

“A Question of What”

Rev. Ron Dunn

November 26, 2017

Last week, Pastor Lorraine suggested that there comes a time in the complexity of our lives when we are forced to come to the conclusion that we simply do not know what to do. Rather than engage in pretense and posturing, the most appropriate response comes in the form of a confession that we are over our heads and that the answers that we seek are beyond us. It is then—and only then—that God can begin to work with us on finding the answers we seek. I’m reminded of Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of the Beatitude that states: **“You’re blessed when you are at the end of your rope. With less of you, there is more of God and God’s rule.”**

This morning, I would like to build upon the foundation that she poured so well last week. As I think about it, there are four fundamental responses to our experience of challenge or struggle in life and each of these responses begins with the word, “What.”

“What now?” “Whatever!” “What If?” and “What’s Next?”

Each of these phrases represents a stage in the process of facing and overcoming the challenges that life presents to us. They represent a progression in our ability to grow through our pain and struggle as we experience the healing and hope of recovery. This morning, I would like to invite you to reflect upon each of these stages and the ways that you may have experienced them.

In addition, I would like to suggest that we can actually see this progression as it unfolds in the life of Peter—the rock upon which Jesus promised to build his church. Now, if you have paid much attention to Peter’s life, you might be able to piece together considerable evidence that Jesus was a little off base when he made that assessment. For Peter’s response to the challenges of his own life was so often so uninspiring that it was even embarrassing. At points, Jesus even has to pull him aside in order to set him straight. Yet, when all was said and done, Peter’s life would reflect the progression and growth that enabled him to overcome his own flaws and failures and become the “rock” that Jesus had said that he would be.

Let’s begin, then, by considering the first phase of human response to challenge and struggle. “What now?!!” is the phrase that often comes from the lips of those who are, suddenly and unexpectedly, faced with a crisis.

Serious illness strikes and suddenly, the future that was once so bright, is clouded over with doubt and uncertainty. **“What now?!!”**

A dream job that had met and exceeded every expectation, suddenly becomes a nightmare. Business slumps and the revenue is simply not there. A lay-off notice arrives in the mail.

What now?!!

A marriage that you thought was solid, begins to show signs erosion. Building tension leads to counseling and counseling leads to a conversation about separation and perhaps, divorce. **“What now?!!”**

Perhaps you have found yourself in a situation such as one of these when life begins to come apart at the seams. If so, your initial response was quite possibly one of astonished disbelief that this could be happening to you. **“What now?!”** is often our initial response of astonishment and disbelief when life deals us an unexpected blow. It is the response of **EXASPERATION.**

As I reflect upon the life of Peter, I suspect that he experienced a “what now?!” moment as he traveled with Jesus and the others on the road to Caesarea Philippi.

One moment, he was boldly affirming his faith in Jesus that he was the Son of the Living God. But then, Jesus explained just what that meant. There would be suffering and persecution and death.

Peter couldn't believe his ears! Suffering and death? This was the Messiah! There was no need, he told Jesus, to think about that! And yet, there was. Jesus made that clear when he called Peter out by telling him that his mind was set on human things—not divine things. This wasn't at all what Peter had expected. It wasn't at all what he had signed up for.

I don't know about you, but I could easily imagine Peter, in a moment of exasperation asking himself: **“What now?!”**

It is the response that often comes first to mind in such unexpected moments. But there are, of course, other responses that are likely to follow. As the weight of the unexpected struggle settles in and the feeling of despair begins to grow, a second expression sometimes comes into play: **“Whatever...”**

We, of course, hear that phrase a lot these days and it can mean many different things. But, essentially, it communicates a sense disillusionment and resignation. **“Whatever,”** in this context, means that the dye has been cast and that there is really nothing that can be done about it. “It is what it is,” we sometimes say and it means essentially the same thing. We are helpless to change what has happened and therefore, opt for a sense of resignation that precludes a sense of hope.

If you listen closely to the conversation that people have with each other today, there is a whole lot of “whatevering” going on. Now, this does not mean that, in every situation, people are opting for resignation. Sometimes this phrase is used much more casually and lightly. My point, however, is that often, when we find ourselves challenged by a major change or difficulty, we are likely to go through a phase in which we are tempted to

conclude that there is absolutely nothing we can do about it and our best choice is to resign ourselves to our fate. “Whatever” is really an expression of **RESIGNATION**.

Now, to my knowledge, Peter never used the phrase, “Whatever!” in his conversations with Jesus. But I imagine that he did, in fact, experience a deep sense of resignation in the aftermath of his three-fold denial of Jesus. I imagine that when he “broke down and wept,” as Mark’s Gospel indicates, that it was the low ebb of his life. He had denied that even now the man that he had promised to follow to the death. In that dark moment, there was absolutely no reason to hold out any hope. All was lost. **“Whatever!”**

As it turned out, of course, all was not lost. While Jesus was indeed, crucified and buried, that was not the end. There came the unexpected announcement from Mary Magdalene that she had been to the tomb and the tomb was empty. Jesus, she told him, was going on ahead of them to Galilee. **“Whatever!”** had, in that moment, been replaced by **“What if?”**

What if...it was true? What if...Jesus was alive? What if God’s love was actually stronger than death?

The very thought of it was enough to move Peter forward into a new phase of his response to what had taken place—one that allowed for the possibility of hope. And it was that upward turn from his downward spiral that proved to be a catalyst for new life.

So it is in our own response to the struggles and losses and challenges of life. When we move from the deep resignation of **“whatever!”** to the hopeful possibility of **“what if?”** we have taken a major step forward in our recovery and our healing. It reflects the movement from resignation to **ANTICIPATION**.

There is, you see, energy—palpable energy—in the question, “what if?” Our thoughts are not limited to what was or what is, but elevated to what might yet be. When we discover, like Peter, that the power of God’s resurrecting love is at work in our lives, we are free to build upon the foundation that hope has poured. And that makes all the difference.

Finally, there is yet another phase of our response that needs to be noted. It is the phase that asks the question, “What’s next?”

This is the question that builds upon the anticipation of “What if?” as it engages in the **INITIATION** of an action plan. It recognizes that one is not helpless nor hopeless, but that one has the power to actually initiate change through the choice to take action.

“What’s next?” is what we ask when we are eager to move forward with the agenda of living once more. It’s the question we ask when we can’t wait to take the next steps that will empower us to get on with the life that God is calling us to live. We move from anticipation to initiation—from “what if?” to “what’s next?”

It’s the question that I think Peter was asking in his last conversation with Jesus on the beach at Galilee.

This conversation came after the resurrection and it offered Peter the opportunity to profess his love for Jesus three times—once for each time he had denied Jesus. Not only was this a cathartic moment of forgiveness and grace, but it was also a moment in which Peter received his commission to live up to his calling. Jesus instructed him to feed his sheep and tend his lambs—that is, to be the shepherd of the sheep of the Christian community—the Church which Peter would usher into being.

“What’s next?” is the question that leads us out of the struggle and challenge of what has been even as it opens the door to what will yet be. When we find ourselves asking this question, we can be assured that God’s healing power has been at work within us, enabling the past to stay in the past and inviting the future to move into the present.

In his book, *“The Road Less Traveled,”* Scott Peck begins with a most memorable sentence: “Life,” he wrote, “is difficult.”

Now, while this may seem obvious, we often act surprised when we are personally reminded of this fact. Yet, let’s not kid ourselves. Life is difficult and there is not getting around it. Sooner or later, we all come face to face with the difficulty that living brings with it.

The question, of course, is how we will face the difficulty, how we will choose to respond to the challenges that life brings. I believe that a healthy response is one that involves a process—a process that moves from exasperation to resignation to anticipation to initiation. “What now?” becomes “Whatever!” and “Whatever!” becomes “What if?” and What if becomes “What’s next?”

It is, of course, never quite that simple and never quite that linear. We may find ourselves moving back and forth between these various phases at different moments of any given day. That too is to be expected. Yet, what I hope that you will see and sense is that even when this process is messy and confusing, the Spirit of God has the opportunity to work within us, enabling us, moment by moment, day by day, to experience forgiveness and grace, hope and possibility.

We are not limited by what was and we are not shackled by what is. Our God is a God who is doing a new thing...a God whose love is stronger than death. And by the grace of this God, we are invited, enabled and empowered to become then person that we never imagined that we could be. As the old saying goes, “Please be patient. God isn’t finished with me yet!

It was true in the life of Peter and it remains true in your life and mine.

Thanks be to God!

Amen!