1. AN INVITATION TO JOURNEY

FOCUS: Faith is not a destination, but a journey.

A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

“To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive.”
– Robert Louis Stevenson

People know that at its core, Christianity has something good to offer the human race. At the same time, many have a sense that they are alone in being a “thinking” Christian and that “salvaging” Christianity is a hopeless task.

What many have longed for is a safe environment where they have permission to ask the questions they’ve always wanted to ask but have been afraid to voice for fear of being thought a heretic. Living the Questions provides a context where people can be liberated from stagnant clichés and pursue their questions and seek to inform their understanding as part of a life-long spiritual journey.

Through exposure to provocative theological and spiritual insights and the engagement of small group conversation, participants in Living the Questions will experience how profoundly important the journey itself is.

LOVING THE QUESTIONS

“…have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language…”
– Ranier Maria Rilke, Letters to a Young Poet

Someone once asked their rabbi, “Why is it that rabbis always answer a question with another question?” The rabbi answers, “So what’s wrong with a question?”

Jesus was typical of the rabbis of his day. According to the canonical gospels, he rarely gave a straight answer to a question. Instead he responded with another question or told a story. For the most part, Jesus was not offering simple answers. Instead, he put his questioners in a position of having to think for themselves. Rather than offer his disciples answers to life’s most perplexing problems, Jesus introduced them to deeper and deeper levels of ambiguity.
Perhaps Jesus knew what Mystics and the wisest of spiritual guides have known all along: that answers can provide a false sense of security and confidence that can become barriers to an awareness of the Divine.

A PREFERENCE FOR THE QUICK & EASY
21st century Western culture revels in instant gratification – the easy fix. We want our stuff, our answers, our entertainment, and our deep sense of personal fulfillment NOW. The idea that something worthwhile might take a long time to develop or be complex to comprehend is not only resisted by some, but condemned as suspicious or morally questionable.

This consumer mentality bleeds over into religion and spirituality – we want salvation or wholeness simple, easy and NOW. Rooted in our primal fascination with all things magic (“just say this prayer/incantation and you’re all set!”), many churches have warped Jesus’ life-transforming call to “follow me” into a smorgasbord of methods for achieving wealth, health, and victory all in a couple of painless and mindlessly easy steps.

One of the more popular ways of identifying oneself as a Christian is to affirm that one has been “born again.” And although a whole religious culture has risen up around the phrase, the concept of being “born again” is essentially based on a mistranslation.

The phrase in Jesus’ mouth in John 3:3 (translated correctly in the New Revised Standard Version) actually tells Nicodemus that he must be born “from above” (anothen in Greek). Whereupon the literalist Nicodemus misunderstands and asks, “How can anyone be born after having grown old?”

And therein lies the core difference between the two approaches to the spiritual life: Being “born again” has come to mean a once-and-for-all experience of God’s grace and love. Insofar as it can be the first step in a life’s journey of faith, being “born again” can be a helpful experience and concept. But Jesus never said you have to be born again, but born “from above.” Being born “from above” implies a journey, a process, an orientation – a way of life.

EVOLUTIONARY, NOT REVOLUTIONARY

“The yearning we feel is an echo of our future.”

– Sam Keen

Methodist piety is just one expression of the same model seen in denominations of all stripes: the moment of realizing God’s love is called “justification” – a revolutionary experience for many. But then the evolutionary work of “sanctification” begins, essentially where one becomes more “holy” as life goes on. A person doesn’t get there by simply reciting the Jesus prayer or claiming
Jesus as Lord and savior.Ironically, many in our 21st century Western culture levitate towards faith traditions that say, "Believe this and you’re covered."

When Maya Angelou was asked if she was a Christian, she turned the question back on the one inquiring of her: "Are you a Christian?" The person replied, "Why, yes, of course!" Angelou exclaimed, "Already?" Being there already is unlikely for most of us. Besides making us totally insufferable to be around, it would also prevent us from examining ourselves critically, learning from other faith traditions, or even opening up the Bible and looking at it again with the openness, thoughtfulness, and critical thought necessary to help us along the way.

The difference of opinion between Christians on whether a life of faith is primarily revolutionary or evolutionary is just one facet of the much broader controversy between moderate or "mainline" churches and the fundamentalist or evangelical churches. Be it a question of the inspiration of the Bible, the status of women and minorities, or the literal "second coming," the revolutionary vs. evolutionary mindset affects almost every aspect of our institutional churches. Because literalists can be found in mainline churches and those suspicious of a literal "second coming" can be found in evangelical churches, this is obviously a broad generalization. However, one characteristic that separates these two worldviews is not just another obscure theological dispute—it is ignored to our peril. Many of the more "liberal" churches foster a “live and let live” attitude, making social change for the better where possible. But those who slip into fundamentalism can develop what Dom Crossan calls a “genocidal germ” that can manifest itself in violent oppression of anyone who disagrees with their perspective. Those who see the spiritual life as a journey continue to draw the circle wider. Those who believe that they alone possess the once-and-for-all truth are much more likely to oppose differences of opinion and seek the ouster of their opponents—by legislative or other, more violent, means.

"Every religion today must take responsibility for its own fundamentalism—because religious fundamentalism is probably the most dangerous thing in the world at the moment. Christians or Muslim. I am not making any distinction."

—John Dominic Crossan in Living the Questions

**The Vice of Certainty**

Beware of the person who says: I’ve got God all figured out. Not even Jesus was that bold. Instead he opted for stories that demanded thought, raised questions, and often went counter to conventional wisdom.

"I think certainty is a vice in religion. I really think that we ought to rid ourselves of it. So, I would constantly want to hold this wrestling, this uncomfortableness, I do not have it together, we are struggling in this together, as the proper image of the Christian faith. We walk into the
mystery of God. We never arrive. And if we think we arrive we become an idolater.”

– Jack Spong in Living the Questions

Absolute certainty keeps us separated from God and our neighbors by claiming that what we know is the whole truth and that there’s no room for others’ experience or input. When we’re not open to ambiguity and different ways of looking at things, we risk becoming stagnant, stuck in a cul-de-sac rather than being out on the adventure and open to the mystery of the divine. To say you ascribe, without question, to a dogmatic set of beliefs and clichés that were developed and set in stone by someone else is easy. Perhaps real “faith” is to possess a deep enough sense of trust that ambiguity is seen not as an enemy, but as a vital part of the journey.

When Billie Holiday sang: “Thems that got shall get, them that not shall lose…God Bless the child that’s got his own, that’s got his own,” she was tapping into a profound truth about life – and spirituality. Relying solely on doctrines and dogma passed on from others has seldom been a satisfying exercise for those longing for something deeper spiritually or thought-provoking theologically. To not ask questions is tantamount to forfeiting one’s own spiritual birthright and allowing other people’s experience of the divine to define your experience.

Wrestling with life’s injustices, resisting the urge to be satisfied with the way the world is, and asking difficult questions are all at the heart of theological integrity and spiritual growth. Excessive certitude can become a substitute for God and cripple an otherwise dynamic relationship with the Spirit. In short, being satisfied with easy answers is a “cop out.”

Boston University professor Harrell Beck said,

“I’ve been put with my back to the wall when I don’t have any cutesy little answers and I cannot reduce truth to the span of the human mind. I have to resort to a relationship which is my security. I think it’s only when you get shoved back to the point where you don’t have any neat little philosophical or theological answers that the relationship becomes central.” (from an unpublished lecture, “Asking the Big Question”)

Every question we ask without receiving a satisfactory “answer” makes us more adept at honing our questions. Every ambiguity with which we wrestle strengthens us for dealing with life’s ever-increasing complexities. The Center for Progressive Christianity’s “8 Points of Progressive Christianity” puts it this way: “There’s more grace in the search for meaning than in absolute certainty, in the questions than in the answers.” It’s in living the questions that we find direction in life.

Dr. Bill Nelson remembers being in conversation with Paul Tillich when Tillich pointed out that:
“Everyone seeks answers, mostly to questions that are not very important. The great concern in life should be to discover which are the right questions. Then, even if you rarely get answers, you are at least journeying in the right direction.”

On any authentic spiritual journey, asking the hard questions is not only permitted, but necessary! What we learn along the way through difficulties and disequilibrium, mistakes and challenges, discoveries and unlearnings, is that the process is what’s important. The unanswerable questions asked in the company of fellow seekers along the way become a central part of the process of the deepening quest, the broadening understanding, and the journey beyond our otherwise limited horizons.

“ Asking the questions for which there are no answers is the beginning of wisdom.”

– Harrell Beck

DVD DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
(Note: Chapter 1 of each DVD session is the introductory story.)

DVD Chapter 2:
How does Mel White define “fundamentalism?”

What evidence do you see of fundamentalists of various faiths organizing themselves into political blocs? Be specific.

How have “killing certainties” crippled the church’s faithfulness to the Gospel?
Describe the advantages of being on a spiritual journey over “arriving” at the truth.

**DVD Chapter 3:**
Spong describes the journey into Mystery as going beyond the literalization of scripture, creed, dogma, doctrine, and words. Explain.

What does Flunder mean by the “either/or” God?

**DVD Chapter 4:**
According to Fox, how is “not knowing” one of the important dimensions of living in today’s world?

What part does risk-taking play in the spiritual journey?

Virtually all of the DVD contributors admit to having grown increasingly comfortable with uncertainty and suspicious of those who claim to have all the answers. Describe your personal experience of this phenomenon.
SPIRITPRACTICE:
How does walking a labyrinth embody the notion of spiritual journey? Of pilgrimage?

Share among your fellow participants the location(s) of any labyrinths in your area. Schedule a time to walk the labyrinth and discuss your experience.

Questions for Personal Reflection:
What do you find most helpful/interesting from the material so far?

What are the implications of this material for you personally? For your local fellowship? For the wider Church? For Christianity as a whole?

Consider the following questions as a group:
What has this session challenged or changed about the way you think about the Divine? People? The Church? Yourself? The relationship of all these?

Be sure to follow up on this session’s theme with Session 1’s Living it Out: “Stripped by God” distributed by your facilitator.