



I've Been Meaning To Ask
Sermon by Pastor Sarah Rohde
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One of my favorite authors, Kelly Corrigan, delivered a graduation speech at the Walker School in Marietta, Georgia this past May. She opened her speech with three stories that I'm going to do my best to paraphrase.

The first was of her husband, Edward, who went to a dinner, and had the initial impression that the guy he was seated next to was a bit of a dud. So much so that he texted Kelly under the table, saying "I'll be home early tonight." The food was served, the wine was poured, and the man across from him mentioned going on a safari. That was a nice jumping off point, so Edward turned to the dud next to him, and said, "Have you ever been to that part of the world?" And this man said to him, "Well, I spent 45 days in Madagascar as a political prisoner and I nearly starved to death. When I was rescued, I weighed 111 pounds." As it turned out, Edward did not come home early that night. Instead he hung around, and asked more questions, and got to hear an unbelievable story from this man he had written off far too soon. A story he came so close to missing.

The second story was of a fundraiser that Kelly attended. The first person she happened to talk to was someone she describes as beautiful and completely put together; this woman was wearing a tailored suit and real jewelry, and shoes with a shiny red bottom, which Kelly assumed were super expensive. Kelly remembers standing next to this woman and feeling, as she describes, schlubby and judgy, but she still decided to ask this woman, "What brings you here today?" And this

woman proceeded to tell her that she comes to this fundraiser every year with her family to celebrate giving her kidney to her mother. Kelly asked a few more questions, and the next thing she knew, they are sitting down, and she was getting the chance to hear more about the discernment, the pre-counseling, the surgery, the recovery. It was another unbelievable story, and one that she, too, almost missed.

And the third story was about the ride in the taxi that she took the day before she gave this commencement speech, when she was on her way to the airport. As these rides often go, Kelly was sitting in the back taking care of loose ends - sending off emails, scheduling appointments, texting her family. She looked up to see where they were at, and her eyes noticed a little marble elephant on the dashboard. She asked the driver where he had gotten it, and he said that his mother had given it to him when he left India at the age of 16 years old. "Did your mom just cry buckets when you left?" Kelly said to him. "Ooooh yes," he said. "She must be really happy whenever you're able to get home" Kelly said. And he responded, "I actually never saw her again. She died and I couldn't get there in time." Yet another powerful story, and one that she came so close to missing.

Kelly's thesis in her speech is that everyone, everywhere has stories to tell us and things to teach us. And she believes the way to get at those stories is to be willing to ask questions of one another. And not just to ask them, but then to sit in that space of curiosity, that space of unknowing that's created whenever a question is asked, so that we can hear with genuine openness whatever is shared in response.

It seems like such a basic thing, to ask each other questions. But there's so much that gets in the way of us doing that.

Too often we think we have each other figured out. What more is there, really, to learn?

Too often we're moving so hastily through the day that it feels like a waste of time to pause and take interest in another.

Too often we settle for superficial exchanges that keep us comfortable, rather than asking the deeper questions that might just open up the stories of our lives, the stories we sure as heck don't want to miss, and yet often do.

And then you add a pandemic to all of these human tendencies, and no wonder it feels like a long time since we've had good conversations with one another.

But thinking about questions, conversations, human connection – things that we're going to be focusing on here at Bethlehem this fall, and I'll say more about that in a little bit – but those themes led me to the passage from the gospel of John that we read this morning. This part of John's gospel comes at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. In fact, we could say it's "Kickoff Day" for Jesus as well. And it's worth noting how Jesus gets things started. Now each gospel writer tells it differently because they each have something specific that they're wanting to emphasize in the ministry of Jesus, but according to John, Jesus doesn't kickoff his ministry with a miraculous healing. He doesn't get everyone in a room and preach a transformative sermon. He doesn't call people to repent of their bad ways. What does he do? What's the very first thing that Jesus does? He asks a question! He walks up to these men who would become his first disciples, and he asks them the question: "What are you looking for?" *What are you looking for?*

Now, I love what this says about Jesus and what he's all about. That he came into the world not to coerce, but to invite. That he came not to deliver the

message of God as a pre-written script, but rather to accompany people and to allow their stories and hungers to shape how he then talked about God. That he came not to keep people comfortable, but to challenge them, us, to actively reflect on what it is we are looking for, what it is we are chasing after, and how it is that those aspirations draw us closer to God or not.

That Jesus started his ministry with an open question shows us the way he was willing to be led by love, which means he was willing to be affected and changed by the people around him. Yes, he brought a message, and yes, he brought a way of life, and yes, he brought the gift of salvation, but he led people to that salvific way by practicing curiosity, by receiving their stories, by resisting assumptions, and by asking good and open questions. That's the Jesus we follow. That's how Jesus kicks things off.

What I also love about this encounter at the start of Jesus' ministry is that it kind of flops. Jesus' question doesn't result in a powerful conversation at all. Contrary to the vignettes that I shared from Kelly's commencement speech, where a question opens up an unbelievably powerful story, Jesus' question doesn't seem to go anywhere. The men don't even answer the question; they just say back to him, "Where are you staying?" Every time I read this dialogue, I'm struck by how awkward it is. And this week it reminded me of the dinner conversations we've been having lately with our really exhausted kindergartner. Some nights there's no logical connection between the questions we ask and the responses we get in return.

Who knows if this is actually how the conversation went, but I'm glad John tells it this way. Even Jesus' questions didn't always spark a powerful story. It's a good reminder to us that we can't force conversations to be meaningful, the

questions we ask won't always take a conversation in the direction we hoped for. Sometimes it's just a bust. And yet it didn't keep Jesus from continuing to lead with questions and with gentle curiosity as he brought the love of God into peoples' lives. It didn't keep him from inviting those wayward men to the place where he was staying. "Come and see," Jesus said. By being with me, you will discover what it is you are looking for.

Asking questions.

Telling stories.

Listening.

Allowing people to be complex.

Discovering connection.

As I've prayed over the state of our country and world right now, as I've prayed over what we can be about here at Bethlehem that will not only strengthen us and our sense of community in this particular time, but also be part of healing the wider world, these are the things that keep coming to mind. These very basic, and yet very intentional acts of connection that begin to bring us back together as human beings. We've experienced so much in the past year that has pulled us apart – and I don't mean just us as a congregation, but us as a society; the pandemic, of course, but also political divide, distrust and misinformation, mounting exhaustion, destructive social media posts, and continued grief over what we've lost and are continuing to lose. All of this combines in such a way that threatens our common life and our calling to be neighbors to one another.

And so, at this time, even as we continue to journey through an ongoing pandemic, I believe God is calling us back to each other. I believe God is calling us to reconnection, in whatever way each of us can safely participate at this time. God is calling us to practice here what we want to be about in the world. Reconnection looks like asking questions, looks like introducing ourselves to one another, it looks like curiosity, all for the sake of living into the wisdom of our common humanity, the way God created us to begin with. I'm really not exaggerating when I say that I believe these intentional practices of connecting with another human being hold within them the power to heal our world, one question, one conversation at a time.

Next week we will begin our fall sermon series which is called, "I've been meaning to ask..." and this series was developed to help communities of faith gather around questions and explore their power for fostering curiosity and connection. The series is based on 4 simple questions – Where are you from? Where does it hurt? What do you need? And where do we go from here? Each week in worship, we'll read stories from scripture and we'll explore what these questions open up, individually and collectively. We'll model this in our sermons, and then, some weeks, as part of our Adult Education hour, we'll pursue the questions more fully there; once in a while, in worship, if it fits, we may also invite your participation and invite you to turn to each other and share your name, share where you're from, share something about our community that you care about. I can see some of you wiggling in your seats; don't worry, it's simply an invitation and we'll all be in it together.

I want to close by sharing one more story from one of the authors who put this sermon series together: "In the middle of the 2020 election season, my next-

door neighbor walked out to his front yard one day while I was planting shrubs in mine. Political signs for different candidates loomed like silent silhouettes behind us. Though we've shared lots of small talk over the years, on this day, my neighbor leaned on the fence between our two yards and, after complimenting my rhododendrons, asked, 'So, do you have family in the area?' I talked about my cousins who live nearby, about my parents who quit their jobs to move to the mountains as newlyweds, about the many generations before me who had spent summers here. And then he told me about his large family, the many cousins and siblings who have called these same mountains home. After a while, he went back into his house and I returned to my shrubs. Our conversation did not unite us or reconcile our differing worldviews. But through curiosity and listening, we shared a little bit more of ourselves, we saw each other for more than who we are voting for, and by doing that, we remembered that we are human, that we are different, and that we are born of the same dust to which we will one day return." (Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity)

We are one, church. And we are better for knowing each other's stories. So let us kick things off this fall as Jesus did, by healing the world one question, one conversation at a time.

Thanks be to God. Amen.