

Questions Jesus Asked (3)

By

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Scripture: Luke 6: 6-11

This past spring I was speaking at a conference sponsored by another denomination. They had read the grace books and had invited me to come to their conference and speak on the topic of universalism. **I always agree to do things like that because it's a speech I've already written.** It's like picking low fruit. But it's also fun because I get to meet new people and make new friends. **So I went to Dallas and talked about how our religious differences, while interesting, have the potential to cause much hostility and division if we're not careful.** I've given that speech probably fifty times in the past ten years. It's a good speech. There's a funny joke about hell, and a story about how I was fired from my first church. **I poke fun at politicians.** People always laugh at politician jokes, even politicians. They always think you're talking about some other politician, not them. I wrap up the speech by saying we have to stop being so stuck in our own religion that we can't have fellowship and community with people in other religions. **By the end of the speech, people feel good about the human race and wanted to shake hands with a Hindu.** It's a good speech.

So I finished speaking and the conference leader stood up and thanked me, said he was moved by my words, and wanted them to celebrate by having communion. **Out came the bread and wine.**

And there I sat, a Quaker who believes communion isn't about bread and wine, but about communing in silence with God, but who'd just advised them not to get so stuck in their own religions they couldn't have fellowship and community with other folks. Well, what was I to do? **I had about five seconds to decide, because a man was heading right toward me with a loaf of bread in one hand and a jug of wine in the other.** So he got up to me and people were watching. I know technically that all 600 people in attendance weren't watching, but it felt like that. **I was going to say "No, thanks. I gave up communion for Lent."** But I could tell by their expressions how holy a moment it was for them and that I probably shouldn't joke about it, so I took the bread and wine and thanked him and I ate and drank.

On the way home, I got to thinking about how we all belong to organizations or groups which are defined by specific beliefs or practices, and those shared beliefs can unite us and help define who we are. **Every group has these.** Sometimes those shared values are sick, like the National Socialists in Germany who believed in the supremacy of the Aryan race. And sometimes those values are uplifting and helpful to humanity, like the members of Habitat for Humanity who build homes for poor people. **But every group has a central belief around which they gather that defines who they are, unites them in a common purpose for good or ill, and gives them a place to belong.**

And if you forsake those beliefs, if those values no longer are central to your group, then the group can't endure, at least in the same form. Now to be sure, some groups shouldn't endure. Some groups need to change, or even die. But their commonly held beliefs give them an identity and a focus and in that sense serve an important role.

Now let's look at the Pharisees. I want to begin by saying that when the Gospels were written, there was great tension between the Christian community and the Jewish community from which it had emerged. **So while the Pharisees often come off as the enemy of change, they were actually comparatively progressive, were open to understanding Judaism in deeper, richer ways, and spent a lot of time with Jesus not because they wanted to silence him but because they shared his spiritual sensibilities.** But this gospel was written in a time of fracture, in a period of intense animosity, and the Pharisees were painted with a broad brush, often inaccurately.

Like any other group, they had a core belief which defined who they were and gave their lives meaning and focus, and that was Sabbath-keeping. **In an increasingly secular Greco-Roman world, the Jewish community was held together by their shared belief in the sanctity of the Sabbath.** Just as our Quaker identity is held together by our beliefs about the sacraments and peace and the immediacy of God.

When Jesus healed on the Sabbath, the Pharisees worried their Sabbath tradition might begin to unravel and they'd lose their identity. So they challenged him. And Jesus understood their concern and was maybe even sympathetic to it. We can tell that by his gentle response. He didn't cut into them. He didn't belittle them. **Like a good rabbi, he used it as an opportunity to expand their understanding of what it meant to be Jewish, what it meant to be a people called apart by God.** He did that with one carefully asked question—"Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or destroy it."

Now Luke says the Pharisees were filled with fury, but maybe Luke was letting his bias against the Jews bleed through into the text. **Probably didn't realize his words were going to be preserved for posterity.** We've all spoken in haste, said things we've regretted, not knowing the microphone was on and the tape was rolling. That might be the case here with Luke.

But something else was going on when Luke was writing. **The Temple had been destroyed and the Jewish people were having to move away from a Temple-centered religion, the heart of which was Sabbath-keeping.** So they were wrestling with what it meant to follow the first commandant—to honor the Sabbath and keep it holy—in a changed world, what it meant to keep Sabbath with the Temple gone.

So Luke writes this story and attempts to stretch the definition of Sabbath-keeping—that Sabbath is kept and God is honored whenever and wherever good is done and life is valued.

And we all have those moments when we realize our circumstances have changed and we have to be a bit more flexible in our thinking. Like when that bread and wine were coming right at me, and I had to decide in a matter of a few seconds what it meant to be Quaker. **Did being Quaker mean not eating bread and wine in a religious context?** Or did being Quaker mean

honoring the Spirit of God in other people? If I get my pastoral recording rescinded, you'll know I made the wrong choice.

It is a good thing to have some core beliefs around which our lives are built. We get to a hard place, a confusing junction, and we can say, "Well, here's what's important to me," and choose a path consistent with our beliefs. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred that works. **But there'll come a day when we have to choose between two competing claims, and on that day, Jesus teaches us that taking care of the hurting person in front of us is takes precedence over the rule book.** Because, in the end, what really defines us isn't so much what we believe, but whether and how we love.