's much to be said for being cool and detached and for searching out correct information about something. I am suggesting that, from the perspective of biblical faith and the philosophy of Socrates, that kind of cool truth isn't the whole truth: that that kind of truth needs to be set in the context of truth as personal involvement, if one is ever to find a genuinely human stance in life.

So from the perspective of biblical faith, you have to ask questions of people. That's the only way you can enter into the faith which is being proclaimed to you in the temple. That's the only way you can make the inheritance from the fathers your own.

Over the vacation I was at a Church youth convention, and one of the Adult Advisors was asking me about what goes on up here in Cambridge. In the course of the conversation he said, "Doesn't it sort of get you that the students ask so many questions?" And I replied quite honestly that I thought that the problem was that the students did not ask enough questions. And now that I think of it, I think I was right.

Whether you are young or old, you can ask questions and you should ask questions. Of course we all have to listen, too. And we all have to use our understanding to formulate our own answers, as well. That's all entailed by real dialogue.

"After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions." It was safe for Jesus to ask questions because he was accepted as a person in his community. It was necessary for Jesus to ask questions because authentic life arises only through personal involvement and personal appropriation.

This is some of the larger context in which the simple drama of our gospel story should be set. This story is more than a mere human interest story. It discloses something of the reality of biblical faith.

III.

But the context is still larger. And here we have to enter into

the mind of the writer of the story, as well as into the meaning of the simple drama of the young man in the temple. It's as if we are watching a play that we've seen before. We see the action before us on the stage, but we also know what is developing. We know what is going to happen. This is the way Luke sees the situation of the young man in the temple. For Luke, something more than meets the eye is developing here.

This explains Luke's reference to the lack of understanding on the part of Jesus's parents. Mary and Joseph finally find Jesus, and they ask: "Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been looking for you anxiously." And he says to them, "How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" At this point Luke includes this comment: "And they did not understand the saying which he spoke to them."

Luke is trying to suggest, I think, that -- although appearances may not suggest it -- the Maker of Heaven and Earth, the Father Almighty, is drawing near to men in and through this young man Jesus: already in this young man, in order to manifest himself to all creatures: in and through this man Jesus, who calls God his Father with a "unique intensity" and with a corresponding sense of "obligation and responsibility."(T. W. Manson)

Here is where the New Testament parts company with Socrates, as Kierkegaard suggests. Authentic human life <u>is</u> achieved only through dialogue, through personal involvement and personal appropriation. But the New Testament is much more specific. Authentic human life is also achieved only by relating oneself to this concrete historical man, Jesus, who shows forth that intense sense of sonship and obligation before God the Father. For Socrates the partner in the dialogue is necessary only to help me to find the truth that's already <u>within me</u>. For the New Testament the partner in the dialogue is necessary to manifest <u>Jesus</u>, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

And here again we come back to the <u>community</u>, to the people of God. We enter into authentic human life right here, for here Our Lord comes to us through the presence and action of others. "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" Jesus asks. I think Luke understands this question to mean: Did you not know that God is drawing near to men through me, in the context of the community of faith?

Hence the simple story of the young man Jesus in the temple is indeed much more than a human interest story. Or perhaps we should say that it is <u>the</u> human interest story. For here the claim is being made that genuine life is achieved in a very specific way, through entering into the life of the people of God: through personal dialogue with others <u>and</u> through relating ourselves to that One man who has that deep and abiding sense of sonship and obligation before the Father Almighty. So, raise a question or two today. But even more, ponder that young man asking questions in the temple. Who is he?

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