

- About 20 years ago, I received a welcome phone call. It was from the editor of the New Church's Teaching Series. He wanted to know if I would like to write the book on Christian ethics (or what is also called '*moral theology*'). I remember my excitement, because *this was exactly what I felt called to do - to write an introduction to Christian ethics, for members of the Episcopal Church*. For several decades, our national Church has not been successful in addressing several areas in ethics. One problem has always stood out. In trying to address ethical matters, too much focus is directed toward *where people end up* regarding issues. But *too little attention is given to where we begin*. So, *if I would write a Church's Teaching Series book on ethics and moral theology, I wanted to focus on exploring questions* rather than on *providing 'answers.'* For when we settle too quickly on what we think are the '*right*' answers, we tend to *stop* asking the *right* questions. *And the most basic question in ethics is about this: how to think about how to live*. For this is what ethics really is - it is *reflection on how we think about how we live*.
- But *where to begin* this book about *beginnings* rather than *endings*? Right where Paul begins - and with *where everything begins, for Christians ~ with our faith journeys*. I decided that I would draw *on my experience*, and that of others, as I focused on *beginnings*. Merging aspects of several lives into a common story, I described the beginning of *one particular faith-journey*, based partly on my own, and on someone I met in church. Here is how I told her story:¹
- On an autumn Sunday in Memphis, a young woman enters a large Episcopal church in an older neighborhood. The greeters do not recognize her and ask if she is a visitor. Later at the coffee hour, as they introduce her to others, they learn more about her. After years of inactivity, she is looking for a church home, and a place to come to maturity in the faith that is beginning to take root in her life. She identifies *one question* she says *sums up all* her questions: '*What should I now believe?*' The young woman is

encouraged to join an adult group that is exploring this very question on a year-round basis, through adult Christian formation. When she attends their next meeting, she discerns that other newcomers share her question. In turn, the explorations of this group are having an impact on the entire congregation, prompting other adult members in the parish to ask a related question, with an ancient answer: *'What do we believe?'*

- About six months go by, during which she attends worship, reflects on her participation in the parish community, and prays and studies with the formation group. The young woman now feels ready to embrace publicly the faith her parents once claimed on her behalf, at her infant Baptism. She goes with a group of fellow parishioners down to the beautiful cathedral for the Ascension Day service. Gathered there are other candidates for baptism, and the reaffirmation of baptismal vows, as well as their sponsors.
- In the preceding months, she and others in her group have talked about the responsibilities that their public affirmation of faith might entail. Yet *their main focus so far has been upon the basic matters of Christian belief and worship.*
- *Now, after reaffirming her baptismal vows, she finds that her focus is shifting to another question: 'How should I now live?'* With the other candidates from her parish who were baptized or confirmed, *she begins to explore the implications of her baptism for everyday life.* The group discovers once again that they are not alone in asking such questions. For other members of the congregation are being prompted to ask, *'How should we now live?'* (pause)
- Paul answers this question beautifully, in our Epistle this morning. He says, *"I... beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called..."* Paul is not talking about *'a calling'* in the sense we usually take it to

mean, like an occupation. And he doesn't answer in the precise, *practical* terms we prefer. Paul has in mind our vocation as people who have been given a *common calling in Baptism*. We have been called, he says, to build "up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God." We are called "to *maturity*, to the measure of *the full stature of Christ*."

- This same question, about *how we should live*, is on the minds of those who are following Jesus and his disciples. When the crowd catches up with him, on the other side of the sea, they ask Jesus, "*What must we do* to perform the works of God?" Sizing them up, Jesus notices that "[they] are looking for [him], not because [they] saw signs, but because [they] ate [their] fill of the loaves." So he rather forcefully tells them, "Do *not* work for the food that *perishes*, but for the food that *endures* to eternal life." In other words, if we ask him *how we should live*, Jesus will ask us: *what do you believe?* To ask, *what do you believe*, is to ask, *for what do you live*. Because we are called to live *for him*, who lived and would die *for us*. *How we should live*, always follows *for what we should live*. This is because *practice* is always rooted in *principle*. [pause]
- *What must we do? What sign will you give? What work are you doing?* These are the questions asked by the crowd that follows Jesus. Their questions boil down to *wanting him to conform to their expectations*, to fit the parameters they're used to. But it's *not* about *our* judgment or wisdom or discernment. *It's about Jesus' Kingdom mission*. Jesus *calls them*, as he *calls us*, to *step out from old attitudes!* He invites us *to step out into new terrain, a spiritual terrain, where the gracious bread of life replaces the Law-related manna in the wilderness*.
- We have this 'safe' notion that God always comes to meet us *where we are*, and this is *basically true*. But then, *we slide into the comfortable but false*

assumption that, because God meets us *where we are*, God is then willing for us to stay *where we are*. In our Gospel story, Jesus makes himself available to the people who find him. They call him to respond to their questions. *To their surprise*, and perhaps to their *frustration*, during their conversation Jesus calls them *from* where they are. *He calls them out from relying on natural assumptions, so they can meet the challenge of spiritual questions.*

- Parallel with our growth to *physical maturity*, as we transition from childhood through adolescence to adulthood, a similar growth process can occur in our *spiritual nature*. This is how we approach the desirable but elusive maturity Paul commends to us. *Maturity involves growth and change, from one state of being to another. The maturity to which we are called necessarily involves change and growth from where we *have been*, toward where we are *being led*, and *transformed*.* Believing in God –believing in Jesus’ Father– means *trusting* change and *trusting* growth. I know from my own experience -*as you surely do from yours*- that this can be a *costly* journey. Yet, *when we embrace questions, and explore them faithfully*, life becomes a most *rewarding* journey, as well.

John 6:24-35

The next day, when the people who remained after the feeding of the five thousand saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus.

When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.” Then they said to him, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” So they said to him, “What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” Then Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but [it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.](#)” They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.”

Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

Notes:

¹ The text that follows comes from, or is based on, the first chapter of my book, *Ethics After Easter*.