

# Questions Define Us: An Invitation

## Transcript

Greetings, everybody, and welcome back. My name is Matt Skolnik. I have the great pleasure of working with dozens of Presbyterian churches in Eastern Ohio.

I am so excited and thankful that there is a growing number of people who are willing and able and have a passion to wrestle with God in this era, in this time.

I am thankful that the church is waking up to reformation in our day, and I'm not talking about an incremental reformation. We are talking about a reformation that will shake and rock and redefine the church for the next 500 years. It is such a privilege and such an honor to serve in this time.

Ministry is never easy, and there are always challenges. And as we look around, there certainly are significant challenges that the church faces now. And so today I'm ultimately going to invite you to join us for a conversation in the beginning of November online, but I want to set that up with a few thoughts.

I think it's helpful to begin with the idea that our lives or any life is truly defined by the questions we have. Sometimes it is a singular, overarching question. And sometimes we have a series of small questions, but nonetheless, our life, our lives are defined by the questions we ask. Sometimes these questions are strong and good and healthy and faithful.

Sometimes these questions are simple and to the point of daily living. And that's okay as well. Let me just give you a few examples. Today you asked yourself the question, what will I eat? And how we frame that question, defines us. We might ask a slightly different question.

How will I nourish my body today? Or, how will I get the energy that I need today to serve and to love? The little nuance, the little difference is what defines us.

We ask questions like, who will I share myself with today? How will I provide for the needs of others? Who am I called to serve? And as we start to think about the different types of questions that we ask, when we examine their nuances, we begin to see that not every question is equal.

Some questions are more helpful. Some questions are healthier than others. And when this in mind, we think about the life and the ministry of Jesus, because Jesus has this propensity, Jesus has this power to Ask, redefine, reshape, reform the questions of individuals and sometimes of a crowd.

Let me give you a few examples.

Last week in the lectionary, we have the familiar story of the rich young ruler or the rich young man. And he comes and he asks the question, Jesus, how do I inherit eternal life? It's an interesting question. Some might say it is a faithful question, but Jesus redefines it.

For Jesus teaches in this interaction that it's not just about eternal life. It's about the kingdom of God. This story first originates in the gospel of Mark, and it is in Mark where Jesus proclaims that the kingdom of God is here. It is now, in other words, it's not just about eternal life.

It's about what God is doing here today. Jesus certainly redefined that man's question, even if he went away shocked and hurt.

Of course, there are dozens of other examples in the scriptures of when Jesus redefines questions.

For example, we might remember when the crowd gathered around the woman who had many husbands, and they were about to stone her to death. And Jesus comes and asks the question, Who among you is without sin? Let that person cast the first stone. Jesus redefined their sense of righteousness to focus on what he would call, in what we hear in the Gospel of Matthew, the plank in your own eye, as opposed to the speck of somebody else's.

In this week's lectionary passage. We have an additional time where Jesus redefines the questions of individuals, and it's the question that is present with James and John as they request that Jesus makes them the two most influential and honored assistants in Christ's reign, in Christ's kingdom.

When we think about questions, it's really important to stop and to understand what is the intersection, where is the overlap between our questions and Jesus

questions. How and where do they not overlap? And how can we ask better questions?

In this particular story with James and John, I think it's beautiful to stop and to recognize that number one, even though there is a request, that their question is still present.

They say, Jesus, we want you to place us on the left and the right. On your left hand and on your right hand. There a question, even though it wasn't worded as a question, was can we be the most honored? And so I bring this up because whether we are acting from a stated question or not, our question is present.

And the beautiful thing about Jesus is that Jesus finds that question and meddles. He plays with it, teases out the underlying assumption. And here, with the story of James and John, just like with the other stories that I shared, Jesus reframes the question. And in this case, he turns it back to an issue of discipleship.

Jesus turns it back to a place of sacrifice, a place of self-giving, and he uses the language of baptism. And on the very base level of baptism, there is a sense, a reality of death, of drowning in the water.

But baptism in the Gospels when referring to Jesus points to Jesus' baptism on the cross, a very real, very tangible death. Jesus reframes that question through baptism. And the beauty here in this story is that Jesus not only challenges James and John, redefining their question, Jesus also challenges all the disciples.

In the Gospel of Mark, we are told that the other disciples, when they heard about the request of James and John, that they became indignant. And Jesus has this powerful teaching, whoever among you wishes to be first must be a slave or a servant to all. Jesus turns it back to discipleship.

Here, I want to circle back to the big question of reformation and power. On one hand, we might have a Christian community or a group of faithful people who would say something like, yeah, that will preach. But on the other hand, we know that most of the people who associate with what we call the church, like the rich young man, will walk away shocked and disappointed.

For it's very easy to come to Christ, to come to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for blessing. It is much more challenging to come seeking to be a disciple. a follower. It's really easy to come to Jesus and say, Jesus, can we sit on your right

hand or your left hand? But it's much more challenging to come to Jesus and say, Jesus, help us to be baptized with the baptism you will undergo.

And this is the challenge in every era for people of faith, but it is especially true in a time of reformation when we as the people of God, as those who claim that we want to follow the Good News of Christ, as those who claim we want to be within the kingdom of God. It is so challenging to look at all of our structures, all of our practices, all of our common rhythms of life together, and come from a perspective of discipleship, not simply of blessing.

And now a brief word from our sponsor ministry.

There is anxiety across the world about war. In the United States, we have lots of anxiety about our politics. Happy election season. And, of course, the stress in our churches is also high. If you have felt this tangible anxiety, and if you are leading a local congregation, we invite you to Coshocton Presbyterian Church in Coshocton, Ohio, on November 2nd from 9 AM to 3. 30 PM for a thoughtful and helpful workshop entitled, "Leading Congregations in Anxious Times." This workshop will be led by a seasoned Healthy Congregations facilitator and one of our elders, Donna Robertson. For more information or to reserve your spot, please call 330 230 7751. If you missed that number, it is 330 230 7751.

Welcome back. We are extremely thankful for Donna, for her gifts and for her willingness to offer this training. People describe Donna as joyful and full of energy. And while we certainly live in anxious times, I think you will be blessed when you come to this workshop. We have a responsibility in these anxious times to be a calm voice and to provide gentle wisdom for our people, the wisdom of Christ, the wisdom of God. And so we certainly hope that you can join us in Coshocton on November 2nd. And again, if you would like more information or want to reserve your spot, please reach out.

Okay, this brings us to the point where I want to warmly and sincerely invite you to join us for a conversation on Friday, November 8th, at 1:00 PM Eastern Standard Time. [The conversation will be on Zoom](#). Currently, we're looking for leaders who have a heart for the church, a heart for reformation, a heart to reshape, and challenge our questions.

And so there are a handful of things that I'm going to ask of you as we prepare to gather on Friday, November 8th. First, it is my privilege to ask you to pray for our discussion leaders, Ajah Hales and Heather Johnston. Ajah and Heather

have been on PC-Reforming in the past and both are strong Christian leaders in our synod.

Ajah is an elder who serves in Cleveland, Ohio. And the second is Heather Johnston, who is a pastor near Detroit. As part of this, we ask that you not only pray for them, but that you pray for the conversation and that you pray for all those who will attend. And we pray for those who will receive invitations that God would move their heart as they are called to come.

The second thing that I would invite you to do is to actively invite as many people as possible to come, to share, be willing to pray, be willing to be open and honest, to be willing to start to at least name what our questions are.

And over time, the hope and the prayer is that God will help us redefine, reshape, reform our most basic questions. For example, one question that sometimes is asked in church is how do we get more young families and children here? In and of itself, it is not a bad question. But is there a more faithful question that we can ask?

We need one another to think through this. We need one another to pray through this. We need one another to invite the Spirit of God into our midst so that we can wrestle like Jacob wrestled with the divine and was renamed Israel; the one who wrestles with God.

So number one, please pray.

Number two, please invite people to come and pray for them as well.

Number three, and this one is important. We want to be able to do this event on Zoom so that we can include as many people as possible and make it as easy as possible for individuals and leaders and communities to attend. With that being said, it is our hope and our prayer that people who come will be fully engaged.

If you don't have time that day to sit, to reflect, to be open and honest together, please don't come. In other words, if you are washing dishes, please don't be there. If you are driving people around, please don't be there. But please, if you have a heart to reform God's community, a faith community, a Christian community, the follow up action is please clear your schedule. Please make this a priority. Please come with a full and an open heart.

The next thing that I ask you to do is you will see a PDF file linked to this episode that has some simple conversation starters. And we encourage you to use those

in small groups, in Bible studies, in gatherings of elders or deacons or the gathering of the choir. It's not long. Take time to reflect together.

And then finally, I do ask that as a sign of our hope, as a sign of our belief and our trust in Christ, that God is doing something new today, I ask that you would donate to making a tangible difference in the world today. In the Presbyterian Church, our Presbytery Mission Agency has something called Presbyterian Disaster Assistance.

Right now in the news, it is no secret that there are people struggling from hurricanes in the past weeks. [The Presbyterian Disaster Assistance is really a strong, worthy cause. You will also find a link to donate to them.](#)

Okay, if you want to get a hold of me, please reach out. I would love to talk to you. You can email me at [matt@mvpresby.org](mailto:matt@mvpresby.org).

Thank you so much. God bless you. Let us close in prayer.

O merciful, gracious, glorious God, we thank you that you call the faith community together today.

Not with our skills, not with our power, not in our might, but in the power of your Good News. We ask that as generations come and go, that even though our names will be forgotten, we pray that your work, your redefining reformation in this time, in this age, will be known for your glory, for your honor, for the generations to come.

We pray that future generations will look back and give thanks, even now, as we look back and thank you that you were faithful in the Exodus. Thank you that you were faithful in the life, the death, the resurrection of Christ Jesus. In the name of Jesus, we give thanks and we pray. Amen.