

Keep Asking the Question

My favorite TV show I've been watching recently is "Young Sheldon." Any other Young Sheldon fans here?

Young Sheldon is the prequel to the show Big Bang Theory. Adult Sheldon, world renowned scientist, narrates the story of his childhood where he was a kid genius in an otherwise normal family in rural Texas in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Sheldon is so advanced academically that he starts high school when he's nine years old, and, when even high school is not challenging enough for him, he enrolls in college when he's 11.

Sheldon was a scientist, even at a very young age. And not only is he brilliant when it comes to science, but he finds the world of science profoundly comforting. Sheldon likes demonstrably provable facts.

But then he takes an introduction to philosophy course, and, for the first time, has an existential crisis. His professor challenged the class about how can they know if something is real. What if everything we think is fact is just a part of our imagination? What if we are a part of some transcendent being's dream and we don't exist at all?

Well, this rocks Sheldon's world. For the first time, he begins to question his belief that science can provide all the necessary answers to life. He stops going to class. He has trouble getting out of bed. Finally, his grandmother and his science professor have had enough, so the two of them, along with Sheldon, go to see the philosophy professor to demand that she fix what she's broken in Sheldon.

The Science professor demands, "I insist that you speak to this young man and explain to him that reality is real and it's possible to know things as fact."

Sheldon's grandmother follows up by telling the philosophy professor that Sheldon hasn't been able to get out of bed, and then this conversation happens.

The Philosophy professor asks Sheldon, "How come you didn't want to get out of bed this morning?"

Sheldon responds, "If I can't know what's real, what's the point?"

And then the professor replies with, what I think, is one of the great explanations for the reason not only for philosophy but I would also add faith. She says, "You have the right words. You're just saying them wrong. It's not, 'what's the point?' It's "What's the Point!?"

Sheldon was so upset because philosophy introduced him to a world where he couldn't factually prove his way to an answer. But the philosophy professor wanted him to understand that the excitement is not always about finding the answer. Sometimes the excitement is about asking the question.

“What’s the point?”

Friends, today as we celebrate four of our young people choosing to be confirmed in the Christian faith and as members of our church, I would like for all of us to think about what does it mean to be a person of faith and what does it mean to be a part of a faith community. That was really the two prompts for each of the confirmands’ faith statement. I asked each of them, “What role does the Christian faith play in your life or what role would you like it to play? And what does it mean to you to be a part of a faith community?” – yes, Moss, it’s actually three questions.

So often, it’s tempting to think of faith like Sheldon was initially thinking about philosophy – to think that faith is meant to give us definitive answers to life’s great questions. Questions like:

- How did the universe come into existence?
- How can I know if there’s a God?
- If there is a God, how can I know that God loves us?
- How can I know that Jesus is God’s son?
- Did Jesus really rise from the dead?
- If God loves us so much, why is there so much suffering?
- What happens to us when we die?
- Or the question that Sheldon asked, “What’s the point of all this anyway?”

Now there are certainly plenty of Christian traditions that will try to offer definitive answers to these kinds of questions, but those answers have never been terribly satisfactory to me, and after spending the last few months with this confirmation class, I get the feeling that those types of answers aren’t very satisfactory to you all either.

The truth is that I am a pastor and have given my life to exploring and studying the Christian faith and I can’t prove any of this to you.

I can’t prove that God exists. I can’t prove that Jesus is God’s son. I can’t prove that he rose from the dead. But what I can tell you is something that I believe is really good news, and that is, I don’t believe proof is the point of faith.

You see, faith is not the same thing as certainty. In fact, if I’m certain of something, if I have proof of something, I don’t really need faith. What Sheldon had to realize, is not that science and philosophy are diametrically opposed to each other. They were just asking different questions.

The same is true of faith.

Faith is not so much about the answers we land on but it’s about continuing to ask the questions. And the beauty of faith is that it’s sort of like a seed. There are seasons of life where it sprouts forth and it grows and blooms. There are seasons where it withers and feels like its dead. There are seasons when the seed falls out of a dying bloom only to be rebirthed again. There’s a reason why Jesus used so many farming metaphors in talking about the life of faith.

I told the confirmation class that the way I answered those questions of faith for myself was different when I was their age than it was when I was in college, than it was when I was a young adult, than it is today. And my guess is my answers will continue to change and evolve as I grow older, as I experience more things. And that will probably be true for them as well. It will likely be true for all of you.

Faith is not about having one set answer that will sustain you forever. Your answers will evolve. But faith is about continuing to ask the questions. That, in essence, is the commitment our confirmands have made today. So my charge to Bobby, Moss, Sam, and Will is this:’

Don’t worry about certainty. But instead always be curious. Keep asking the questions we explored in confirmation class, and while you likely won’t find The Answer, you will find answers along the way that will give you hope, that will sustain you, and that will remind you to keep asking the questions.

But there’s one other thing that I find profoundly hopeful – asking these questions is not something we do alone. We do it together as a community.

Being confirmed is not only about choosing to continue exploring the Christian faith but it’s also about choosing to become a full member of a faith community. This is your church. That was claimed for you when you were baptized, but today you are claiming that for yourself, and that means you are claiming this group of people to be your people and they are claiming you.

I want you to remember the promises we’ve made to you. We promised to grow alongside you. We promised to be challenged by you. And I know you will challenge us. And we need that. We need you to help us be more loving, more inclusive, more accepting. But guess what, sometimes, we forget that because being challenged is sometimes hard.

So please challenge us and if we don’t receive that challenge, remind us of this promise. Remind us that we promised to receive your challenges and insights and questions as a sign of our love and support for you. But not only that, we’ve promised to receive your challenges because we need them for us to be our best selves as a congregation.

And the second promise we’ve made to you is to always love and support you. Will, Moss, Sam, and Bobby, I want you to stand up for a minutes and look around.

Some of these people you know well and some you may not know at all, but every single one of them has promised to love and support you no matter what. I want you to know that we mean that promise.

I can’t wait to see all the things that you all will do. All four of you are incredible kids. And I know you likely won’t be here forever. You’ll go to college. You’ll find new communities to be a part of. Who knows where life will take you.

But what I want you to know, no matter what – whether you stay in this community forever or whether you move to the other side of the earth or anywhere in between – you always have a home here. You always have a church that will love you and support you. No matter what.

So keep asking the questions of faith. And know that we love you very much. Amen.