Does Curiosity Kill the Cat?

One of the quickest things some of us learned in Sunday School was that the teacher did not really mean it when he said, once or twice a year, “All right, boys and girls, we’ve finished this morning’s lesson ahead of time. Does anyone have a question?” It was not, at least in the upper grades, a very congenial atmosphere for real questions, so there would be a long silence until finally, in desperation, forgetting what he had so painfully learned the last time he tried this, the teacher would coax us, “Surely you must have questions about something. It doesn’t have to be about today’s lesson. Just ask whatever it is you have on your mind.”

And somebody would take him up on it. I remember the girl who asked one day, “Did Jesus ever have a date?” It was not a smart-alecky question. It was asked innocently by one who really wondered, and as I look back on it from the advantage of a few more years it strikes me as an excellent question, with a bearing on how we think about the historical Jesus. After all, the girl who asked had been told that he was her example for living. She wanted to know if that worked for the world of dating and courtship.

The teacher might have won himself a whole roomful of young friends if he had known how to deal with that question, but he ran only on carefully-placed tracks, and this question was off the track. It fit into no system he was used to dealing with, and he had no intention of wrestling with it. He first tried to evade it on the grounds that the girl was being cute, and when he saw that this was obviously not true, he fell back on Old
Reliable: “Well, there are just some things we’re not supposed to ask,” and then he went back and rehashed the first part of our lesson until the bell rang and we were dismissed to go out to the church service.

He didn’t know it, but he was tampering with something that not only is a basic emotional drive in all of us, but one of the most essential impulses we have if we hope to make very much of ourselves. We call it curiosity — the mind when it is hungry for knowledge — one of the best proofs we have that inside the head there is promise. It’s an obsession in small children, and even there it reveals the same two-sidedness that will mark it through all of a person’s life. It can be risky, leading a child into all kinds of learning experiences over which we have to keep guard to see that they are not fatal. Touching a hot stove, sticking a finger in the light socket, tasting the stuff in the bottle — if we had no guardians we’d be lucky to make it out of childhood before our curiosity killed us.

But at the same time it is curiosity that takes us up and out of childhood. Not just physically, which mostly happens on its own, but mentally — a development not likely to happen unless we have a healthy curiosity and keep on using it. But even when we are grown, it remains two-sided. It’s the stuff of origin for everything from the Peeping Tom and the prying gossip and the inquisitive bore, to the open-minded truth-seeker, the daring explorer, and the research scientist. So to that question posed in the Bible book of James, “Does the fountain send forth from the same opening both sweet water and bitter?” in this case the answer is “Yes, curiosity certainly does!” It may express itself in a nasty little hunger to know which neighbor is in
trouble, or it may express itself in an insatiable thirst for useful knowledge. I remember reading once that when someone asked the baggage master at a railroad station used by Rudyard Kipling what the English writer was like, the man said, “Kipling had the darndest mind. He wanted to know everything about everything, and he never forgot what you told him. He would sit and listen and never stop.” You know immediately he would have been a fascinating man to have as a friend.

I would like to put aside today the misuse of this energy, when it is merely impertinent or morbidly in love with scandal, and talk about it as the indispensable stuff of any life worth the name. If you need a shorthand guide on how to use it, I give you the advice of the brilliant 19th century poet-philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge, expressed with such compact elegance that the words are gone almost before you realize how much has been expressed: “The right kind of curiosity,” Coleridge says, “willingly stops at the point where the interests of truth do not beckon it forward, and where the love of its neighbor bids it stop.”

If my memory, and a quick check, serve me right, the word curiosity itself does not occur in the Bible, but the mental process is shown there over and over. There is, for example, only one story about the childhood of Christ, but in that story it’s his curiosity which is made dramatic. He has found his way in among a group of teachers, and he is asking them questions. Now if you read his life as a real life, by which I mean one which could have developed in any number of ways and was not simply programmed like a player piano, this is an exciting glimpse into his boyhood. How much credit for what he became belongs to this compelling curiosity?
Is this what led him to read and listen so carefully to those great Hebrew prophets who shaped his understanding of what God had in mind for him?

It was simple curiosity that dictated the opening chapters of the Bible. The book of Beginnings, the book we know as Genesis, starts out to answer the most basic of questions. By the time humanity had developed enough to become reflective, to look around and marvel at the difference between ourselves and other creatures, by that time they were too far separated from their own past to know by what road they had traveled. But they were curious, and full of questions like these: How did the world come to be so full of so many different kinds of living things? Who made them, and what is their relationship to us? Why is so much of life difficult? Why, to be specific, do men have to sweat in the sun with backbreaking labor, digging in the soil and doing constant battle with weeds and thorns? And why do animals have their young so easily when we see our daughters and sisters cry out in pain? And why this strange attraction between males and females which causes them to leave their homes to be with one another and to have children together? And those stealthy, slithering things we are all so much afraid of, why were they ever made like that? Especially snakes?

Read the first three books of Genesis and you find man’s attempt to answer those questions. They are not always the most profound questions which human beings will later ask, but they were the first ones to jog us into thought. They knew life to be hard and painful, and the sting of it made them wonder. So they came up
with answers: men work hard and women have pain in childbirth because they disobeyed an ancient prohibition in a wondrous Garden. Snakes slither the way they do because they were cursed in that temptation story. And men and women have a compelling desire for each other because — as they framed the story — she was part of him and they are whole only when they are reunited.

Well, the answers would be different now, for millions of us, but the questions were good ones, and out of them came a useful way of understanding life until it could be time for something that made even better sense. And I always have the feeling, when I sense the questions behind those stories in *Genesis*, that in them is the germ of something much more profound yet to come. I think of Rodin’s statue, *The Thinker* — that lowbrowed naked man with the gnarled fist pressed against his lips, but with huge dignity in it.....the dignity of mind awakening, the excitement of those first dim thoughts that lift us to our feet and will take us who knows where before the long journey is over?

Because even in that first dim curiosity, *Why is life not better than it is?*, there is hunger for better understanding of what it means to be human. What is the reason for the strange restlessness in the minds of men and women? Why are they troubled by a sense of estrangement from that to which so much of their purely physical lives seem to belong? Somehow they are like the other animals, but yet not like them. Consciousness has come, that strange and terrible gift that sets them apart forever, and with consciousness came the questions: 

*I am not like those others. How did I reach this place? What am I to do with myself, and my knowledge of*
myself, and what will happen to me? If I am different from the animals, when I die will there be something
for me that is different from what happens to them? These are the questions from which came art and
religion and science, and without which none of those things would have come at all.

Unfortunately, once some answers have been given there is always a tendency to carve those particular
answers in stone and regard them as final. I can almost hear some Hebrew child asking one day, “Why were
there Ten Commandments? Why not Eleven? Or Twenty?” And the answer, already shaped by priestcraft,
would be: “Because that’s how many God gave, and that’s all we need to know.” But since the number of
commandments given at Mt. Sinai is different in different versions of the same story, our curiosity is aroused,
and the answer which makes sense to many of us is quite simple and logical. Ten laws were codified in one of
those stories not because there really were just ten important legal statements for human life, but because people
have five fingers on each hand, ten in all, and it is convenient for each finger to represent one commandment as
an aid to memory. Our hands, in other words, become a kind of rosary, with ten beads.

Curiosity may not always lead to some earth-shaking truth, as you have just seen; it may not lead to
anything very practical. But even then it’s the salt that gives life flavor. I have a brother-in-law who is a great
joy to be around because you never know where his curiosity will take him. Go with him on a trip, and at every
stop, at almost each new contact with a fellow human being, he will be full of questions. Good ones, asked in a
pleasant way so that others like to respond, and this man is in school every day of his life. He never had a day of
college, but he is forever learning. And religion has to be like that, or curious people will find it irrelevant. If you have ever read the book of *Job*, one of the most powerful poetic debates ever written, you know that this entire book grew out of a single overwhelming question. Orthodox Jewish doctrine taught that God consistently rewards good men with large families, much wealth, and long life, and that he consistently punishes bad men with few children or none, with poverty, and with sickness.

As a theory that was probably comforting. As a fact of life it was obviously wrong. Most people are submissive before majority opinions, but not the poet who wrote the book of *Job*. He looked around, noticed what actually happens in life, and said, “Tell me something, ladies and gentlemen. Why is it that we teach one thing, and all around us, every day, something else happens? Something must be wrong with our theology. What is it?” And religion was never quite the same after that curious man raised his question. We keep religion from hardening into dogma by asking our questions. “You shall know the truth,” Christ said, “and the truth will make you free” — but before the knowledge and before the freedom comes that vital energy I have been praising this morning: curiosity.

The sermon title, in case you hadn’t looked, was *Does Curiosity Kill the Cat?* so where does the cat come in? Well, a poet named Alistair Reid once wrote about cats in some lines that support my sermon so cleverly that I would like to share them. He takes off on the old saying about how curiosity killed the cat, and takes a swipe along the way at “dead dogs,” which is his metaphor for people who have no curiosity at all. The
Curiosity may have killed the cat; more likely / the cat was just unlucky, or else curious / to see what death was like, having no cause / to go on licking paws, or fathering / litter on litter of kittens, predictably.

Nevertheless, to be curious/ is dangerous enough. To distrust / what is always said, what seems, / to ask odd questions, interfere in dreams, / leave home, smell rats, have hunches / does not endear him to those doggy circles / where well-smelt baskets, suitable wives, good lunches / are the order of things, and where prevails / much wagging of incurious heads and tails.

Face it. Curiosity / will not cause him to die — / only lack of it will. This modern poem is fun stuff, because the desire to know is the yeast of life. Lose it, and you lie flat in the pan. Keep it, and you rise. You may spill over on the wrong side, you may bump your head, you may temporarily occupy some spot not suitable for you....but you are finding your way all the time to something better, and that’s what keeps the excitement in life. The poem ends with this line: “Only the curious have, if they live, a tale worth telling at all.” When Jesus said, “Come follow me,” I think he was talking to all of us cats who have the curiosity to accept his invitation.

Grant us a generous gift, eternal God, of that hunger to know which is life....we ask in the name of Christ our Lord. Amen.