

# ARE YOU CONFUSED?

---

## Great Questions (Part 5)

Text: John 16:17-25

### I

Life does not flow in straight predictable lines, does it? We try very hard to forecast and finesse this life. We work to set up rules and security fences. But as any of you who have faced great loss or hardship know, life is a meandering mystery that will not easily be managed. In its easiest moments, it feels like a friendly river; in its toughest seasons, a dangerous flood. Maybe that's why many of us turn to religion to help us navigate life's waters. We look to God to uncomplicate the journey for us, to make it safer, sweeter, or more serene.

From all the evidence, this was surely *part* of the motivation that drove the first people who followed Jesus. Oh, I imagine that they genuinely wanted to get closer to God too. From the side conversations the Gospels record, however, it is clear that a major part of their motivation in taking a job with Jesus was in order to better control life's flow. Judas was in it for the money, James and John for the power and position, Peter for the prestige, and others for the health and social benefits that could come from hitching their wagon to the Messiah's rising star.

This is why, when we meet them today in John 16:27, the disciples are so disturbed. You have to understand that in the verses that precede our text for today, Jesus has been telling them that some very difficult times are coming. YOU who are with me now, will betray, deny, and abandon me, says Jesus. I will be handed over to evil men to be crucified, dead, and buried. You will be hated by people because of me. They are going to persecute and hurt you. You'll be thrown out of the synagogue. People will kill you, believing they are serving God. It's actually going to get worse than this, says Jesus, but it's best I don't tell you. **"I have much more to say to you than you can now bear"** (John 16:12).

And then Jesus dropped an even bigger bombshell. "I am about to leave you," he says. John 16:16 reads: **"In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me."** Christ was referring, of course, to his earlier promise that after three days in the grave, he would rise again. The disciples, however, do not get this. **"Some of his disciples said to one another, 'What does he mean by saying, 'In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me,' and 'Because I am going to the Father?'"** <sup>18</sup> **They kept asking, 'What does he mean by 'a little while'? We don't understand what he is saying."**

And I picture Jesus smiling, as he thinks to himself, "Ah, maybe finally, we are getting

someplace together.” The Bible goes on to say that: **“Jesus saw that they wanted to ask him about this, so he said to them, ‘Are you asking one another what I meant...?’”** Or, to paraphrase him slightly, Jesus asks here another one of those GREAT QUESTIONS that are his characteristic way of reaching deep into a human life. Jesus asks: **“Are you confused?”**

## II

If I were to pick out one condition that Jesus clearly aims to sow in human life, but which is all too frequently lacking among his followers in every age, it would be the blessed state of confusion. I know this may sound like heresy at the start, so bear with me. I just don’t think it is possible to seriously study the Scriptures and not be struck by how perseveringly God works to confuse people. In fact I would go so far as to say that the chief characteristic of a dead religion is comfortable certainty, while the chief characteristic of an enlivening relationship with God is disorienting confusion.

Self-sealed certainty is the absolute enemy of the spiritual life. The notion that I know most or all of what God is like, what God wants, how God shows up or works is poison to my relationship with God, just as this kind of certainty is death to most other kinds of relationships too. Smug familiarity breeds not only contempt, but complacency and cirrhosis in the relationship. We stop interacting with the miracle and mystery of an actual living being and start relating to a set of categories, prior conceptions, and convenient constructs that are actually set up for one purpose: To keep our image of the other exactly as we think, so that we can stay exactly the way we are. This is not only relational laziness, it is a form of idolatry.

Writer Annie Lamott says: “You can safely assume you’ve created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.”<sup>1</sup> It’s an evidence that you’ve got a religion that is about making God a reflection of you instead of making you a reflection of him. This is why I think Jesus struck out at Jewish nationalism and Phariseeism alike. Their common foundation was this smug certainty: “We are chosen. We are right. We are in control. We are certain about what pleases God and it is us.”

Winn Collier, to whom I owe some of the most helpful insights in this message, suggests that: “If the Jesus we hear never finishes a sentence differently than we imagine he would, if the Jesus we claim to follow never offers an ideology in direct contradiction to what we have grown comfortable with [or]... never loves people we would never expect him to embrace, we might need to revisit the Gospels... to be introduced to the biblical Jesus.”<sup>2</sup>

When I read the Bible carefully, I’m struck by how different the teachings of Jesus are from those polite little maxims and proverbs that characterize most of the world’s religions and philosophies. Jesus speaks in riddles and parables. He teaches using contradictory and shocking images. Rather than tying life up in neat little boxes and

bows, the teachings of Jesus are like benevolent grenades. They are intended to blow out the sides of our self-serving boxes and send us into a place of confusion. Jesus drives us to live in the agonizing tension between truth and grace, justice and mercy, freedom and accountability. He forces us to live in that disorienting place where our selfishness is unmasked and our idols are named. Jesus takes us to that place of confusion where we might finally become open to seeing God, others, and ourselves in fresh terms.

So, here's a question for you: Are you sufficiently confused? Not by this message – I'll understand that – but by God? Are you honestly open to having a God who is about your transformation and not your tranquility, your conversion and not your comfort, his will and not your own? If he says to you, as he said to those first disciples, it's time to take up the cross... It's time for me to go away from you as you've known me before and come back to you in a way that you've never seen before... can you accept that? Can you point to one attitude, conviction, or pattern in your life that the still living God has overturned or profoundly re-shaped during the past year to make you better reflect Him, even though that was messy? Are you honestly open to being confused by God or does your certainty own the throne?

### III

Let me be clear, confusion isn't good as an end in itself. God's goal isn't to leave us in a place of endless disorientation. People talk that way sometimes, as if not knowing any answers or believing in any definitive paths to truth or the good, is actually more spiritual. Confusion in that sense, however, is simply a form of relativism or agnosticism. It's the spiritual or theological version of that "anything goes" mentality that has left our world in its present state of disintegration.

The kind of confusion to which Jesus leads us is simply a recurring stage on a continuing journey toward newfound clarity about the definition of truth and the good. When we are confused and disoriented by the teachings of Jesus it is often a sign that we've actually heard God correctly and are beginning to see that the life to which he calls us is dramatically different than the life for which we've been schooled by this world. Jesus ushers us into confusion for the purpose of conception. He is trying to birth something new in us.

In John 16:21, Jesus actually uses that analogy: **"A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy."** No one I've ever met likes the agonizing confusion and disorientation that comes with labor. But few people get to the other side of that passage and do not rejoice in what that labor produced. It was for the joy set before him that Christ endured the cross. So it will be with you, says Jesus, if you let this

confusion do its work.

In Dostoyevsky's magnificent novel, *Crime and Punishment*, a student named Rodion Raskolnikov has murdered a malevolent pawnbroker – partly out of just motives but also out of selfishness. The novel centers on his interior conflict – first over whether to do the killing and then later over whether to confess the crime and recover his humanity. As the story moves toward a climax, Porfiry Petrovich, the magistrate in charge of the investigation, calls Raskolnikov to do the unthinkable --- to confess his guilt and accept the consequences. Raskolnikov is profoundly confused. He can't conceive how making such a confession could possibly be in his best interests and yet he has this strange sense that Petrovich is not out to destroy but to deliver him. "I know you don't believe in it," Petrovich says, "but... fling yourself straight into life, without deliberation; don't be afraid – the flood will bear you to the bank and set you safe on your feet again. What bank? How can I tell you? I only believe that you have a long life before you." It turns out that Petrovich is right. Raskolnikov's confession doesn't remove his struggle. It sends him to exile in Siberia. But it is the start of the restoration of Raskolnikov's mind and soul.

I don't know all the contours of that confusing place into which God may have called or be calling you now. It may be in your marriage or vocation, in your health or self-understanding, in your relationship with a child, a workmate, a friend, or God himself. I don't know all the contours of the far bank God has planned for you either. But, when I look at Jesus, I know that the heart of God is good. I know that his desire is not to destroy us but deliver us to a life even greater than we have today. Oftentimes, that deliverance will not come without profound disorientation. The new fruitfulness he has planned sometimes requires a flood, the new birth a time of labor, the great conception a crisis of confusion.

"Are you confused?" asks Jesus. "Then, maybe I have you exactly where you need to be. Fling yourself into it. Fling yourself straight into life. You'll find me there."

# ARE YOU CONFUSED?

---

## Great Questions (Part 5)

Text: John 16:17-25

1. What is it that motivates you to follow Jesus? To what extent is part of this the hope that He can help you find a life that is less confusing and complicated?
2. How do you feel or think about the idea that being in a state of confusion can be a “blessed” condition? In what possible ways is confusion sometimes good?
3. In what sense is certainty about God or certainty of faith a great good? In what senses or situations can it be bad?
4. How fixed is your understanding of Jesus or of the way he calls you to live? What is one attitude, conviction, or personal pattern that God has profoundly reshaped in you during the past year? In the past 10 years?
5. Is there a particularly confusing or disorienting dimension of your life right now? What does that feel like? How might God be acting in that situation to “birth” something new?

- 
- <sup>1</sup> Anne Lamont, *Bird By Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995), 22.
- <sup>2</sup> Winn Collier, *Holy Curiosity: Encountering Jesus' Provocative Questions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008) 105.