"Isn't It Curious?"

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
First Parish in Wayland
May 19, 2019

Did you know that it's all right to wonder?
There are all kinds of wonderful things!
Did you know that it's all right to marvel?
There are all kinds of marvelous things!

You can ask a lot of questions
about the world and your place in it.
You can ask about people's feelings.
You can learn the sky's the limit.

Did you know when you wonder, you're learning?
Did you know when you marvel, you're learning?
…about all kinds of wonderful,
all kinds of marvelous,
marvelously wonderful things.

We learn so much by wonder.

This is just one of the many wise sermons Mister Rogers shared on his infamous program for children. Thank goodness for Mister Rogers who reminds us of what is good and right in the world. In his kindness and in his curiosity, he taught us to wonder and to marvel about the world around us.

Curiosity is so much more than a path to learning more. It *is* this. Curiosity can entice us into all manner of pursuits and endeavors. What begins as an off-hand conversational comment might end up becoming a months-long pursuit of a new hobby or mastery of a new topic. Curiosity can coax us beyond the boundaries of what we know and where we feel comfortable. Curiosity might even transform our understanding or our experience—a kind of metaphorical death of the old . . . not unlike the lives lost by the proverbial curious cat.

Curiosity can be also be an entire posture towards living. Being a curious *person* can mean living an open-ended life. Rather than building a static structure of knowing, a curious person might collect a toolbox of learning, exploring, marveling, and wondering. There *is* a

© Stephanie May 2019

difference between the two approaches to life. One seeks to master the world, to be able to declare the boundaries known and the systems stable. The other seeks to explore the world, to remain open to the unknown, to the changeable, to the unpredictable.

I have sympathy for both. There are times I wish the world would just make sense. There are times when I wish progress towards justice and equity would just be successful and stable. Instead, we have seen our first black president be followed by a rise in white supremacist voices extolling racist and religious bigotry and violence. Instead, we are witnessing significant challenges to the nearly half-century old legal framework of protecting a women's right to choose her future and her health. Wouldn't it be nice if we could just put the world into order the way we think is right and have it stay that way?

But, of course, it's not like that is it? Our world is fractured, divisive, and rife with differences that erupt into conflict and even violence. A simplistic call for world unity feels utopian—a dream that does not and could not exist in any place. And yet, if we listen, a curious voice emerges like a plant determined to grow between the cracks in the pavement.

Curiosity calls out with a spirit of hope. As long as curiosity inspires new questions and paths of inquiry, there is hope in the possibility of change, of new insights, or alternate responses. Curiosity champions the perspective that all is not lost. Curiosity asks, "what's next?" Or, in the face of calamitous issues like climate change, curiosity might wonder what *is* possible to achieve? What *would be* the path forward to greater collaboration of resources and ideas? Curiosity is a posture of faith in the unknown that may yet provide what is needed.

Curiosity is also a posture of humility. [This I learned from my partner Bill whose deeply curious posture has taught me much. Our first date was an experience of his questions as he asked follow-up question after follow-up question to better understand. Since then, I have watched him do the same with academic colleagues, members of my midwestern conservative family, and, well, with some of you. While he admits that sometimes it's more difficult to find something of interest with some folks, he keeps asking questions in search of that thing that will make a person come alive with passion. Watching him, I see his conviction that every person has a story, every person feels strongly about something for some reason . . . if we dare to ask, to be genuinely curious about another.

When I asked Bill about his thoughts on curiosity, he emphasized the importance of humility.] To be curious, one has to start from a place that accepts one's own ignorance. If you are confident that there is nothing to learn from a person, nothing worth your time to investigate about a topic, then there is no space for curiosity. Curiosity requires the

© Stephanie May 2019

humility of admitting there are things we do *not* know. Indeed, in leading us into a place of the unknown, curiosity opens up the chance that we may be changed by what we learn.

Sometimes, the path of curiosity will come at a cost as it changes us. When I began to wonder about ideas of God, Jesus, and the Bible as a young adolescent, I did not know that it would cost me the certainty of my evangelical faith or the approval of people for whom I cared deeply. Perhaps curiosity has also cost you something? Maybe its cost you the certainty of your ill-opinion towards a neighbor once you learned their whole story. Maybe its cost you a marriage as you questioned your sexuality or your values. In inviting us into unknown and unpredictable possibilities, curiosity can change us.

Yet, these changes need not only be measured by their cost. Curiosity can open up whole new worlds of wonderful and marvelous things. Without my religious curiosity, I would never have known what it is like to live without the anxiety of properly following all the religious rules. Without my intellectual curiosity displacing ideas of Creationism, I would not have been able to marvel that we are made of stardust. Nor would I have learned to marvel at the love story of a woman's first kiss with another woman or officiated as one man married another. Without curiosity, I would not have come to so deeply respect my Muslim neighbors across the hall in my Cambridge apartment or learned to stand in solidarity with our Muslim neighbors here in Wayland.

Curiosity is not just a path towards learning new things; curiosity can be a posture of hope and humility that changes us. Curiosity can teach us to live with faith in an experience of life and other people that is always bigger than we can fully grasp. In this way, curiosity teaches us, along with Mister Rogers, to wonder and marvel. Such an attitude towards life brings a freedom that cannot be contained by any rigid or tyrannical system that would have us not question. Such an awareness reminds us to not take for granted what is good, just, and fair as the world around us may change again. Curiosity calls for us to be humble and adaptable as we learn . . . and it calls for us to never stop noticing what is yet possible, what we do not yet know, and what is wondrously marvelous all around us.

On this Sunday as we both recognize those who have sustained this congregation for many years and welcome others as new members, my hope is that we may work together to intentionally cultivate a culture of curiosity. Of course, we can flex our curiosity in learning through sermons, education programs, Winter Sessions, or social justice events and projects. But, I wonder how we might also practice postures of curiosity in our how we relate to one another—whether by talking with different people in coffee hour or talking differently with those we often see. Or, perhaps we bring a posture of curiosity to questions

© Stephanie May 2019

of governance, organization, and ways to best manifest our mission. I wonder how curiosity might change First Parish . . . how it might change each of us.

Within these walls and beyond them, may we all explore what it means to live with a posture of curiosity. While there is much in the world that doesn't make sense and there are many who would tell us that they have all the answers, may we value the hope and humility of curiosity as a way to live with wonder and marvel in a complex world.

So may it be. Amen.

© Stephanie May 2019