

May 24, 2009 Sermon
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Twenty years ago, I did a pre-ordination internship with a chaplain at Goucher College, in Baltimore. And the chaplain had me do a variety of activities. One of the things that he asked me to do, was something that was completely my own. I had to think it up, plan it, do it--all of that. So I thought about what I wanted to do, and decided that I really wanted to challenge the students at Goucher to look at scripture with all the moral ambiguity and difficulty that's in life. So I had to come up with a catchy title, of course, to bring people into this talk and discussion. And I thought--well, it's a college campus, so I called it "Sex and The Bible." I got the crowd I was looking for, and learned a lot in that presentation. Because essentially what happened was the poor students sort of went to the poles, and stayed there, and argued back and forth. It was wonderful. At the end, a few true believers from both sides stayed on. And at one point, one of the women pointed to her Bible, and she said, "This book has all the answers I need to live by," and then she walked out.

And I realized where the struggle was for me, because I don't see Scripture as a book of answers. I see it as a book of questions. Leading us into answers, perhaps someday, down the line. But Scripture is challenge, inviting us into questions that lead us into Life. I think that's most obvious when we read parts of Scripture that really sort of "grind our teeth" and sort of bother us. Now, c'mon--we're an Episcopal church...you can admit that some verses in Scripture drive you crazy. Please... Maybe it's the one where someone kills someone else...right?...it could be that. Today, in the Book of Acts, my teeth "grind". The disciples, saw the problem, I think, with great expedience, and spiritual immaturity--by drawing straws. I mean...c'mon...what problem of importance would you ever solve by drawing straws? Do you want our president to draw straws--or mayor, or anyone in your work, or family? No! I think this is an expedient way to deal with anxiety in the moment--that the disciples were in--and it shows us a path, by doing something that challenges us to NOT do.

But step forward. In the eighty generations after this took place--the eighty generations of Christendom--we have moved into the difficult questions, through something we call discernment. That's asking the difficult questions, and seeking God's voice. Recently, I read a book that talks a lot about discernment, only talking about a scientist from the history of science. The scientist's name is Joseph Priestley--some of you know this character. He's the one who discovered oxygen. Priestley was a priest, in England, about the exact same time that Benjamin Franklin was in England, as a politician. Most of us know Franklin as a politician, but he was also one of the pre-eminent scientists of his day. Just a towering figure of Science. Franklin used to meet with his friends--they were focused on electricity. He used to meet with his friends in a coffee shop near St. Paul's Cathedral, in London. Priestley was a young man--just educated--in the country, and decided he wanted to get in with this group. They were much older and more experienced, so Priestley went to them, and told them he wanted to write a book about their discoveries, and all the great things they did. And they said, "Well, come on in, young man, and join us." Flattery helps sometimes.

So Priestley met with them, and wrote their story. And at the same time. they encouraged him. Now Priestly was a inquisitive person. He was always wondering about life. So Franklin and others encouraged him to go deeper and deeper into his questions. Something you need to know about Priestley: He had a strange childhood obsession and interest. It went like this: He would capture mice, put them under a jar, and see how long they lived. How long would it take that poor mouse to die? Then he'd capture another mouse...put it under the jar...and see how long that mouse lived. He started timing them. When he became an adult, Franklin encouraged him into the world of experiments. So Priestley got a table, like a water table. Now if you've ever been with a 3-year old, you know what I'm talking about. Water tables now are about this tall...and the kids stand nearby and splash in the water. Well, that's the best I can imagine that Priestley had. What he would do, is he'd put the jar of air on top of the water, so it would seal, and he'd put something under it, put it over on a platform, and time it. How long would it live? He started doing those same experiments with mice...how long?...how long? Then he started doing something else. He put a poor mouse under this glass, then he put a wick under it--I don't know how he did all this--and then he lit the wick, while it was sealed, and moved it over to see how long the mouse lived. Less time when the fire was lit. So he tried this for awhile. Then one day, just sort of hap-penstance, he picked a sprig of mint from his garden, put it under the water, into a new glass, and set it aside. Came back the next day...the mint had not died. This was strange, this was new--everything he had put under the sealed glass had died. So then he tried the same experiment with the mint, and he lit the flame, set it aside. The sprig did not die--it kept living. Then he put the spring of mint under, and left it there, and put a mouse under, and the mouse lived longer than before.

This is how Priestley began to understand oxygen. Another time, he was with playing another mineral--you'll have to read the book to get the name...it's not right here for me--he's playing with another mineral, and it released near a flame, and the flame expanded. Hmm...what's going on there? So he did it again...and again...it was pure oxygen. So then he released that mineral under the glass, and put a mouse under the glass. And he noticed the mouse lived much longer than before. This is how Priestley began to understand oxygen. It sounds like child's play, and it's a little creepy with all the dead mice. But this is how we human beings, on this planet, came to understand the reality of oxygen. Priestley lived with the question, and he asked the question repeatedly--only over a long period of time, did he live into the answer. So let me read to you, from my book here, and I want you to know I did not put this book on the altar. Last time I did that, someone got upset. So let me read from my book here, about Joseph Priestley, as he playfully asked the question. "What's interesting about Priestley,"--the author Steven Johnson says, "is not that he had a hunch, but rather that Priestley had the intelligence and the leisure time to let that hunch lurk in the background for thirty years."

If you want to live a life of discernment--because that's what Priestley was doing--if you want to be a spiritual scientist, you have to have leisure. Only, in the church, we call that Sabbath. Sabbath Rest. Sabbath as the seventh day of creation, when God looked upon creation and said "It is very, very good." On the seventh day of creation, God wasn't exhausted from work. God was full of God's creative energy. And part of

the creation was God beholding the creation, and enjoying it. That is Sabbath Rest. Sabbath Rest is not that day where we're so exhausted from working, we try to pick ourselves up. Sabbath Rest isn't Miller Time, where we just want to forget the week, and drink with friends. Sabbath Rest is completion of work. It's in a rhythm with work. Meaningful, purposeful work, requires intentional rest. Without Sabbath Rest, we will never be able to engage those deep important questions in our life. And we'll be forced to put easy quick surface answers on top. But our gut--our soul--will never never be settled there. And so, as Priestley did in his life--so we do in our lives: practice Sabbath, as part of a creative engagement with God's deepest questions.

The author goes on to say that we don't yet recognize how slow in developing most good ideas are...how they often need to remain dormant as intuitive hunches, for decades, before they flower. Priestley's mature scientific discoveries were directly linked to fascinations he had in childhood. And I think it works the same way in our spiritual life. I think the only doorway for you, to answer the deepest questions of your life, to make meaning where there could be despair...the only doorway for you, are those childhood places where you had a deep awareness of God's presence. And they're in you. But without Sabbath Rest, and without an open curiosity, those places may have sealed off. Sometimes in this culture, we think maturity is to seal off those playful childhood parts of ourselves. And then the words of Jesus come back to us: "Unless you become like a child, you'll never enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Unless you see like a child, unless you honor that in children, and help them honor that in you, you will never enter the fullness of Life. You will never live with those deep questions, and the meaning that they bring. Those childhood hunches are your way home.

The writer goes on to say: "Most great ideas grow the way Priestley's did...starting with some childhood obsession, struggling through an extended adolescence of random collisions and false starts, and finally blooming decades after they took place." So it is in your soul. Let those collisions and false starts be part of your discernment--not part of your shame. They will take you to God. Again he says: "Part of the secret to having great ideas, lies in creating a working environment where those fragments are nurtured, and sustained over time. What's your environment for discernment? How do you put yourself in a place that's fruitful, to ask those questions? The scientist goes into the laboratory. Where's your laboratory? Where's your place where you work...where you surround yourself with the tools you need to ask important questions? Who are those relationships? What are the books? How about the types of prayer you use? Is Trinity a place for you? Is it a spiritual laboratory? A place where you can experiment, and ask questions? Or is Trinity a place where...you need to be put together, and sort of demonstrate your competence. I hope it can be both...a place where we share our discoveries together. You know what really worked for me in prayer this week? And...oh--I'm really grinding...I'm just in a cloudy place. The weather is stormy. Both sides, both sides...a spiritual laboratory, a playground, a place here, where we have what we need to ask the tough questions. One hundred and fifty-eight years...people have been praying here. There's a lot available to you, through this community. Let it be a place of challenge--of comfortable challenge to you--where you can ask those questions. Let it be your laboratory.

Finally, the author says: "Priestley had created an environment for himself, where those long-term hunches could thrive with almost no pressure. And his habit of simultaneously writing multiple documents, upon multiple topics, kept the fragments alive in his mind, over the decades." It's asking those questions, broadly. When our presiding bishop was here--a couple of years ago--she said "Listen to all the voices. Listen to all the voices. Ask the questions in a broad place, and find a space that's safe for you to ask the difficult spiritual questions."

Our vestry here at Trinity practices a form of discernment, that incorporates these discernment and scientific models that are talked about for Priestley. What our vestry does, is focus on a question very, very carefully. Examines the question from all types, all sides--like a diamond with different facets. And then the vestry looks to see that there are positives on both sides, where you might answer that question. And there are also challenges on both sides. Any deep question has challenges all around it. So the vestry tries to focus on that question, very clearly. And then, once they're clear on the question, ask all kinds of questions around it...broaden way out...listen to all the voices. We look at cultural messages. God might speak to us through culture. We look scripturally. God speaks through Scripture. We look through our own experience--our emotions, passions and feelings. God speaks there. We listen through conversations with colleagues and others. We listen through the tradition of the church, and what has gone on before, our practices here. There are many ways to discern God's voice.

What I pray for you, is that you will have the courage to ask the tough questions. That you will not "paper over" tough questions with easy answers. That you'll hang in there with us...together...and that we take one step further here at Trinity, to be a place of discernment. Active, vigorous, energetic spiritual discernment. And that way, we certainly will change ourselves, and maybe we can change the world. Maybe we'll find spiritual oxygen for people who need more.