

March 4, 2012

Questions for Lent and Easter
The Grace Question
John 3:1-10

Opening Words: John Simone Sr. once said, "*The key to wisdom is knowing all the right questions.*" I think he is right. Even without answers, questions have value. After all, what is a question? A question is nothing more than a request for more information. Only fools think they know everything. How many questions have you asked in the past week? How many questions have you asked in the past month? How many questions have you asked in the past year? Jesus asked twenty questions in the Gospel of John. Those questions are the foundation of my newest sermon series, *Questions for Lent and Easter*. We are looking at twelve different questions the Master asked. Each one is an excellent question because each one is timeless.

This is message number four. I have called this message *The Grace Question*. We find ourselves in the third chapter of John. The text is nothing more than a private conversation between Jesus and Pharisee named Nicodemus. The expert in the law believed in Jesus but he also had a few questions. May God give you ears to hear this morning's Gospel lesson, John 3:1-10

John 3:1-10 1 Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. 2 He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him." 3 Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again." 4 "How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!" 5 Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. 6 Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. 7 You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' 8 The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." 9 "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. 10 "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things?"

Fiorello LaGuardia was mayor of New York City during the worst days of the Great Depression and all of WWII, was called by adoring New Yorkers 'the Little Flower' because he was only five foot four and always wore a carnation in his lapel. He was a colorful character who used to ride the New York City fire trucks, raid speakeasies with the police department, take entire orphanages to baseball games, and whenever the New York newspapers were on strike, he would go on

the radio and read the Sunday funnies.

One bitterly cold night in January of 1935, the mayor turned up at a night court that served the poorest ward of the city. LaGuardia dismissed the judge for the evening and took over the bench himself. Within a few minutes, a tattered old woman was brought before him, charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She told LaGuardia that her daughter's husband had deserted her, her daughter was sick, and her two grandchildren were starving. But the shopkeeper, from whom the bread was stolen, refused to drop the charges. "It's a real bad neighborhood, your Honor," the man told the mayor. "She's got to be punished to teach other people around here a lesson." LaGuardia sighed. He turned to the woman and said "I've got to punish you. The law makes no exceptions--ten dollars or ten days in jail." But even as he pronounced sentence, the mayor was already reaching into his pocket. He extracted a bill and tossed it into his famous sombrero saying: "Here is the ten dollar fine which I now remit; and furthermore I am going to fine everyone in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Baliff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant." So the following day the New York City newspapers reported that \$47.50 was turned over to a bewildered old lady who had stolen a loaf of bread to feed her starving grandchildren, fifty cents of that amount being contributed by the red-faced grocery store owner, while some seventy petty criminals, people with traffic violations, and New York City policemen, each of whom had just paid fifty cents for the privilege of doing so, gave the mayor a standing ovation. That is a story of grace; this is a story of grace.

According to the text, there was a man by the name of Nicodemus. He was no ordinary person; He was a Pharisee. Who were the Pharisees? They were legalistic group who strictly believed in the written Law of Moses and the unwritten "traditions of the elders." Nicodemus wasn't just any Pharisee. He was one of their leaders; He was a member of the Jewish Ruler Council. In his world Nicodemus was respected. Normally, people went to him with questions. In this story Nicodemus went to Jesus with his questions. The conversation begins with some complimentary words. However, Jesus ignores those words and hears the real topic, salvation. Verse three is key. It says, "*no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.*" Nicodemus doesn't have a clue: Nicodemus doesn't understand. It is like Jesus is speaking a foreign language. His life had been built on the laws but Jesus is not speaking in legalistic terms. Jesus is not speaking of punishment; Jesus is speaking of grace. Our scripture lesson ends with the question of the day. Verses nine says, "*You are Israel's teacher,*" said Jesus, "*and do you not understand these things?*" Nicodemus was an expert in the law but he knew nothing about grace. How many people do you know don't understand grace? Do you understand the significance of grace?

This morning I want to look at the theological term grace. I am going to do this by answering three questions. Together they act like a funnel. They go from being very general to very personal. The first question is wide, **what is grace?** The second question is narrower, **what is Jesus' grace?** The third and final question is very personal, **why is Jesus' grace important to you?** My goal is to help you appreciate the little phrase, saved by grace. What you are really going to hear is a dose of old fashion Christian theology. So if you are ready to begin say, **"Amen!"**

What is grace?

This is question number one. *What is grace?* According to Webster's dictionary there are nine different definitions for the word grace. It can be used as a name or it can be a lifestyle category, living with grace. The definition of Christian grace is getting something of value for doing nothing. When was the last time you experienced grace? When was the last time you got something for doing absolutely nothing?

Years ago, Kathryn and I were flying back from Florida. We were making a connection in Chicago. The girls were little and our flight was cancelled. We were forced to wait several hours for the next flight to Pittsburgh. We sat in the corner of the terminal trying to get comfortable in those plastic chairs. I must have looked extra frustrated. A man walked up and introduced himself. He made us an offer we could refuse. He was member of one of those frequent flier clubs. He was trying to back to Pittsburgh too. He wanted to know if we wanted to wait in the airlines frequent flier club. I said, "Yes!" When we walked through those magic doors the world changed. There was a television set for the girls and comfortable furniture. He got us all a beverage. (He got me an adult beverage!) I offered him money but he wouldn't take it. All I could say was, "Thanks!" I got something for doing absolutely nothing. The man had grace on me. When was the last time you experienced grace? What is grace? Grace is getting something of value for doing absolutely nothing. If you can remember that say, **"Amen!"**

What is Jesus' grace?

This is question number two. *What is Jesus' grace?* Jesus offers us spiritual grace. If you haven't heard, Jesus lived the perfect life. He never committed a single sin, which made him the perfect sacrifice for our sins. It was an incredible moment in history. On Christmas we celebrate the incarnation of God. In other words, God left the perfection of heaven to become one of us. Thirty-three years later that tiny new born baby is a grown man. He is found guilty of nothing but he is executed like a common criminal. His death liberated us from our past sins; His resurrection gave us the hope of eternal life in heaven. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

Why is Jesus' grace important to you?

During the building of the Golden Gate Bridge over San Francisco Bay, construction fell badly behind schedule because several workers had accidentally fallen from the scaffolding to their deaths. Engineers and administrators could find no solution to the costly delays. Finally, someone suggested a gigantic net be hung under the bridge to catch any who fell. Finally in spite of the enormous cost, the engineers opted for the net. After it was installed, progress was hardly interrupted. A worker or two fell into the net but were saved. Ultimately, all the time lost to fear was regained by replacing fear with faith in the net.

This is question number three. *Why is Jesus' grace important to you?* This is the answer. Jesus didn't just die for his generation. Jesus died for every generation. Jesus died for you and for me. The key is accepting Jesus in your life. Once you accept Jesus two things happens. First, you receive the forgiveness for your sins. In other words, you can live guilt free. Second, you receive the great gift of salvation. Death does not have to have a hold on you. You are going to live for eternity. It is too good to be true but it is true. It is called the abundant life. You can live guilt free without any fear of death. You will be just like those Golden Gate Bridge construction worker! You can get the most out of everyday because you don't have to live in fear. You are getting something of great value for doing absolutely nothing! It is called grace. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**" The only question remains. Have you accepted Jesus as your Lord and Savior? Have you been born again?

The great evangelist Billy Graham was once stopped in a small southern town for speeding. Graham admitted his guilt, but was told by the officer that he would have to appear in court. The judge asked, "Guilty, or not guilty?" When Graham pleaded guilty, the judge replied, "That'll be ten dollars -- a dollar for every mile you went over the limit." Suddenly the judge recognized Graham. "You have violated the law," he said. "The fine must be paid--but I am going to pay it for you." He took a ten dollar bill from his own wallet, attached it to the ticket, and then took Graham out and bought him a steak dinner! That is a story of grace!

I have some good news and some bad news for you this morning. The bad news is I do not have a steak dinner to offer you. The good news is I have a meal that will satisfy you for an eternity. Come to this table of grace and never hunger again. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"