

Life's persistent questions

## **I don't want to reach the end of life having complied with external demands instead of listening to the internal, eternal voice.**

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About four years ago, my tenure as pastor of a remarkable and challenging congregation ended. It was time.

For a year, I'd undergone extensive treatment for cancer, and there were more drugs, pain, and fatigue to come. I couldn't do the work of pastoral ministry in the ways I thought it should be done.

It was time, also, because stark confrontations with my mortality made it unwise for me to continue to lower the volume on persistent questions about the Spirit's calling

and my vocational response.

I was soon to be 58 years old. I'd been on the staff of a local church almost continuously since I was 21. For all but three of those years, I had served as pastor.

I was, and am, committed to the church. I agree with the apostle Paul that it carries treasure in the flawed and fragile clay vessel of its common life; it bears wavering but crucial witness to the bright glory of God's self-revelation in the person of Jesus.

In the give-and-take, push-pull, faithfulness-and-failure of its everyday life, the church is a school for Christlikeness. In our relationships with one another over time, we learn to forgive and be forgiven, to love and be loved, and to extend and receive mercy.

We encourage each other to be together who we truly are but can never fully be in isolation: the body of Christ—the tangible, audible and visible presence of Jesus—in pursuit of justice, peace, and healing for the world.

The church matters to me, so much that I've often said, "The church is worth all the trouble." It can be a *lot* of trouble (and, sometimes, *I'm* the trouble), but I think the church is worth the sweat and tears, prayers and laughter, I gave it.

I was and am grateful for the nearly four decades that I invested in church leadership; but, after a year of difficult illness and with an uncertain horizon, it was past time to listen more attentively to—and, as Rilke put it, to live and to love—the questions.

Do you know how easy it is to turn the volume back down on the questions—how readily available the mute button is? There are bills to pay, cars to have inspected, shrubs to trim, groceries to buy, meals to cook, Netflix series to binge-watch, social media rabbit holes to get lost in, sermons to preach, lectures to prepare, papers to grade, meetings to attend, meetings to attend, and meetings to attend (did I mention that there are meetings to attend?).

Four years after I knew it was time to leave the pastorate and tend to the questions, I have to admit (confess) that not even face-to-face encounters with death—*my death*, not the idea of death and not someone else's death—kept the questions at the front of my awareness. I have a black belt in denial.

I don't want to reach the end, however soon or later I reach it, and have to admit that I've given primary energy to secondary things, toured the periphery rather than made a pilgrimage to the center, and complied with external demands instead of responding to the internal and eternal Voice. For the love of God—I mean it: *for the love of God*—it's time to discover or rediscover what I most deeply believe to be true in response to questions such as

What keeps people from knowing, deep in their bones, that they are God's beloved children? How can we help each other to know?

How can we trust that, because of God's vast and self-giving love, there is "no condemnation" by God and "no separation" from God? What do communities enlivened by such trust look, sound and feel like? How can we fashion and sustain such communities?

How do grace and mercy heal our brokenness, even when they don't cure our illnesses or end our pain?

How does love displace fear—in individuals, in families, tribes, and communities, and among nations?

What are the ways of life that place and keep us in harmony with the "grain of the universe"? How do we learn and encourage one another to honor them?

What does it mean—what could it mean?—that Jesus calls us his friends?

There are more. Questions like these shape my vocation now.

I can't number the times the Spirit used the poetry of Mary Oliver to call me back to my calling. It happened again last week. After she died, these words were everywhere:

Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?

Tell me, what is it you plan to do

with your one wild and precious life?

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