

“Living without answers”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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*Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31 and John 16:12-15*

by Patrick Heery

Each day in New York City, 55,000 people dial 311 to get answers. In fact, last year, that number rose to 200,000 calls per day, as people sought help during the pandemic, while also ratting out their neighbors for breaking the rules. Nothing like a crisis to bring us together!

Set up as a public service in 2003, the hotline offers information on more than 3,600 topics related to the city. While the most common calls have to do with noise complaints, landlords, and parking, the 311 operators field some odd questions. One person reportedly wanted to know whether they could claim their dog as a dependent on their taxes. Another person asked, “Is it illegal to leave an adult sitting in a parked car?” and “What are remedies for a naked neighbor?” A woman once called to report a crocodile in her garage; easy—call Animal Control. Not so easy was a phone call asking how to interpret a line from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*.

Last year, 311 received 23.5 million calls, driven by a need for essential services and life-saving information. More people have called the number than the number of people who have attended all New York City pro sports teams (and the US Open) combined. More than 350 employees work 24 hours, 7 days a week, 365 days a year to answer people’s most burning questions.

And not all the questions are mundane or silly. One caller was a mother who was at her wits end about what to do with her troubled daughter; 311 connected her with counseling services. Another call led to breaking up a child prostitution ring operating out of Brooklyn. Another time, a woman called because she was worried that her husband was going to leave her. The operator kept her on the phone for 45 minutes, just listening.

Hundreds of cities have similar services. We have the questions, and they have the answers. In New York City alone, more than 80 percent of those calls are answered and resolved within 30 seconds. What a wonderful world it would be if getting answers to life’s questions were so simple. And oh, do we have questions! Can someone please explain to me how so many of my socks disappear? And don’t even get me started on the TV show *Lost*. Seriously, what is up with Walt?

There are questions that keep us up at night. Does my life matter? How do I be a good parent, a good friend? Should I take this new job? Why do some parents have to bury their children? What will it take to achieve world peace? Questions about God and death, love and hate, the Bible and salvation, creation and science, ethics and theology.

I can’t tell you how many hospital rooms I’ve been in, holding the hand of someone whose body has just... turned against them... when they look up at me and say, “Why me?”

Sometimes, it makes me so angry not to have the answers.

Psychologists say that as children, when we don't understand something, we spontaneously invent explanations—so painful is the experience of not knowing. And not a whole lot changes as we grow into adults. We are so uncomfortable with the unknown that we are driven to seek answers. This desire has fueled invention, philosophy, and scientific discovery. But it's also led to some of history's greatest disasters, including wars and lasting prejudices. In our rush, we fail to consider all options. We make assumptions, which quickly crystallize in our minds and are incredibly difficult (despite facts, despite new experiences) to alter.

And this is never truer than in times of crisis. Psychologists say that the big factor in knowing your tolerance for uncertainty is not personality; it's circumstance. If you feel like everything is crashing down around you, even little questions are going to frustrate you. It has been documented, for instance, that the desire for certainty shoots off the charts after a terrorist attack.

When our world is unsettled, we want to be settled. We want answers.

The disciples who are with Jesus in our Gospel of John passage are no different. Already they're in crisis mode; a foreign power, Rome, occupies and terrorizes their holy city and people. They're looking to Jesus for answers. But, in his farewell sermon that stretches across five chapters, Jesus tells them that he's going to leave them, that the world's going to hate them, that they're going to suffer. They're confused, and when they ask for explanation, he responds in cryptic parables. And when they think they've figured it out, Jesus insists that they haven't.

Then, to make matters worse, Jesus says that there are more truths, more answers, he has yet to share with them, but he's not going to, because they can't bear them right now. What? You mean to say that Jesus is holding out on us? Why would Jesus, in this time of crisis, leave his disciples without the one thing they want: answers?

Because, giving them answers they are not prepared for would be like splitting the atom for a people who just want a bomb.

People who think they have all the answers are dangerous people. They're the kind of people who will soon crucify Jesus. They're the kind of people who shove six million Jews into ovens. They're the kind of people who insist that you're not saved unless you subscribe to their exact beliefs. They're the kind of people who dominate our current political discourse.

Giving them answers wouldn't have saved the church and the world from schism; it would have caused it. Because each of them would have heard something different. It's as if Jesus wants them unsettled, wants them curious, wrestling with questions.

Because people who live without all the answers... now, they are the kind of people who listen. They're the kind of people who need and have to love each other precisely because they don't have it all figured out.

Many times in this farewell sermon when Jesus tells the disciples something, he explains why he's telling them. He says that it's in order that they might have joy, that they might love one another as he has loved them, and that they won't stumble. I can only assume that whatever answers he is holding back right now would make it hard for them to live joyfully and lovingly.

And so instead of giving answers, Jesus says, be a people who listen. To each other and to God.

What we have failed to perceive is that this refusal to answer is a gift. All those debates in the Book of Acts, all the midnight prayers when we've pleaded with God, all the hospital room questions, all the arguments right here in this church, weren't mistakes; they were opportunities. And sometimes we missed the opportunity; we rushed to closure, insisting we had the answer, soliloquizing when we should have been listening. But other times, we wrestled in the storm of ambiguity, like Jacob with God, our minds and souls entangled. And because we wrestled and did not have all the answers, we learned what really matters—not the fine points of doctrine, not even the answers to our most painful questions, but each other, this community bound in love and in God.

In those hospital rooms, I may not have had a great and wise theological answer for the dying; I may not have been able to tie up their pain in a neat bow. But I did squeeze tighter the hand of the dying, and I felt the warmth of their tears, and I knew them in a way that I don't know most people. And maybe for the first time, I understood what it meant for Jesus to walk among us, to take on flesh and suffer with us. I understood it in a way no speech could have explained. I understood because I was experiencing the incarnation, right there in that hospital bed.

God wasn't in that room because we had the answer. God was in the room because we had the question.

Once the poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote to a young poet, saying, "I would like to beg you, dear Sir, as well as I can, to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer."

This is something that every parent knows, isn't it? There are some truths that you just can't teach; they're just going to have discover them by living.

The Rev. Dr. George Mason says it in another way: "To bear a truth means to receive it as a fact of life that will change you. It is more than information to be processed; it is wisdom to be lived."

Jesus doesn't say that the disciples will forever be without answers. He just says that they're going to have to discover them by another means. By the means of life and community and ambiguity and curiosity and love and listening and the presence of the Holy Spirit.

How do you live in the absence of answers? Well, the answer to that one is pretty easy, Jesus says. You live. Together.

And if that doesn't satisfy you, good. Maybe then you'll keep wrestling, keep pushing and exploring, keep using that mind of yours, keep working together. You might just live your way into the answer. **Amen.**