When Billy and I started to date, like all people, we asked one another a lot of questions. “Where are you from?” “What's your family like?” “Have you ever been married?” “Do you have any children?” “What kind of music do you like?” Very early on, I asked Billy a question that was a bonafide deal breaker. “What do you think about women pastors?” I hadn't actually told Billy what I do for a living at first. I was running a jewelry and bead store at the time and had a part-time parish. I wasn't hiding the fact that I'm a pastor, just waiting for the right moment to share it with him. To be truthful, my vocation *had* been an issue at times when I was in the dating world. It took Billy a while to answer my question and that made me nervous. Finally, he responded with a question himself. “Wasn't Mary one of the first women preachers?” I think that may have sealed the deal, right from the beginning. Now that we've been married a while, we still ask one another questions every day, some of them momentous and some not. “How are we going to pay this bill?” “Do you think this looks good on me?” “How should we handle this crisis?” “How do we act in the world as a Christian family?” “Will you go to the doctor with me?” “Have you seen my glasses?”

Questions are a good indicator of a relationship. They show a curiosity about the other person and what he or she thinks. Questions can build trust in a relationship. Questions help us grow together, help us solve problems, reveal to the other that we don't have all the answers and that we can try to find at least some of them together. Questions can also be hard to ask, especially when we're afraid of the answer.

Jesus and his disciples were traveling through Galilee. Jesus had recently asked his disciples a question: “Who do you say that I am?” Peter said the right thing, with little understanding of what he was saying. “You are the Messiah.” Then Jesus told the disciples pretty much what he told them in today's gospel reading. “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, then they will kill him and three days later he will rise again.” Again, Jesus' followers did not understand what he was talking about. Mark tells us, “They were afraid to ask him.”

It would be easy here to beat up on the disciples, to put them down for not having the courage to ask Jesus what he was talking about. To be fair, if I had been in the disciples' sandals, I probably would have stayed mute myself. Maybe you would have, too. What could they say in the face of such unbelievable, even ridiculous news? The Messiah, the one sent from God, was going to be taken away from them in such a gruesome way? Of course the disciples didn't understand Jesus. How could they understand that this powerful Son of God was to be crucified and then raised from the dead?

But don't you wonder how things might have gone if the disciples *had* asked Jesus some questions out there on the road? What if they had asked Jesus why he had to die? Or why those in power feared him? Or why Israel had to be redeemed through suffering? Or what would happen to them when Jesus was gone? Maybe those questions and Jesus' answers would have helped them understand who Jesus really was. Maybe the questions would have deepened the disciples' relationship with Jesus, would have built trust and commitment. Maybe the questions would have helped the disciples cope better in the awful days that were to come. Maybe the questions would have kept the disciples from arguing about who was the greatest among them when they had the greatest one in the very midst. Maybe the questions might have helped them to see that greatness does not lie in power but in service and sacrifice. Maybe the questions and Jesus' answers would have helped us understand Jesus better, might have strengthened our relationship with him, made us trust him more.

But the disciples didn't ask Jesus any questions that day. Are we so different from them? We as Christians often hesitate to ask questions. Maybe it's because we're afraid our questions aren't okay or that we don't ask them in the right way. Maybe we're afraid that questions will make us look foolish to God or to others. David Lose writes that as a culture we tend to equate intelligence with knowing things. We admire smart people who know things. But, Lose asks, “What if we could also imagine that intelligence is measured not simply by what you know, but also by how eager you are to learn more? That is, it's at the edges of what we know that there is the greatest chance to grow in understanding. Which is why questions are so important. Questions are not the mark of a lack of intelligence, but of a curious and lively mind.”

Questions are also a mark of a faithful heart. Many of us grew up thinking that questions are sign of doubt and that doubt is the opposite of faith, but that is simply not true. It is not unfaithful to doubt, for faith grows when we are honest about our doubts. Given the reality that the disciples of old and now face, how can doubt not play a part in our faith? Again, Lose writes, “Jesus' life, death and resurrection are so logic-defying and world-changing that, quite frankly, if you don't have doubts you're probably not paying attention.” And not paying attention may very well be the true opposite of faith.

So, what if we were to really pay attention to Jesus, to his death and resurrection and wonder what they mean for us today? If we were to believe that Jesus is ready to hear our questions, that he is eager to hear them? What if we were to believe that asking questions can actually bring us closer to God?

What would you ask God if you had the chance? Which of your questions, struggles or doubts is at the front of your mind and deepest in your heart today? You have probably guessed by now why I had the children pass out the index cards. This is your chance to ask God anything about God, the Bible or your faith. I'm going to give you some time at the end of the sermon to write your question on the card. Then I ask you to place your card in the offering tray. Just as we give God our time and talents and money, we give God our questions and doubts as an offering. You don't have to sign your card if you don't want to. I am not going to do anything with them but look at them, because they will help me know what questions we have about faith as a parish. It just might help me in a future sermon or two. I'm going to put my question for together these are the questions of a community of faith. I won't try to answer your questions because I don't have the answers. I firmly believe that writing down our questions will start a conversation with God, one that will continue and will deepen and enrich our relationship with our Creator.

I pray that today we learn something from those first disciples. I pray that we always, as disciples and as the church, turn to God with our questions and our struggles, for it is there that we will find understanding and compassion, love and grace. And it is there that we will find strength for the journey we take together as sisters and brothers in faith.

Amen.

*Pentecost 17B*

*September 20, 2015*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*Mark 9:30-37*