

I spent most of my career before becoming your pastor as a teacher, as you know. I have a son and two daughters-in-law who teach, and we have fun conversations about the joys and challenges of educating the next generation. I know a number of you were teachers as well, and so I suspect that you can complete this sentence, “There are no dumb *questions*”!

Inevitably, even when someone would ask a question that they were worried was “dumb,” others in the class would nod, or chime in that they were wondering the same thing.

I love questions, which no doubt spurred my own education and my teaching. I love it when one of you asks me about something in my sermon or other theological or church-related question.

There aren’t always easy answers, but I’m always happy to consider the possibilities.

And I also know it’s not always easy to ask a question. Students,
and all of us I suspect,
fear looking dumb,
and even knowing that there are “no dumb questions,”
we fear looking foolish.

So we keep silent. Or maybe we make up our own answers, or worse, or maybe we don’t really care to investigate, or maybe we don’t *want* to investigate . . .

I wonder what the case was for the disciples after they heard a lesson from Jesus.

After some high-profile and very public events—
the Transfiguration,
and the dramatic healing of a boy with an unclean spirit
that had been too hard for the disciples to heal—

¹ Credit for this title goes to commentator Dr. Matt Skinner, Luther Seminary.

Jesus pulls just the disciples aside for some private tutoring in a small seminar course, and he tells them. . .

‘The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.’ (Mark 9: 31-32)

And the disciples don’t get it.

It’s actually the second time Jesus has given this same lesson. The disciples didn’t get it the first time either, with Peter famously intervening and telling Jesus he was wrong about the Messiah suffering and dying. This time the text simply says this:

“But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.”

Why do you think they were afraid to ask him? Fear of looking foolish? Fearful of asking a dumb question, or maybe, in the words of Dr. Matt Skinner, perhaps they are tragically incurious?

Could it be that they just shrug and say “This is just too hard.” I don’t want to know about this. I don’t like what I’m hearing, so I’ll just put my fingers in my ears—as we did as kids— and say “la la la la la.”

It really could be that . . . because what they are hearing is something they don’t want to hear.

Maybe they are afraid to ask because *they are afraid to find out the truth.*

Because you see, their belief about the Messiah didn’t fit what Jesus was saying.

EVERYONE believed wholeheartedly that the Messiah would be a political conqueror who would free Israel from Roman oppression.

And here was Jesus, behaving in every other way like a Messiah, but saying that he wouldn’t be the strongman, that he would, in fact, be the opposite:

he would be given over to the oppressing empire,
and he would be killed.

Sure, he said he’d rise again in three days, but what did that mean to the disciples? Not much. They had no concept of resurrection. We’ve know about Easter and have celebrated the resurrection for most of our lives.

But the disciples could not imagine life after death.

Death was final. Death was absolute.

If Jesus died, hope would die with him.

But here is the thing, and it's almost comical,
they reject and don't want to investigate the whole "suffering and dying"
and default to the *exact opposite!*

After Jesus says

"my way is the way of sacrifice and powerlessness"
they start arguing about *who is the most powerful—who is the greatest!*
Talk about flunking the midterm exam!

In this way, the topic of the disciples' discussion,
as they walked along and as Jesus overheard them,
is not a coincidence.
It's not accidental that they have a conversation about
who is the greatest because,
in fact, they feel weak, out of control, and uncertain.

Jesus keeps talking about weakness,
But they are interested in who is strong.
Jesus keeps talking about suffering and death,
But they are interested in victory and winning.
Jesus keeps talking about vulnerability,
But the disciples are interested in who is powerful.
Jesus keeps talking about "downward mobility,"
But they are interested in "upward mobility."

And aren't the disciples just like us? They want what we all want:
certainty, and and status.
Like the disciples, we prefer power.
We don't like powerlessness.

Seeing how far the disciples are missing the mark of comprehending
who he is and what he's here to do,
Jesus does what all good teachers do,
he gives them an analogy,
gives them an illustration,
he explains it in a different way.

He brings a little child to himself, explaining to the disciples the way of the kingdom of God. Scholar Chelsea Harmon describes the situation well:

“Children were part of the vulnerable sector of the community: they had no rights of their own and were the property of their father; they had nothing to offer a stranger in terms of status or importance. And here is Jesus, sitting among a group of men who were playing at who was most important. Jesus calls one of the household children to him, picking up the child in a big hug and repeatedly using the word “welcome.” To stress the point, Jesus tells them to *grow their hospitality in order to live with humility.*”

Because of the lowly status of children,

The crowd surely did NOT respond with any warm “oohs” and “ahs” and “aren’t they so sweet and precious,” like the responses I get when I show you pictures of my granddaughters. (*See me after church if you’d like to see one!*) No, Jesus here welcomes a ragamuffin kid, to the great surprise of everyone there.

And do you see the irony here? Jesus is a clever teacher! Scott Hoezee observes that

“ . . . in a power struggle when the disciples are behaving like children, Jesus unmask[s] their aspiration to power by putting a real child in their midst and using him as an object lesson.”²

Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie gave a TED Talk in 2009 entitled “[The Danger of a Single Story](#).” Maybe you’ve seen it. It’s really good. I’ll link it to my manuscript, which Mary will send out this week. I’d encourage you to watch it. In her talk, she explores the negative influences that a “single story” can have and identifies the root of these stories. Adichie argues that single stories often originate from simple misunderstandings or one’s lack of knowledge of others, but that these stories can also have a malicious intent to suppress other groups of people due to prejudice. People, especially in their childhood, are “impressionable and vulnerable” when it comes to single stories. Adichie asserts that media and literature often only tell one story, which causes people to generalize and make assumptions about groups of people.

Adichie shares two primary examples to discuss why generalizations are made. . . . she recalls her college roommate had a “default position” of “well-meaning pity” towards her due to the misconception that everyone from Africa comes from a poor,

²Scott Hoezee, *The Abingdon Preaching Annual*, 2018, p. 118.

struggling background, while Adichie had grown up solidly middle class, just like her roommate.

Adichie also clearly faults herself for also being influenced by the “single story” epidemic, showing that she made the same mistake as many others. Due to the strong media coverage on Mexican immigration she “had bought into the single story”, automatically associating all Mexicans with immigration. These illustrations emphasize how stereotypes are formed on incomplete information, but she argues, one story should not define a group of people.³

The Disciples had a Single Story about Jesus. He was the conquering militant warrior Messiah who would overthrow Rome.

And they weren’t curious to find out anything to the contrary.

They weren’t curious enough to listen to how Jesus actually described his mission of self-sacrifice.

So we have to ask, where do we subscribe to Single Stories? Are there people groups whom we think of in single-story ways?

Where are we incurious when we should be asking questions?

In this election year, are there other stories we should consider?

* * *

Adiche ends her talk with this thought:

“when we reject the single story,
when we realize that there is never a single story
about any place, or any people,
we regain a kind of paradise.”

Jesus says,

“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”

May we guard against single stories,
and with God’s help,
seek to imitate our suffering servant savior,
the one who welcomes little children,
Helping us regain the paradise of the kingdom of God.

Thanks be to God.

³[Summary: “The Danger of a Single Story.”](#)