

Message: "The Importance of the Unasked Question"

Scripture: I Corinthians 6:12-20

¹²"All things are lawful for me," but not all things are beneficial. "All things are lawful for me," but I will not be dominated by anything. ¹³"Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food," and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is meant not for fornication but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. ¹⁴And God raised the Lord and will also raise us by his power. ¹⁵Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! ¹⁶Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For it is said, "The two shall be one flesh." ¹⁷But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. ¹⁸Shun fornication! Every sin that a person commits is outside the body; but the fornicator sins against the body itself. ¹⁹Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? ²⁰For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.

Ah, the fresh chill of a profound winter storm! The snow falling, the temperature dropping, the air crisp with freshness, the beauty of frost patterns on windows.....isn't this wonderful?

I may not be convincing to you this morning, but such were the thoughts of myself and my friend Tom one winter's day long ago during my years in college. We were in our third year or so of engineering college; it was right around this time of year; we were experiencing a cold spell with over a foot of snow on the ground; we had several days off for Christmas vacation; and we had both received new camping equipment as gifts. What does all of this add up to but the perfect time -- to go winter camping.

Neither of us had ever done such a thing before, but that just made us want to do it more; so did the cautions we received from our parents and friends about it being a crazy thing to do (which, as most people know, makes a young person solidify his resolve to go ahead) - so we packed our tent and sleeping bags and freeze dried food in my Jeep CJ5 and headed for the hills. Our plan was simple - drive up a forest road as far as the snow would let us, find a good tent site, and set up camp. What could be more fun?

We drove into the mountains above Boulder, Colorado, to where an abandoned mining road took off upwards into the forest; we drove through deep snow for about three or four miles until the jeep got stuck, which was our plan (we could always back out in that it would be downhill, we reasoned). Then, we put on our backpacks and hiked in another mile or so until we saw a bit of level ground partway up the slope. We set up our tent, unfurled our sleeping bags and dining gear, and made out like experienced boy scouts - although we were nothing of the sort.

Then, we set upon something that consumed every single second of that camping trip from that point on - we set upon figuring out how to get warm. Because as time went on, we noticed it was pretty cold. Intensely cold. Ridiculously cold. Unbelievably cold. Indescribably cold. And it took us all of ten minutes to realize, we'd better figure out how to keep warm.

We built a great fire and arranged stones and logs around it; we put logs on the fire, keeping it raging; we sat as close to the fire as we could, noticing that we had to turn back and forth so that our backs wouldn't freeze. We were each wearing three or four layers of clothing, pants and shirts and flannel and parkas and anything and everything we had brought with us; deep layers of clothing held the promise of keeping us warm but the drawback of not being able to judge just where we needed to sit to receive the greatest benefits of the raging fire. I remember sitting so very close to the fire, noticing that there was smoke issuing from my leather boots, whereupon I almost immediately felt my toes searing with burning heat as the flames began to develop; I whipped off my boots with speed motivated by immanent immolation to stop my flesh from being singed; my relief was quickly replaced by freezing pain as my toes began to turn blue. Such was the manner of our camping out in the deep of winter; we spent every single minute, from our arrival one day to our departure the next morning, desperately trying to get warm. We later found out that we had been camping in negative 23 degree weather.

We never did such a thing again, for we discovered a truth that is often arrived at only after very painful experiences such as these - the truth that even if one can do something, there are things one ought not to do.

This is precisely the point Paul is making in our scripture passage from I Corinthians, when he says "¹²All things are lawful for me," but not all things are beneficial. "All things are lawful for me," but I will not be dominated by anything. All things are lawful for me - in a sense, I can do anything I choose to do; I am an unlimited being, full of potential and possibility and ideas and visions.....but not all those things I could choose to do will be beneficial to myself or the world around me. All things are lawful for me - in a sense, I can form habits of self-indulgence and hedonistic exploration and tie myself to things and people of power and influence that may help me go far in my career and wealth accumulation and political pursuits or turn to substances and drink and lusts that make me feel good and fun and alive for the moment.....but such things tend to dominate life after

awhile, creating allegiances and connections and addictions and patterns of living that are anything but free -- and almost always destructive.

I can do anything - but what is worth doing? It's the most commonly unasked question when considering what we add to life, what we pursue, what we aim at with our living; we all too often settle for the answers that others give, what the marketplace or the majority or the political party or the powers that be claim our lives should be about, but fail to ask the one entity that really knows what's worth doing.

Faith is the practice of intentionally and regularly asking that unasked question - asking it of God, rather than of ourselves or our world. Asking God what is worth doing. God has answers for us, each one of us, answers that meet our needs as human beings, answers that satisfy a spirit's longing and that shape a soul's personality. But they are not answers of convenience or clarity; they are answers that are found through process and journey; they are the kind of understandings that can only be discovered as one engages in the risk of love, the challenge of forgiveness, the impatience of temperance, the vulnerability of honesty, and the sacrifice of humility. These are counter-intuitive things the world will never promote, which is why the world largely misses the presence of God in life; we spend so very much time searching for the things we want to do that God approves of, when life is to be found by starting with the things God approves and shaping our lives according to those items. After all, faith is the pursuit of God, not of ourselves; it is not the effort to find out how God fits into our lives so much as the effort to see how we may fit into God's life - and we get these two things mixed up all the time.

Rev. Derf Bergman, who used to pastor up at Mission Valley and is now pastor at Calvary UMC in Colorado Springs, sends out a regular devotional via email. In his post yesterday, he sent out a quote from Gordon MacDonald which is extremely fitting for what Paul is talking about.

"I will tell you. Get up, and do something the Master tells you; so make yourself His disciple at once. Instead of asking yourself whether you believe or not, ask yourself whether you have this day done one thing because he said, Do it, or once abstained because he said, do not do it. It is simply absurd to say you believe, or even want to believe in him, if you do not do anything he tells you. If you can think of nothing he ever said as having an atom of influence on your doing or not doing, you have too good ground to consider yourself no disciple of his."
(From *Creation in Christ* by George MacDonald)

We must remember that being free to do anything we choose is a pathway to hellish frustration if we don't know what's worth doing. In the freedom God has granted us in this life we have the pathway to fullness and abundance - but only if our freedom is used to choose what God says is worth doing.