

## “M.Y.O.B.”

John 21:15-22; Luke 9:51-62

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June 30, 2019

Now I don't know about you, but on the whole, I tend to regard inquisitiveness as a positive trait. Right? Isn't it a good thing to be curious to ask questions and search for answers, to investigate, to explore, to probe, and examine? In my former church we called our New Member classes *Inquirers' Class*. This was a time for people to inquire about the church: its beliefs, its practices, its history, its organization. We want people to inquire and we want to answer the questions that they are asking, concerns that have sparked their interests.

And yet, each of us would recognize that at some point not rigidly fixed, inquisitiveness can become inappropriate or invasive. Frequently, you hear people say that there are no bad questions, only bad answers, but the truth of the matter is that some questions display an inappropriate inquisitiveness, even a malevolent curiosity. Are you planning to get a divorce? What do you pledge to the church? How much do you weigh? What did you pay for your home? In our gospel lesson for today, we see an example of what might be called inappropriate inquisitiveness.

The risen Christ has miraculously appeared to Simon Peter and six other disciples as they fished the Sea of Galilee, called Lake Tiberius in John's Gospel. From the shore Jesus calls to the men out in the boat and tells them to cast their nets on the opposite side and they will catch some fish. Obeying the instructions from this stranger whom they do not yet recognize they soon catch a haul of fish so great that they cannot even lift the nets to bring them into the boat.

John is the first disciple to recognize that this stranger on shore is their Lord. When Simon Peter sees that it is the Lord, bold, impulsive, impetuous, tender-hearted Peter, the most human of all the disciples, he throws all of his clothes on (apparently, they stripped while they were fishing) and he jumps into the lake, hurriedly swimming to shore while the other disciples slowly make their way back, pulling with them the tremendous catch of fish.

Soon, in solemn awe, the disciples are sitting quietly with their Master, almost afraid to speak, while over a charcoal fire, they prepare some of the freshly caught fish for breakfast. It is a time of intimate fellowship and deep communion and Jesus uses the occasion in a particularly moving way with Simon Peter. This is the last recorded dialogue between Peter and his Lord, which makes it all the more poignant. Three times Jesus asks Simon Peter if he loves him and three times the fisherman responds, "*Lord, you know I love you.*" Why he asked three times we can only speculate, but it could well be that inasmuch as Peter had recently denied the Lord three times that Jesus is here giving him the opportunity to reaffirm his loyalty and his love, at least as many times as he had denied him. This affirmation counter-balances the threefold denial, as it were. At any rate, Jesus commends to Simon Peter the pastoral care of the church with the charge, "*Feed my sheep!*"

Next the Lord warns Peter in verses 18 and 19 that his following and his faithful pastoral ministry will eventually lead to his own martyrdom. "When you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and

someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.” The writer, John, or at a minimum John’s disciples, adds parenthetically his own interpretation of this statement, that it is a reference to the eventual death of Peter, who, according to church tradition, was carried away and crucified. The early church historian Eusebius relates that Peter’s final request was granted when he asked if he could be crucified head down since he was not worthy to die in the same manner as his Lord.

Now, what do you suppose Peter was feeling as he heard the Lord’s solemn prophecy of his approaching martyrdom? Was he encouraged to learn that the Lord had every confidence in him now and knew that he would show courage and faith in years to come? Was he grateful, frightened, or maybe even resentful that he was the only disciple sitting about the fire that morning who was singled out for such a mission of martyrdom? Could he have been angry at the thought of his destiny?

Well, we just don’t know do we? But notice if you will what transpires next when Peter asks what Jesus clearly views to be an inappropriate inquiry. Seeing his fellow disciple, John, sitting beside the fire Peter asked, “Lord, what about him?” What follows is clearly a rebuke from the risen Lord, a divine brush-off, if you will, for an inappropriate question. Mincing no words, Jesus says, “What is that to you? Follow me!” In other words, the Lord’s calling and purpose for John had little, if anything to do with Peter and his call. Whether John would live to a ripe old age and die in his sleep or pour out his life’s blood as one of the church’s martyrs was none of Peter’s business, and therefore his inquiry was clearly out of line.

Hearing our Lord’s reprimand in this passage reminds us of a darker and more ominous side to this business of inquisitiveness. Some inquisitiveness is inappropriate. Some inquisitiveness is the product of idle curiosity or worse, perverse meddling in the affairs of others. Occasionally inquisitiveness is a cover for one’s own flaws, a way of distracting attention from our own responsibilities, while at the same time calling attention to the inadequacies or flaws of others. But Jesus does not tolerate this in his disciples. So when Peter, realizing that death might be required of him, inquires, “But Lord, what about old John over there. You know, the one they call the ‘beloved disciple?’” And Jesus says: “What is that to you? You just follow me!” Surely, Jesus knew that Peter would have his hands more than full just trying to remain faithful and obedient in his own life. There would be little time left to worry about what was expected of John or of anybody else.

One publication has made a fortune while contributing to the decline of American culture, all in the name of inquisitiveness. It is called, “*The National Inquirer*.” Its byline is “people with inquiring minds really want to know.” Well, the truth of the matter is that sometimes people want to know too much. They want to know things that they should not know. They want to know things that can harm or hurt others. This little tabloid is a great example of the darker side of inquisitiveness. It is a reminder that some of our questions are at best worthless and at worst malicious and malevolent, for some people ask questions in an effort to expose the sins or sorrows or foibles of others for their own petty purposes.

But it’s not just the grocery store tabloids but even more reputable newspapers, magazines, and media organizations have done their share of overstepping the bounds of propriety and responsible inquiry. One prominent newspaper used to have as its slogan, “All the news that’s fit to print.” Nowadays it seems like any and all news is fit to print and the only determination for fitness in accuracy in reporting. I am no political or ministerial supporter of Pat Robertson but several years ago the media delighted about the date of his marriage and the date of the birth of his first child. Such an inquiry seemed irresponsible at best and malicious at worst. It was designed simply to embarrass a minister who was considering running for the

presidency and really had nothing to do with his politics or even his current moral fiber. So far as I know, Pat Robertson has never claimed to be flawless or sinless and an early indiscretion was frankly none of the press' or public's business. Someone should have asked the media, "What is that to you?"

Ordinary folks too use this ploy of inappropriate inquisitiveness all the time in an effort either to buoy their own self-image or to shirk their own duties. If you watch closely or listen carefully you will find much evidence of it. On such occasions Jesus would say to us as he said to Peter, "What is that to you? Follow me!"

As parents we see it in our children just as our parents saw it in us. Quite often when my mother would ask me to do something around the house, like mowing the lawn or washing the dishes, I would suddenly become very inquisitive: "But what about David? What are you going to ask him to do? He's just sitting back there fooling with his butterfly collection." My mother might well have said, "What is that to you? Do as I say!" Instead, what my mother ordinarily said was, "M.Y.O.B. — mind your own business! You just worry about doing what you're supposed to do and leave your brother to me." Different words, perhaps, but they translate the same way.

If ordinary folks struggle with inappropriate inquisitiveness, so too do religious folk like you and me and other disciples past and present. Arthur John Gossip has written The Interpreters Bible, (Volume VIII, page 810) "There is an inquisitiveness that hangs idly about the environs of religion that Jesus will not satisfy; a meddling with many things that are of no concern of ours."

And have you noticed that some inquiries can lead to inquisitions? In Luke 9, one of the lectionary passages for today, we read about a Samaritan village that refused to receive Jesus. James and John are incensed and respond by inquiring, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from Heaven to destroy them?" All we are told is that Jesus rebuked the disciples, but he may have well have said, "What is that to you? Follow me!" Earlier in that chapter the disciples are perturbed because a man, not of their company, is apparently driving out demons in Jesus' name. Frankly, it is none of their business and Jesus tells them so, reminding them that "Whoever is not against you is for you." Jesus' disciples must have been shocked even more on another occasion when he said something that struck them as strange indeed. Speaking of himself as "the good shepherd," Jesus says: "I have other sheep that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So, there will be one flock and one shepherd." (John 10:16)

If each of us and all of us would do a better job of minding our own business, and doing what the Lord is calling us to do as individuals, we would have precious little time on our hands and little energy left to meddle in the affairs of others or to busy ourselves in doing things that God has never called us to do, like judging between who is saved and who is not. Why is it that we Christians find such a fascination in this issue? How often we disciples allow ourselves to get drawn into this fruitless debate about the number or names of the redeemed, for it has not been given to us to know. The Lord has not assigned judgement to any of us, so far as I know, and to be quite blunt about it, it is none of our business. We have been called to witness and to work. We have been commissioned to share the gospel with any and all as tactfully and as lovingly as possible. But no one of us has been set up to be the judge and jury and much of the inquiry along this line is both inappropriate and un-Christlike.

Yet, we continue to speculate, do we not — to ask the unanswerable questions borne of idle curiosity or meddlesome inquiry, as if we had nothing better to do, as if by mutual consent we could pass judgement

on others. “Tell me, preacher, will those people over there be saved? What about the Muslims? Do you think there will be Hindus in Heaven? Or what about the countless millions who died never having heard of Christ?”

The best response I have ever seen to this inquiry about salvation outside the Christian church was made by the great 18<sup>th</sup> century English poet and cleric, John Donne:

“To me, to whom God have revealed his Son, in a gospel, by a church, there can be no way of salvation but by applying that Son of God, by that gospel, by that church. Nor is there any foundation for any, nor any other name by which any man can be saved, but the name of Jesus. But how this foundation is presented, and how this name of Jesus is notified, to them amongst whom there is no gospel preached, no church established, I am not curious in inquiring. I know God can be as merciful as those tender fathers present him to be; and I would be as charitable as they are. And therefore, humbly embracing that manifestation of his Son which he hath afforded me, I leave God to his unsearchable ways of working upon others, without further inquisition.”

“Without further inquisition.” Leave it to John Donne to say just the right thing.

But some people inquire not only about non-Christians, but also about fellow-Christians who may be different. And while we are at it, preacher, what do you think the Lord will do with all those Catholics, or Mormons, or Unitarians, TV Evangelists, or even those Presbyterians in that other church down the street? And what about old Jim who drinks too much, or Phil who left his wife, or Jean who had that scandalous affair, or Lynn who took her life? What about this one or that one, whose faith, whose ethics, whose lifestyle are clearly at odds with my own? From time to time we may all very well like to inquire about these matters, but we have much better things to do. More often than not, we would be better advised to mind our own business. And when questions of this nature come to our minds, we might just recall the words of our Lord — “What is that to you? Follow me!”

In just a moment we will sing a beautiful and relevant hymn, “*There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy.*” There are at least twelve stanzas to that hymn, so all could not be included. But one of my favorites which is not present in our hymnal goes like this:

“But we make His love too narrow  
By false limits of our own;  
And we magnify His strictness  
With a zeal He will not own.”

That is something all disciples should keep in mind.

Prayer: Eternal God, give us the grace to follow faithfully and obediently wherever you lead us, and forbid that we should become distracted by the performance of others or the habits or beliefs of those who are not a part of our number. Help them and us to be faithful to your will as we are given to see it, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.