"What's the Right Question?" October 25, 2026
Matthew 19:16-26 Westminster, Greenville
22nd Sunday after Pentecost Ben Dorr
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Today is our final sermon in our fall sermon series, "Christian Questions with More Than One Answer."

And our question this morning is "What's the Right Question?"

I ask that question, "What's the Right Question?"—
because, from time to time,
ever since God's church was born,
the church has struggled with this question.

For example…there was a famous split that occurred in the 16th century, during the Reformation, between two leading theologians of the day:
the German Reformer Martin Luther
and the Swiss Reformer Ulrich Zwingli.

The split occurred over what takes place during communion.

For Zwingli, communion was a sign or symbol of a deeper spiritual reality. For Luther, communion was MORE than a sign…what happened in communion was that the "real body and blood" of Christ was present.

At Marburg in 1529, the two sides were able to agree on 14 different theological tenets, but on the fifteenth, which had to do with communion, they could not agree. And with that disagreement hanging in the air, Zwingli—with tears in his eyes—offered Luther his hand in brotherhood, and Martin Luther refused it!

Now Zwingli and Luther—they thought they were asking one of the most important questions. But 500 years later, I don't hear my colleagues and I much concerned with that question.

The most important question I hear about communion is this:
"Whose table is it?"

It's not Westminster's table.
It's not a Presbyterian table.
It is Christ's table.

Which means that everyone is welcome at that table.
And we will turn no one away from that table.

Do you see what I'm getting at, when I ask:
What's the right question?

That's the topic of our sermon today.
And it's not just in church that this becomes an important question.
It happens in our daily lives as well.

Years ago, when our oldest son was maybe 4 or 5 years old, his grandparents were in town to visit. And grandma loved to cook for her grandchildren and she made one of her famous pies.

So after dinner, grandma brought out a slice for our older son.
And we said, "Sam, what do you say to grandma?"

And he looked at the pie.
And he looked at his grandmother.
And he said, "Grandma, that's not a very big piece of pie!"

Clearly, we could have found a better question.

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What's the right question…

That's the topic today.

How many of you have been in worship anytime during the month of October?

Good. That means you know we're in the midst of our annual stewardship campaign. And as you've heard, we're aiming to raise $85,000 more in pledges this year than what we received last year. And you've heard, I hope, that we can do it if everyone in our church were to raise their pledge by a modest amount for 2027.

Now first, let me say that I am very aware that some of you will not be able to raise your pledge for next year. I get it, we get it. Please, please do not feel guilty about that. There are many ways to give to one's church…through time, through talent, and through treasure.

But if you are able to raise your pledge for the coming year, our "Living Waters" stewardship campaign is offering what we hope is a very clear path forward.

Consider raising your pledge by $500.
Or by $300.
Or by the amount that you feel God is leading you to…

And turn your pledge in on November 8th, which is Commitment Sunday.

That's the request.
That's the ask.

Now…having said all that, do I believe that what I just asked you to do is the most important question when it comes to our stewardship campaign?

No.

The most important question, when it comes to ANY stewardship campaign, is this:

Who did God create us to be?

In other words, we don't give to the church, or make a pledge to the church, simply to make the budget each year. We give generously of all that we have, and all that we are, because that's who God created us to be.

How many of you believe you are created in the image of God?
How many of you believe that the God who created you is a generous God?

A gracious God?
A God who loves to give and give and give?

And if it is in God's character, then it is in ours as well.
We are created by God to be generous people.
To be gracious people.

Not only with our treasure, but also with our time, with our energy, with our love.

What's the right question during stewardship season?
We can ask for x or y or z.
But that's the not the question that I want you to begin with.

The question I want you to start with is this:

Who did God create you to be?

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You see, I think THAT question lies behind so much of Jesus' ministry.

Just take our 2nd text for today.
You've heard this story before.
What most of us remember about the man who approaches Jesus in this story is that he's rich.

"…he had many possessions."

That's how Matthew puts it.

But please, do not turn him into some billionaire villain.
He's not a bad person.
In fact, he's a very faithful person.

According to our text, this gentleman has kept the commandments since his youth! Which means, if he's following Jewish law, he's probably used to tithing. He knows what it means to give 10% of his wealth away, and he does it!

No, what stands out for me about this man is not his money.
It's his METICULOUSNESS.

You can see it in his questions.

"Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?"
"…keep the commandments," says Jesus.

"Which ones?" says the man.
Jesus goes through the list.

"I have kept all these; what do I still lack?"

What we have before us in this text is someone who loves God and is a faithful person…AND a cautious person…a meticulous person, planning out every detail ahead of time.

Anyone here like to plan the details of your life out ahead of time?

That's what makes this text so difficult for me.

I don't think Jesus is telling us, in this text, that we're supposed to give away all our possessions at this very moment. I think Jesus is telling us, through this text, to stop being so cautious with our faith, or with our love, or with our generosity, at ANY moment.

Jesus is asking each of us:
Who has God created you to be?

Look, when it comes to being careful and meticulous, you and I both know that there are times in our lives where it's helpful…just last weekend, I came home from church and heated up a few tacos for lunch.

Put the tacos on a tv tray in the living room.
Went to get a glass of water.

When I came back to the living room, not more than 20-30 seconds later, you'll never guess who was enjoying my tacos…actually, at this point I bet ALL of you can guess who was enjoying my tacos.

Our dog, Pepper.
I mean, I know better, right?

When it comes to leaving food lying around at low levels in our house, one cannot be too careful.

But what about when it comes to our faith?

When it comes to how we give back from all the gifts that God has given us, how we forgive because of all the grace that God has shown to us…can we become too cautious?

Can we get caught up in the details, and become too careful?

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In his autobiography, Nelson Mandela describes what it was like when he was finally freed after 27 years in captivity on Robbin Island.

He said he could feel the hatred in his heart.

"I didn't get to see my children grow up. I lost my marriage and the best years of my life. I was angry. And I was afraid, because I had not been free in so long.

"But as I got closer to the car that would take me away [to freedom]," he went on to say, "I realized that when I went through that gate, if I still hated [my captors], they would still have me."

"I wanted to be free…so I let [the anger] go."[1]

Nelson Mandela was not asking:
How can I return the favor to those who wounded me?

He was not asking:
How can I construct a life that will be very comfortable for me?

[1] Nelson Mandela, "Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela," New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2013.

I think he was asking a much bigger question:
Who is it that God has created me to be?

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That's the right question.
Not just during stewardship season, but during ANY season.

I believe that it's the kind of question that forces us to grow.
Encourages us to change.

Invites us to be more generous people,
more gracious people,
taking chances with our love,
taking risks for our Lord…

The pastor Lillian Daniel tells the story of a very wise and kind man that she used to know. Every night, this man would come home from work and look forward to a few hours alone after dinner—
watching tv, reading a book,
winding down from his day.

He wasn't single.
He was married and had a daughter.

But his wife was an early bird, he was a night owl, and their daughter was young. Wife and daughter would go to bed early, and he would stay up late every night.

But then his little girl grew up.

And when she became a teenager, it turned out that she was a night owl too. After his wife went to bed, his teenage daughter would join him in the family room.

And this became a problem.

Suddenly, it was HER hand on the remote, and not HIS.

If he did manage to get to the remote before her, he couldn't hear the television because the music from her earphones was so loud it was distracting.

He tried getting his daughter to go to bed.
"You're staying up too late. Don't you have homework?"
"I've already done it, Dad," she said.

It was the same conversation, night after night after night.

Finally, one night he said to her in exasperation, "Never mind your homework. You need to be alert for school. Staying up late will set you back in school."

She said, "It doesn't seem to be affecting you, Dad. You hold down a successful job, you don't sleep much, but people talk about what a great guy you are. What makes you think you're different?"

"I am different," he snapped.

"I'm an adult, and I'm your father. You need to sleep or your grades will slip, and you'll get into trouble, and…you just need to get out of here and go to your room."

Well, his daughter's eyes filled with tears.

She said, "I get good grades. I don't fall asleep in class. I just don't need much sleep. The truth is, I'm a lot like you, and because of that, I actually look forward to our time together, and the only time I can

get that is late at night. But clearly you don't feel the same way. You just want to get me out of here."

And she left the room crying, and went to her room.

After she left, he realized something: she was right!

They WERE cut from the same cloth…with one important difference. When he stayed up, he was reaching into himself, but when she stayed up, she was trying to reach out to HIM...

This difference was suddenly very obvious. So he stayed up all night that night, thinking and praying about what to do. And the next morning, he decided to reach out to his daughter IN A NEW WAY.

He did not talk about her grades.
He just asked about her…

And he talked about his work days, the number of meetings and difficult people he encountered…

He told her he loved her, and she listened.

The next night she did not come to the family room, but stayed in her room, and her father's heart ached with a loss he had never expected to feel. Night after night went by, and he had all the time to himself that he needed, and to his astonishment, he didn't want time to himself anymore.

He wanted time with her.

Finally, after a week or so, his daughter entered the family room after her mom had gone to bed. And father and daughter sat quietly together. And her father quietly thanked God for that moment, knowing

that in just a few years this would be happening in a college dorm room instead of their family room.[2]

Now…what happened to that father?
I'll tell you what I think.
I think he discovered the right question.

Not:
What can I watch on Netflix tonight…
What can I do to recharge my battery tonight…

He started asking himself:
"How can I be the father that God created me to be?"

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When was the last time you asked yourself a version of that question?

How can I be the parent or the grandparent that God created me to be? How can I be the friend, the neighbor, the brother or sister whom God created me to be? How can I be the joyful and generous and gracious and forgiving disciple of Jesus, whom God has created me to be?

If you're not in the habit of asking that question, give it a try.
Who knows what will happen?
It might not just change what you write on your pledge card.
Asking that question every day…could change the story that God is writing with your life.

Amen.

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[2] This story by Lillian Daniel appears in her sermon "We Need More Love," in *Journal for Preachers*, Advent, 2010.