

Last Sunday, I spoke about the central role of speech or speaking in our lives together, not only what we say but how and why we say it. (When did your speaking help to nourish or encourage another person this past week? I focused on the spoken words in the gospel story and the 12<sup>th</sup> century tale of Parzival and the Holy Grail, the version written by Wolfram von Eschenbach, a Christian knight and poet.

Speaking is the particular gift, the special form of nourishment that human beings alone can give to each other and to all of creation (1). We are called to envision a present and a future in which human speech is spoken from the heart of our being, the core of who we truly are, as God's beloved. This morning, our focus is on the role of questions in our two stories—and in our own lives.

We know how much Jesus loved to ask questions, often frustrating the crowd and his disciples, including us. Jesus' questions urge us to dig deeper into ourselves and our relationships to recognize the presence of God within us, the Word that yearns to speak through us.

**Where would we be without questions?** Questions free our minds and hearts to fly.

Unfortunately, we often say: "This is probably a stupid question, but..." No question is stupid when you are trying to learn and understand and grow! We want to get to know one another, learn from other people, understand what is happening within us and around us. And ultimately, of course, every question leads to the greatest mystery, and question of them all: who or what is God! Whenever we stop asking questions of God and about God, whenever we stop asking questions of ourselves, others and all creation, then we are in serious trouble!

In our gospel story, Jesus asks his disciples two questions that not only go to the very heart of his identity and mission but also challenge us to examine our questions and responses, to God and one another.

*Who do people say that the Son of Man is?* Jesus asks. The disciples would have recognized the title "Son of Man" that was by the Old Testament prophet Daniel as describe the Messiah who would be both human and divine, who would come to save humankind. Jesus' disciples speak the names that people are using to identify Jesus, well-known names of prophets who spoke God's word. Jesus is Elijah or Jeremiah or John the Baptist come back to life.

When Jesus asks questions, there is no coercion or manipulation; he offers an opening, inviting others to enter and explore the radically new thing that God is revealing. Jesus always gives them and us the freedom of choice (1). This is the vision of speech in the story of the Grail: Grail speech is the speech of Christ, the Word of God. At this moment, however, the people are staying with what they already know; they are not yet ready to move into the unknown.

With his first question, Jesus may be preparing his disciples for his next personal and challenging question: *Who do you say that I am?* Whenever we hear the words “I am” in Scripture, we are to remember the day when Moses asked for God’s name (in the burning bush) and God answered: *I am who I am. Or, I am that I am.*

Will any of them respond to the shock of hearing “*who I am?*” Hallelujah! Yes, Jesus asks the right question at the right time, for Peter responds by speaking from the depths of his heart: *You are the Messiah, the son of the living God.* And a new, intimate relationship begins that will gradually transform Peter, those around him and more, far beyond his own imagining. Thanks be to God!

The other disciples remain silent. They could respond to Jesus by expressing their confusion or need for guidance. But no, like the people around them, they are not ready to move into this mysterious realm of “son of the living God” or “God right here with us!” Still, as we say, often it takes only one person to get the ball rolling---and that person is and will be Peter, the rock of Christ’s future church.

The poet Rilke wrote: *Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves... The point is to live everything. Live the questions now* (2).

In the story of Parzival, he asks lots of questions when he embarks on a quest to serve as a knight. His grieving and fearful mother raised him in a remote place completely cut off from the world. So Parzival knows very little. People make fun of his ignorance and seemingly stupid questions, but he doesn’t seem to notice or care. He wants facts and directions so that he can get on with his quest. But he asks so many questions that he can’t understand all the answers, and he doesn’t take the time to sit down for meaningful discussions. Then, when an elderly knight advises him not to ask too many questions, Parzival goes to the other extreme and says nothing when a question is most desperately needed.

Early in the story, he happens to arrive at the Grail castle of a very ill king and a kingdom in disarray. It is a time and place when the people yearn for him to ask the right question for this moment, the question that will heal the king and open the way for the kingdom to be restored. But Parzival’s heart is not aware enough to ask anything. After he leaves the castle, his angry cousin scorns him for being “too faint of heart to ask a question” (3).

Did anyone think of what that question might be---or look it up online?

The healing question that Parzival must ask the king is: “*What ails thee?*” or in modern English: “What is troubling or afflicting you, what are you suffering from?” The exact wording of the question doesn’t matter. It’s the asking of the question that is so crucial.

**Why do you think this is so?**

The question that will heal is the one that expresses true compassion. What matters is that someone responds to suffering with a compassionate and concerned heart, that someone cares enough to ask that person a question to make a connection. The purpose of speaking is to connect

with one another, to engage in dialogue, to form a relationship. That's what Jesus and his questions are all about, aren't they?

God created human beings to live in communion, in community where we relate to ourselves and others as sacred beings worthy of love, as humans who share joys, challenges and sorrows.

Author Georg Kuhlewind writes:

“Since a human is a being created by God, he or she can radiate the light of the Word. But the Word requires at least two people. Only in this way does the human word, even the unspoken word, encounter the human understanding and shine back. This is the presence of the divine Word on earth... in the common reality of all human beings.” (4)

Questions form the connective tissue by which we join with others and with the world. Through questions, we reach deep inside ourselves and stretch out beyond ourselves into a whole new way of perceiving things and relating to others. The right questions at the right time have the power to create, transform, move us to live in God's ways (5).

After leaving the castle, Parsifal learns the question that he could have asked, and he is filled with remorse and confusion. But this is just the beginning of his journey. He must go through many challenges and trials that will gradually transform his speech into an imaginative language that reflects his whole self. Parzival must live into his name, which means “through the middle,” coming to live in balance as a human spiritual being (6)

Although it may take us by surprise, while Jesus lived with us on earth, he had to live and grow into the fullness of his name and mission: *Messiah, Son of the Living God*. He traveled and taught, questioned and debated, so that as many people as possible would know the healing Word of God, speak it, and commune as humans in whom the Spirit lives and moves and has its being.

How do you respond to Jesus' question: *Who do you say that I am?*

What question might you ask your neighbor today and in the coming week, a question that expresses the compassion in your heart?

Will you take the time to listen to your neighbor's response?

**So many awesome questions to live!**

And there are two more Grail questions to come. Can you imagine what they are?

Thanks be to God! Amen.

#### NOTES

1. Sussman, Linda. *The Speech of the Grail*. Lindisfarne Books (United States, 1995), Kindle version, pp. 6-7
2. Rilke, Rainer Maria, *Letters to a Young Poet* (1903).
3. Sussman, Kindle version, pp. 67-8
4. Sussman, Kindle, Note 14, p.34
5. Sussman, Kindle, p. 46
6. Sussman, Kindle, pp.3, 37