

Asking the Right Questions (Part 5)  
What are Signs of a Healthy Faith?\*

Matthew 22:37-40

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I will begin my message with two quick stories. I would like to see if you can discover what they have in common.

The first story is about a woman who is a motivational speaker. She often gave keynote addresses at conventions and convocation. Recently she returned home after speaking five nights in a row. Her husband said, “Honey, I know you must be really tired, so why don’t you ‘sleep in’ this morning?”

So, she slept a couple of more hours. Then she decided to pamper herself by taking a shower, putting her hair in big pink curlers to give it body, and she gave herself a facial. Before going downstairs she put on her favorite old terrycloth robe and slide her feet into a pair of open baked slippers.

When she went downstairs she noticed her husband had forgotten to take the garbage out. She knew if she didn’t take it out immediately she would miss the garbage truck. After all, the garbage man waits for no one.

She tightened her robe and grabbed a garbage bag in each hand as she shuffled out the door and down the driveway. She saw the garbage truck driving away and shouted: “Hey wait for me.” The garbage man responded: “Sure thing, jump on.”

The second story is about a minister who played golf. He liked to play golf with his friend Tom. His wife noticed he and Tom had stopped playing golf, so she asked if something had happened to their friendship. He responded: “Would you play golf with someone who kicked his ball out of the rough; hit multiple balls into the water; sometimes hit the wrong ball, and continually made mistakes on his score card?”

She thought for a moment and said: “No, I wouldn’t.”

He said: “Neither does Tom.”

Can you hear the connection between these stories? The thing they have in common is the stories were told by the people involved. The woman known for her

ability to speak at important events and the pastor told these stories about themselves. Both of them had the ability to poke fun...to laugh at themselves.

It's important to have a good sense of humor and a good sense of self. I think this is a sign of being a healthy person.

Now let's take this a little deeper. Today's question is: What are the signs of a healthy faith? Today's scripture gives us a quick and easy answer. Do we love God, Self, and Others? To assess the health of our faith we will participate in a brief "faith checkup" by asking two questions.

The first question is: How can we know if our relationship to God healthy...a living and breathing relationship?

Think about your relationship with God. Is it healthy or unhealthy? Do you spend time thinking about God every day, once a week, or once a month? How often do you attend worship, pray, and do devotions? In order to be in a relationship we need to spend time in God's presence...talking to God...getting to know God.

Some people have a relationship with God that is based on fear and guilt. They are concerned about what they have done wrong and they don't want to be punished. They turn God into the bogeyman that lives under the bed.

It reminds me of our twin nephew and niece: Nick and Lea. When they were little, Nick was afraid a monster lived under his bed. His parents developed the habit of looking under his bed with a flashlight to help him relax at bedtime. One night he was very afraid, so his twin sister decided to console him. She said: "Don't worry Nickolas the monster doesn't live under your bed...*he's in the closet.*"

If fear of punishment is the basis your faith, you've missed the point. God is a loving God who ushered in a new age through Jesus the Christ. We are a forgiven people. We are a redeemed people. We are people who rejoice in the unconditional love we have received from God. God's gift of grace is the reason we respond with acts of compassion, encouragement, and generosity. We respond to God's with our actions. This gives us a strong faith that we can carry with us throughout our lives.

There is speaker named Nell Mohny. A number of years ago she spoke at a women's conference and shared a story about her family.

Nell and her husband, Ralph, have two kids. The younger son, Rick, was in a terrible traffic accident when he was twenty years old. He was rushed to a hospital in Chattanooga where the doctors and nurses went to work on him. For five days they received encouraging news about their son. He is stabilized. He is resting comfortably. We see small signs of improvement. After the fifty day Rick's health took a turn for the worse. In just a short time he died.

Nell's husband, Ralph, was the pastor of the largest UMC in Chattanooga. They were both well known throughout the community. It seemed like everyone in the city mourned Rick's death. On the day of the Memorial Service the church was absolutely packed with people from every walk of life.

The next week their older son went back to college, so Nell and Ralph were left alone at home. On Sunday morning, Ralph was back in the pulpit. Nell dreaded this day because she their son Rick sat together every Sunday, but today she would have to have the strength to sit alone. She struggled to get ready for Church. She had to force herself to drive to church. She sat in her car, in the parking lot, and thought about turning around and going home. She had to force herself to go inside.

As she walked into the church she thought this was one of the hardest days of her life. She had to keep her head up and walk into the sanctuary without hesitating. Just before she went inside she said a prayer: "O God, please be with me. Please be with me. Give me the strength I need to do this. O God, be with me.

Nell walked into the sanctuary and a few people greeted her as she walked by. She stopped beside her usual pew...stepped to her left and slid to her usual spot...leaving enough room for her son to sit beside her. She looked at the empty spot, and it was almost unbearable; she felt all alone. She knew her son would never sit beside her again. So Nell closed her eyes and bowed her head.

Then, to her surprise, a nine year old girl slipped in beside her. She reached out and took Nell's hand. During the service she said: "I love you Mrs. Mohney. I love you, Mrs. Mohney." During the service whenever Nell's eyes would well up with tears the little girl would squeeze her hand and say: "I love you Mrs. Mohney." Nell said in those moments, through the warmth of a little girls hands and the gentleness of her voice...she felt the love of God sweep over her.

Nell's story is an example of what it means to have a healthy relationship with God. She had practiced a strong faith by walking with God throughout her life. It

helped her through this horrible experience. Her faith wasn't built on fear or guilt, blaming herself or God for her son's death. Instead, it was based in love and trust with knowledge that, even now, God was at her side.

Second, Do You Have a Healthy relationship with yourself and others?

Jesus taught us, we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. (This isn't easy to do.) It's a counter cultural idea. Christ taught us we are in a mutual relationship with others. Just imagine the importance of what Jesus said: If we don't love our neighbor...we can't truly love ourselves.

There is an old story about a man who was arrested and taken to court because he'd stolen a loaf of bread. When the judge investigated, he found out that the man had no job, and his family was hungry. He had tried unsuccessfully to get work; so, to feed his family he'd stolen a loaf of bread.

Although the judge recognized the extenuating circumstances, the first thing he said was, "I'm sorry, but the law can make no exceptions. You stole. Therefore I have to punish you. I order you to pay a fine of \$100." The man's shoulders slumped. He didn't even have \$10.

The judge then continued, saying, "But I want to pay the fine myself." He reached into his pocket, pulled out a \$100 bill, and handed it to the man.

As soon as the man took the money, the judge then said, "Now I also want to remit the fine." This allowed the man to keep the money. "Furthermore," he said, "I am going to ask the bailiff to pass the hat around to everyone in this courtroom, and I'm fining everyone in this courtroom \$10 for living in a city where a man has to steal in order to have bread to feed his family." The money was then collected and given to the defendant.

This is a story that reminds us of the importance of the Christian Community. Our strength is found in the relational nature of the church. We are called to hold on to each other. Being a Christian is about people helping people. It's about God's people helping others: body, mind, and spirit.

To truly love ourselves...we must love God and others just as much. We need to be as concerned about their wellbeing, as our own.

(\*James W. Moore: Faith is the answer, but what are the questions. Chapter 6)