



Massanutten
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

When an Answer Evokes a Question

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

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Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

Philippians 3:4b-14

Maybe it's just me—or perhaps this political season—but it seems to me that there is a marked increase in bumper stickers these days, and a good number of them would have to be classified as theological bumper stickers. They are popping up everywhere. You can see everything from the truly profound to the downright silly. Perhaps you've seen this one: "Is there life after death? Touch this truck and find out."

Or this one: "Smile, God loves you." Or, as the new twist proclaims: "God loves you whether you like it or not."

And then there's the running battle between the "Jesus is my co-pilot" sticker-bearers to those whose theology is a bit more refined, "If Jesus is your co-pilot, then you need to switch seats."

But every now and then I would see one that takes me back. It's an oldie but a goodie.

It was sometime during the 70's that I first started to notice this message on the bumper stickers popping up on cars all over Dallas where I grew up: "Jesus is the answer." "Jesus is the answer." Not long after that, the inevitable reply started appearing: "If Jesus is the answer, then what was the question?"

Of course, that's a good question. For many, the question isn't important. Jesus is hailed as the answer to every question the world has ever asked. Like traveling medicine men who hawk their tonics as "the cure for what ails you," many have done the same with Jesus. "Having trouble sleeping at night, don't count sheep, count on Jesus. He'll help you sleep well."

"Who will help you with your test? Who will lead your team to victory? Who will lead your country into battle?" Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. For some, he's the answer to all of life's questions.

No matter what the question, someone is always ready to shout: "Jesus is the answer."

But that somebody isn't Paul. Paul shouts something else: "Jesus isn't the answer. He's the one who questions every answer you've ever had."

You see, Paul had spent his whole life cultivating his answers, making sure that he had the right pedigree, the right theology, the right political allegiance, the right education. And, as he points out to the Philippians, if you were to give him a test, he would have scored the highest in the class. His answers were perfect.

Or so he thought. But, as he followed his answer of right theology down the road to Damascus to persecute those with a different answer, he was knocked to the ground by his encounter with the one who brought all of his answers into question: Jesus Christ. And

when he got up from that experience, unable to see, he saw something more clearly than he had ever seen before. His answers were far too small for such a vast God. When he met Jesus on that road, he wasn't so sure that he'd found an answer for his life, as much as he knew that he had been found by the one who called into question the very answers he'd been building his life upon.

As one scholar has written in a recent book on Paul, Paul felt that he had been invaded by grace, and, as Beverly Gaventa writes, "the Gospel's invasion necessarily obliterates worlds, including particularly the world of the law. The Gospel and its attendant vocation simply take over Paul's earlier life."

And so Paul doesn't join the masses calling to us an easy "Jesus is the answer" theology. No, Paul has a different tune: "If you ever meet Jesus," Paul calls to us, "you better get ready, because every answer you've ever held dear is now up for inspection." In other words, "(The gospel) also obliterates those other places with which people identify themselves, even the most fundamental places of ethnicity, economic and social standing, and gender. The only location available for those grasped by the Gospel is 'in Christ.'"

And maybe that's a good thing. After all, we craft our lives around going to the right schools, living in the right neighborhoods, driving the right cars, voting the right ticket, investing in the right stocks, and we build up a perfect resume of what it means to live life. And, if we're not careful, we may begin to think that these answers we've cultivated are the ones that give us life. So Paul screams to us: "Wake up. The answers I crafted weren't *the* answers, and neither are yours."

And so the question comes to us: What answers are we so sure of that Jesus may call into question? It's a question the people of God have been living under for centuries.

When you read the Book of Acts, you can't miss those times when the church is standing pat on an answer, only to have God pull the rug out from under them. And really the church should have expected some new answers. Didn't Jesus, the head of the church, keep saying, "You have heard it said, but now I say to you?" And then he would dismantle an answer that seemed carved in stone. The answer that had said "an eye for an eye" suddenly became new: "Forgive," and we are still wrestling with it means for us to be a people committed to being agents of peace. With Jesus, even the old answer of death gave way to the new answer of resurrection.

The church has been chasing that living answer for over 2000 years now. And new answers aren't just a thing of the past. We're still struggling with it today. We know what it's like to let tightly-gripped answers slip from our grasp as God has shown us a new thing. We've changed our answer on so many things in the last century, not because we're wishy-washy, not because we're going along with public opinion, not because we want to attract members, but because we believe a life following Jesus is never finished. We are pressing on toward the goal, as Paul wrote. We are always following our living Savior who is leading deeper into the truths of God.

In a recent article, Scott Colglazier describes two types of churches that he calls "answer" churches and "journey" churches. Answer churches are those who have their beliefs neatly packaged, while journey churches are those who see faith as an ongoing

journey, who understand that listening to the Bible is a process.

He concludes his article this way: “Our culture will always have ‘answer’ churches—those communities of faith that tend to see a well-defined Christianity. But for other churches, ‘journey’ churches, theological exploration is essential because these churches thrive not by suggesting, ‘It doesn’t matter what you believe,’ but by inviting people into the adventure of theological reflection and discovery....”

That’s one of the beautiful things about the Presbyterian/Reformed Tradition. We are always called to examine our answers—to be reformed by the Word of God through the power of the Spirit—to discern who God is calling us to be in this place at this time. It’s not that we don’t hold answers; rather it’s that we hold all of our answers— theological or otherwise—to the continuing discernment of what God is up to in the world.

Jesus is the answer, but make no mistake: Jesus is no easy answer. No, he’s the answer who shakes things up, even the things that you thought were unshakeable. He’s the answer who questions every answer you’ve ever had.

So, if Jesus is the question, how will you answer? And, if Jesus is the answer, what will you question?