

On Faith, Doubt and Certainty

Mark 9:20-24; John 20:24-29

“Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart”, wrote Rainer Rilke to the young poet, “Try to love the questions themselves. Live the questions now.” Today’s sermon probes the meaning of faith and believing, of doubt and its potential good, and of the dangers of certainty. Let’s plunge in.

I

So faith. What is it? I like its verb form *believing*, a kind of believing that is also a way of living, the kind that helps you love yourself and others better. Marcus Borg says that “believing” best translates to “be-loving.”

Believing is deeper than beliefs, not so much a believing this or that, but a believing *in*, a relational kind of thing.

For the first few centuries of the church, faith was the kind of believing that was a way of living your life. Early Christians in Acts called the Jesus movement “The Way.” Faith was a verb. The only essential creed was the baptismal confession of faith, “Jesus Christ is Lord”, which meant “I’m a follower of his.” It also meant, “And no one else is, including Caesar!”

Then came a proliferation of creeds which, joined to the power of the State, became an instrument of persecution. “Heretics” were named, persecuted, sometimes killed.

Some ask, “What do I *have* to believe in order to be a Christian?” The Fundamentalist Movement, which began in the early 20th century, named the Big Five:

Inerrancy of Scripture

Divinity of Christ

Belief in the miracles

The substitutionary blood atonement

The Second Coming of Christ

If you are a true Christian, they said, you sign your name to that.

“What do I *have* to believe?” I think the better question is “What do I *need* to believe?” What kind of believing brings life, joy, confidence, hope, resilience? Faith in God at its deepest levels is closer to things like *trust*, *confidence* and *loyalty*. It gives us hope.

Emily Dickinson, in the pantheon of American poets, refused to be converted during the Great Awakening revival that swept through her New England town. Conversion came laden with doctrines she could not swallow. In a

bit of delicious understatement she wrote: “Believing what you don’t believe does not exhilarate.”

Faith can be a deadening thing when it requires believing what you don’t believe. Then it dies itself.

What do you need to believe? What do you want to believe? What old beliefs need to go? Or have already gone? What new kind of believing can bring life, even exhilarate?

When the father brought his epileptic son to Jesus in hope of a healing, Jesus said to him, “All things are possible to one who believes.” And the man made this honest cry of a prayer: “I believe, help my unbelief!”

What kind of believing would you pray for today?

II

Now let’s talk about *doubt*. Can doubt be a positive thing in our life of faith? Frederick Buechner wrote: “Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.” Doubts help us move from a less adequate faith to a more adequate faith.

Perhaps the most dramatic example of doubt and a changing faith in the Bible is the *Book of Job*. It is there to combat a faith of easy answers, to confront

the false belief that says: “Good things happen to good people. Bad things happen to bad people.” Easy. Simple. And False.

In the story, Job was a righteous man surrounded by the blessings of wealth and family. But then a series of unspeakable tragedies struck that robbed him of his wealth, his children and his health. It made no sense to him; it contradicted what he had been taught to believe. Doubt and despair ravaged his heart.

“God curse the day I was born”, he cried. “I sit and gnaw on my grief; my worst fears have happened. Silence and peace have abandoned me, and anguish camps in my heart!”

Job’s three friends had come to comfort him, but when they heard his cry of doubt and despair, they bombarded him with the easy answers of their faith, answers that heaped blame of Job’s suffering and loss on Job.

“Have patience” one said to him. Such advice rarely helps. Whoever came up with the phrase, “The patience of Job” had not read the book. Job cried out to God the injustice of what had befallen him. He spoke poignantly of what his relationship with God had been: “Once God and I were as close as close could be. The friendship of God was on my tent. God was near me, in front, in back, everywhere. But now God is nowhere to be found.”

Then he raised his voice in anger to God. “You are responsible for my pain. You use me for target practice. You are like a tyrant, a wild beast, a ruthless warrior. I am torn apart by my grief. Then he let it all out: “Earth do not absorb my blood! Let the cry of it wander all over the earth!”

He mustered up enough faith to say: “I know that my Redeemer liveth, my Advocate, my Defense Attorney. He will plead my case.”

Then he asked God to come near, where he could hear and see him, a desperate and risky request. And God came near in a series of visions and with a series of questions that said, in effect, “Job, all this is beyond your human understanding.” Job asked for answers, God answered with God’s *presence*. And Job was comforted and was at peace.

At the end of the Book of Job, God addressed Job’s friends and said: “Job’s doubt was truer than your beliefs, his questions truer than your answers.”

Job is in the Bible to honor our doubt. It helps us ask today: What are our doubts that are moving us toward a deeper, truer faith?

Of course our doubts can be too fashionable, too glib. So we need the humility to be able to doubt our doubts. On the other hand, if they go straight to the heart, hold them as long as needed, til new light comes.

III

Now we turn to *certainty*. It can be a deadly thing. In the phrase “dead certain”, the operative word is “dead”. Someone has said that the opposite of faith is not doubt; the opposite of faith is certainty. I think that’s about right. When Paul said, “We walk by faith, not by sight”, part of what he meant was, we walk without certainty.

The Bible is full of examples of the dangers of certainty, the ways zeal can go bad, even in its heroes. Elijah for example.

Elijah had just won the victory over the priests of Baal when God sent fire to consume Elijah’s sacrifice to God. But then, carried away with his dramatic victory, he said, “Seize the prophets of Baal and do not let them go.” Then they led them down to a creek and slaughtered them all, all 450 of them.

We cringe. Jesus taught another way. When his disciples came to him upset that a village had not given them hospitality for the night, they said, “Jesus let us call down fire from heaven and destroy them like Elijah. Can we Jesus?!” And Jesus rebuked them and taught them the way of non-violence.

He rebuked the marriage of faith and violence. This marriage formed in the bowels of certainty is a deadly thing. The history of the church is replete with violence and persecution in the name of God. The Inquisition, the Crusades; the

persecution of the Jews, culminating in the Holocaust, but still alive; the Salem witch trials which named women “witches” and burned them at the stake. Unbelievers, Jews, so-called heretics, all killed by religious certainty.

Today in America there is a Christian Supremacy movement seeking to encode a particular set of beliefs and morality into the laws of the land. Beware its certainty.

There’s a character in one of William Faulkner’s novels, an abusive father whose strict religion was sure of everything. Faulkner described him as a man having “neither doubt nor pity.” The two go together. A person without doubt often has no room for pity or mercy.

Here is the importance of Jesus’ disciple Thomas and his doubt. He would not believe the resurrection had happened unless Jesus appeared to him and he could see him and the wounds in his hands and side. And Jesus obliged his doubt and came to him. He did not hold Thomas’ doubt against him. He came to him in Thomas’ need to believe. Jesus does not despise our doubts. They save us from the deadly dimensions of certainty.

What are your doubts? I confess, believing in God is easy for me, perhaps too easy, but I have my urgent doubts about the state of the world, about the success of evil doers. And I guess these come down to questions about how this

connects with the goodness and power of God. Our Call to Gathering this morning is a paraphrase of Psalm 2 and voices such doubts and concerns. You see them many places in the Psalms and elsewhere in the Bible.

What do you believe, what do you doubt? A professor at Union Seminary writes about “faithful disbelief”, a disbelieving of beliefs we can no longer believe—not from a lack of faith, but because of our growing, changing faith.

You’ve probably seen the bumper sticker: “God says it. I believe it. That settles it!” Sometimes God comes to unsettle our faith.