

Bellaire Community United Methodist Church

October 30, 2016

## **Words that Challenge Faith: “When?” “No.” “Why?”**

*Naked Spirituality, part 3. Based on the book by Brian McLaren*

Psalm 42:1-11

*Call to Worship – Psalm 25:1-3a*

*“To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul; in you I trust, O my God.*

*Do not let me be put to shame, nor let my enemies triumph over me.*

*No one whose hope is in you will ever be put to shame.”*

Take a look around you for a moment. You are not alone this morning. If you feel like you are, maybe you are just sitting too far away from the others. No matter how you are feeling this morning, you are in the right place. You are not here by accident. God sees you. He knows we are here to worship Jesus Christ and love on each other. So thank you for choosing to come here. Your presence matters to all of us, and it is a pleasing offering to God.

I invite you to pray with me. “Lord, we offer you this day, in the things we do and say. Please fill us as we pray, and teach us to follow your way. Come, Holy Spirit, come. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.”

The past few weeks we have been talking about “Naked Spirituality,” based on a book by Brian McLaren. Rest assured, we are not starting a hippie commune, and although I stripped down to a t-shirt last week, I intend to stay fully clothed throughout this sermon. Instead, these messages are about addressing the frustration of fake religion. We are attempting to strip away the pretenses, facades, and hype from inauthentic faith by using simple words and simple practices. We want to be authentic followers of Jesus Christ.

We started with the words *Here, Thanks* and *O!*, words for simplifying and awakening faith. We talked about presence, gratitude, and joy. God is here with us. God blesses us, and we are thankful. God is wonderful, and we worship him.

Last week we admitted our failures and weaknesses with the words *Sorry, Help,* and *Please,* words that strengthen faith. We discovered grace in confession, strength in weakness, and the ability to have empathy and compassion for others. We considered an important verse from the apostle Paul, "God's power is made perfect in weakness." (2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 12:9)

The truth is, up until now, my messages have probably not been controversial. I expect most of you agreed with my reflections. Well, today might be different. Some sermons are like a check-up with the doctor. Sometimes, it hurts because the doctor pushes too hard. Sometimes it hurts because the doctor has found the source of the problem. This might be one of those times.

Today's words are *When, No,* and *Why.* Perplexing words. Confusing words. Words that challenge faith. As we poke and prod our unanswered questions, we might start to feel some awkwardness, some doubt, maybe even some hurt. But such feelings are healthier expressed than concealed inside us.

Questions are important in any language. When I was learning German, I learned this funny song from Sesame Street.

*Wer, wie, was?*

*Wieso, weshalb, warum?*

*Wer nicht fragt, bleibt dumm!*

Translated, it means, "Who, how, what, why, why, why? If you don't ask, you're dumb."

We were all taught in school to ask questions. Who? What? When? Where? Why? How? SO WHAT?! If you don't ask, you'll never know. Asking questions is how we learn.

The average four year old asks a question every two minutes. "Why is the sky blue? Who is God? Why do people get sick? Why do people die? How much longer until we get there?" And the questions don't stop when we get older; they just get harder and we are less likely to speak them.

But no matter our age, we assume that someone, somewhere has the answer. Your teacher. Your parent. Google. Siri. Even your pastor.

But what if no one has the answers?...not even God? Or at least, what if God won't reveal the answers to us, even in our prayers? What then?

I don't know. Today is about questions, not answers, because Naked Spirituality is the exact opposite of cheap, easy answers that don't satisfy. I don't want to answer your questions. I want to expose them.

The first question is When. We've all asked "When?" before. "When are we going to get there?" I always say either "15 minutes" or "about an hour." Even if we are on a seven-hour flight to Europe. Believe me, it works.

But many of us face one crisis after another. And we ask, "When will it end? When will relief come? When?" Or another way to put it: "How long? How long with this struggle last?" The longer a conflict drags on, the more you start to doubt. You start to wonder if you really have faith.

You may think that you are weak or isolated in your doubts. You might think no one else asks the hard questions. But you're not alone. The question, "How long?" appears at least 15 times in the Psalms as a complaint to God. (I searched the NIV.) "How long must I wait? How long will my enemies triumph

over me? How long will you be angry? How long will the righteous suffer and the unjust prosper? How long do I have to wait for your justice and compassion, God?”

The answer is, I don't know. It might be 15 minutes, or an hour, or a week, or even years. But rather than fall into pessimistic despair, we need to recognize something. The assumption behind the question “When” is that God will act. To ask “when” is an indication of faith, not doubt. It is an honest question, a persistent question. Neither the psalmist nor we are content to accept silence for an answer.

Look at Psalm 42:2. “When can I go and meet with God?” It's the biblical equivalent of the whiny kid in the back seat. “How much farther is it, God? When can I finally get to you?” Psalm 42 reminds of us two great truths. First: Sometimes God is hidden. Second: we are all vulnerable, no matter how great our faith is.

It is our pain that causes us to ask when. And this is actually good. Real, naked faith does not ignore pain. Instead, it recognizes pain, and uses it.

I love this quote from McLaren. “The blue-sky flower-strewn illusions of false faith must be sorted from the realities of good faith – complete with rain, sorrow, pain, labor, and trials. And that process takes time. And pain.” (Naked Spirituality, 153-4) He goes on to say, “Sometimes, survival is a victory in itself.”

The spiritual practice for this is called “desperation.” It means admitting our doubts, weaknesses, and frustrations. It is a sign that we are being real with ourselves. McLaren compares it to stretching a muscle. We must bring it to a point of ache for it to do us any good. Either it will get better, and we will get

relief, or it will get worse, and we will be strengthened and energized for what lies ahead. (McLaren, *Naked Spirituality*, 155)

Frustrated and unanswered questions are like a void. You know what a void does? It allows sound to travel, a sponge to absorb water, a vacuum cleaner to work, an airplane to fly, and a car to drive. A void moves us from one place to another. Unanswered questions work the same way with our faith.

The second word isn't a question, it's more of a statement. NO. N-O. It is one of the first words children learn. "Can I put whip cream on the cat?" *No*. "Can I jump off the roof with a blanket?" *No*. NO tells us where the boundaries are. People who can't say "No" often run into major problems in life.

We say no when we reach our limit. When we see pain, frustration and injustice, we say, "No, I won't accept it." It's a word of anger, a word of rage. "No, it can't be this way." And we can utter this "No" in the face of God.

Is it OK to get angry at God? Chew on that for a moment. We realize there is pain. There is evil. There is tragedy and injustice. Should we just accept them? I think the answer is "No." Here's why. God can handle our anger. If you have a long-term, loving relationship with God, you can be honest with him.

People do get mad at God. But there is a silver lining to the anger. McLaren says, "Those who rage at God believe there is a God who is willing to be raged at." (*Naked Spirituality*, 158).

We all admit that there is suffering. But if we denied that there is a God, then the pervasiveness of suffering shouldn't bother us. In a world without God, suffering would make sense, actually. But the truth is we are bothered by suffering, because we believe in God who should be doing something about it. In

our frustration, in our “No”, we are actually drawing near to the best source of comfort and strength to our problems.

Our “No” in the face of pain is a refusal to accept cheap answers. You’ve heard them: “Good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people.” (No, they don’t.) “It will all work out in the end.” (No, it won’t, not for me.) “There must be a good reason for all of this.” (Really? What?) “Just chin up.” (Easy for you to say. You’re not dealing with my pain.)

C.S. Lewis once said, “The best answers don’t do as much good for a person in pain as a dose of courage does.” (Naked Spirituality, 160) The psalmist knew this. That’s why, three times in Psalm 42 and 43, these lines are repeated:

Why, my soul, are you downcast?  
Why so disturbed within me?

Put your hope in God,  
for I will yet praise him,  
my Savior and my God.

After all of our raging, we finally reach a point where we simply say, “I don’t know. I don’t understand.” And in the painful, golden silence, we simply ask, “Why?”

That’s really what it’s all about in the end, isn’t it? All of our questions, all of our suffering. Why does it happen?

The deepest cry of agony and lament is, “Why?” “Why does evil exist?” “Why does pain exist?” “Why do bad things happen to good people?” But we are not really looking for an answer that satisfies. We are simply acknowledging the heavy burden of our pain.

Has someone ever tried to answer your “Why?” Did they ever give you a satisfactory answer? I’m guessing not. Most people, although they mean well, are stumbling for words, trying to give insight in an area they know nothing about.

Cheap, easy-answer religion is worthless. All it does it create guilt. The “Why” questions are all wrong. “Why don’t you have enough faith?” “Why don’t you solve your own problems?”

We should beware of answers from someone who does not know our pain. In Romans 8:18, the apostle Paul admitted that his sufferings were not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed in Christ. Honestly, those words would be trite and cheap if they came from someone who had suffered less. (McLaren, *Naked Spirituality*, 176). Paul went through hell – he was imprisoned, beaten, stoned, shipwrecked, mocked, chained in dungeons, and eventually martyred. And he said, there was a glory so great, it wouldn’t compare with his sufferings. That’s saying something.

Are you suffering? Are you asking, “Why? No! When? How long?” The questions will keep coming. Rather than look for answers, we need to look at choices. What choices do we have in the face of pain? Let me give you a few.

We can get angry. We can blame. We can even create fantasies that justify evil.

Or, we can realize that pain reminds us that we are alive. We are vulnerable. We can recognize our pain, we can tell God we don’t like it, and we can resist easy answers. In short, we can get bitter, or we can get better. That’s what all the psalms tell us.

Psalms 23:4 – “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.” All of us are either in a valley, climbing out of a valley, or just about to enter another valley.

Even Jesus Christ used a psalm when he cried out to God in his pain on the cross. Matthew 27:46 records his words, “My God, My God, why have you

forsaken me?” Much has been made of this statement. But I want you to hear the full version, from Psalm 22:1-5.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from saving me,  
so far from my cries of anguish?

<sup>2</sup>My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,  
by night, but I find no rest.

<sup>3</sup>Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One;  
you are the one Israel praises.

<sup>4</sup>In you our ancestors put their trust;  
they trusted and you delivered them.

<sup>5</sup>To you they cried out and were saved;  
in you they trusted and were not put to shame.

Jesus quoted this psalm from the cross. He expressed his pain and his hope together.

What will we do in the face of our pain and questions? Will we look for excuses? Place blame that neither helps the situation nor makes us feel any better? Or will we be nakedly honest in our cries to God?

Naked Spirituality doesn't look for answers, it asks a different question. Instead of trying to explain the suffering, we ask, "What possible good can come of it?" In this view, pain, evil and suffering are no longer meaningless. They are realms of possibility.

The classic example is Jesus death on a cross. Because of the "if" and "why" that Jesus uttered, we have forgiveness. Because of his pain, we have the assurance of his presence in the deepest darkest valleys of our lives. We can say to others, honestly, "I don't know when or why. But I will join you in your *No*. I



won't give up hope. And I will show you a God who cares." Imagine the strength we would find together.

McLaren says, "When you practice lament, when you are stretched and suspended on the cross of abandonment, you do not feel heroic." (Naked Spirituality, 185) But if we do not give up hope, good may yet come.

So I say, don't repress your doubt. Don't repress your anguish. Cry out to God. When? No! Why? Look for hope where others do not. Look for Jesus in the worst of circumstances. It's OK to talk about pain, but we should never lose hope or think God will forsake us.

Let God speak to you through this song as we prepare for our time of prayer.

"Just Be Held" – by Casting Crowns.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tIZitK6\\_IMQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tIZitK6_IMQ)

### Memory verse

Psalm 42:5 (NIV)

"Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God."

### Reflection questions

1. To whom did you go for answers as a child? Why?
2. If you could ask God only one question, what would you ask?
3. What "When?" are you wondering in your life right now?
4. How is saying "No" to easy, cheap answers a sign of growing faith?
5. What is the difference between being in denial and refusing to accept injustice?

6. How is "Why?" a question of acceptance and hope?
7. How do you answer someone who asks, "Why does God allow bad things to happen to good people?"