

## From Giving Answers to Asking Questions Sunday, 8/30/20

Raise your hand or comment on Facebook if you know what a Johari Window is. It's a simple idea developed way back in 1955 for describing what we know about ourselves and others.<sup>1</sup> Imagine a square that's been marked into four quadrants, just like a foursquare court. Each of the squares represent something about the awareness you and others have about you, and the relative size of the squares varies from person to person and over any one person's lifetime. The first quadrant is called the open area. It's what you know about yourself and others know about you as well. The open area would include things like our names, our addresses, our eye color, and other kinds of public information. The next quadrant is the blind area, where others know things about you that you don't. For example, you might not be aware that you have the annoying habit of completing other people's sentences, like I sometimes do, but most people who know you could easily identify that shortcoming. The third quadrant, the hidden area, flips that around. These are the things that you know about yourself but keep hidden from other people. Things we're secretly afraid of are an example of hidden information. The fourth quadrant is the unknown area, and as you could guess, it's the things we don't know about ourselves and other people don't know either. This can include things like forgotten or suppressed childhood experiences, or potentials we have that have yet to be realized because we haven't had the right experiences yet to unleash them.

If you were to draw a Johari window for yourself, I wonder what might be written in each of those boxes. Which boxes would be the largest, and which would be the smallest? My guess is that most of us underestimate the amount that others know about us and overestimate the amount we think we know about ourselves. Part of maturing as a human being is learning to ask questions, listen to others, and share our own stories, all of which allow us to explore and expand our self-awareness. While some of us, either by temperament or by training, have learned to share our stories, relatively few of us are adept at asking questions and listening. That's a problem for us individually, socially, and as a church.

In our first Bible reading this morning, Jesus implores us to ask, seek, and knock in order that we might gain the Kingdom of God. In the Early Word, I said that asking, seeking,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.selfawareness.org.uk/news/understanding-the-johari-window-model>

and knocking is usually associated with prayer, but it can also involve reading the Bible or listening to other people. These are not, by the way, intended to be singular actions. We don't find a living faith in Christ by asking once, seeking once, or knocking once. We are to go on asking, go on seeking, and go on finding, because the Kingdom of God is gained through a living, growing faith.

Let's take the concept of the Johari window and extend it to seeking God's Kingdom. Notice that Jesus does not encourage us to find the Kingdom of Heaven by telling our stories; by, in effect, residing in those quadrants of what we already know about God's Kingdom. Instead, Jesus tells us to ask, seek and knock. Those are all postures of humility, not statements of fact or opinion, but inquiries into the unknown. I wonder, if you were to make a spiritual Johari window that describes what you and others know about the Kingdom of God, what might you write in each box? More importantly, what are you doing to fill in the boxes? Does your prayer, Bible study, and spiritual conversation simply elaborate on what you already know about God? Or are you continually asking, seeking, and knocking, hopefully and passionately seeking to know God better?

In this challenging time when the church, more than ever, is being called on to reinvent itself, it's not what we already know, or think we know, about God that's going to help us reach new people in creative ways. We need to return to our roots, to recover from the delusion that we have more knowledge and control than we really do. We have to reclaim the attitude and practices of asking, seeking, and knocking.

You're probably well aware that Jesus had a propensity for asking questions and was often reluctant to give answers. Unlike us, Jesus already knew the answers, but he asked the questions both to engage the people he was with and to model the behavior of question asking for us. In a way, he was showing us how to ask, seek, and knock.

Martin Copenhaver, in his book, *Jesus is the Question*, asserts that Jesus asked 307 questions in the Gospels, while he was asked 187 and only answered three! You can check his math for me if you like, but his point is that Jesus modelled a spirit and discipline of question asking for us. He used questions in a large variety of ways, and sometimes only rhetorically, but he truly was a master of the question. Take, for example, three consecutive passages recorded in the eighth chapter of Gospel of Mark. I'm starting with verse 17 in the

New Living Translation. {Read Mark 8:17-21}

Couldn't all of that speech have been replaced with a single, theologically correct statement from Jesus, the Son of God? Yes, but notice that Jesus wasn't in the game to be right, he was there to make disciples, and he was making disciples through a process of mutual discovery of what was, for the disciples at any rate, in the unknown quadrant- the Kingdom of God. He asked them questions to get them wondering and reflecting. Even his rhetorical questions were an invitation for them to ask themselves that very same question. Is my heart hard? Do I have eyes but fail to see?

Let's skip forward to the next passage in Mark 8, beginning with verse 27 {Read Mark 8:27-29}

Did you notice the power that his questions had on the disciples? Jesus could have simply stated, "I am the Messiah, the Anointed One of God." Instead, he asked the disciples to observe and reflect on what others knew about him, and then engage with their own statement of faith. When we teach confirmation or lead Bible studies in our church, I like to think we invite our students to do the same, but I'm often aware of how easy it is to fall back on the seductive appeal of quickly and efficiently announcing the truths as we know them, only to be briefly discussed and quickly forgotten.

Listen to Jesus again in this concluding passage from Mark 8 beginning with verse 34 {Read Mark 8:34-37}

I love the questions Jesus asked at the end of that passage. They certainly imply an answer. There's no mistaking that Jesus believes there is no benefit to gaining the whole world if we lose our souls. He could have just said so. Instead, by asking the question, he leaves us with an invitation echoing in our minds and hearts, an invitation to ponder by asking, seeking, and knocking: "And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? Is anything worth more than your soul?"<sup>2</sup> Well? Is anything worth more?

Let's go back to the Johari Window concept that I started with. What if everything about our faith that's really worth knowing- God, the Bible, the Church, the Kingdom of

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<sup>2</sup> Mark 8:36-37. New Living Translation (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition).

God- depends less on filling in the box of public things that everyone knows, and more on a mutual exploration of what we don't know, learning to trust in God and in each other as we navigate what's often an anxious, uncertain space? Somewhat paradoxically, perhaps that's where we need to move as a church if we hope to succeed in our mission of making disciples in these strange and uncertain times. Instead of trying to double down on our plans, traditions, and preferences, I wonder if what we need most for these anxious days is not more certainty, but a greater comfort with uncertainty.

Here's the deal. Most of us know quite a bit less about ourselves and the rest of the world than we'd like to believe. Most of us have less control over the circumstances of our world and our lives than we realize or like to admit. And when it comes to this year of crisis, with the convergence of the pandemic, the great racial justice awakening, and the 2020 elections, the temptation has never been greater to search for human authority figures and movements with their facts, opinions, and unreasonable certainties to anchor ourselves in the storms of change. That may be the temptation, but it's not the way we're going to survive and thrive as Christians and as the Church.

Instead, Jesus invites us to lean into the unknown and uncertain, trusting in the Spirit and Grace of God, trusting in each other, to sit for a while as we admit that there are a great many things of which we simply don't know. Together, Jesus invites us to ask, seek, and knock, knowing the action is in the asking, and not the final answer. The value is in the seeking, and not the delusion that we've discovered all there is to discover about the kingdom of God. And it turns out that it's not even our place to open the door of the church to seekers, but rather to join them in knocking on God's door. We are all seekers, after all; seekers of the Kingdom of God. It's not easy or comfortable to be continually seeking, but it's the only way for us to be true to our Christian calling and the only way for the church to weather the storms of change that are only getting more urgent.



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