

I BELIEVE IN DOUBT

Mark 9: 17-24; John 20:19-31

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Union Church of Cupertino

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When I attended Phillips Andover Academy scholarship students were assigned a job, and my job was to lead prospective students and their parents on tours of the campus. Usually the guests were satisfied to know that Charles Bullfinch had designed the building where English classes were taught, that Samuel F. B. Morse was kicked out in his second year and George Washington's nephew was a graduate. But some of the time the guests would ask personal questions.

I remember a mother who wanted to know what I intended to do with my life. At that time I was thinking about becoming a dentist and said so. Whereupon she asked me to open my mouth and began to examine all of my teeth. To this day I don't understand what she was thinking.

A father asked what courses I was taking and, hearing the list, he wanted more information about the class on religion. I shared my great satisfaction in recently learning that the Book of Jonah in the Hebrew Scriptures was an extended allegory, a prophet's warning that Israel was becoming too insular. It was, for me, a new way of thinking about the Bible, and it felt good to be freed from the need to accept the text as literal truth. Immediately the dad squared around, got his face in mine and wanted know: "Isn't your God great enough to command a fish to swallow a man?"

"Sir! It was Thomas Corcoran, trustee and major donor, who gave the money so that Bancroft Hall could be moved from there to here so that we could enjoy this sweeping view to the West."

"Young man, what are they teaching you about Jesus walking on the water?"

"I don't know. We haven't gotten to that yet but I imagined my teacher would doubt it.

"Doubt is precisely the problem!" he said. "Do you remember how Peter tried to walk out on the water to meet Jesus? His first few steps were taken on faith and he was doing beautifully when he had a moment of doubt. Immediately he started to sink."

I believe the man's message was: "When it comes to the Bible don't bother to think! Thinking leads to doubt and in doubt we begin to sink."

I didn't believe the man's message was appropriate to an academic setting, or useful to a youthful mind. "This way please to the Oliver Wendell Holmes library."

I believe the father would have approved of the text found in one of the more obscure letters of the Christian Scriptures:

The one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind.... The doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord. - James 6b-8.

That's a terrible text. I don't believe it represents the mind of God.

In another of the lesser letters, we find a kinder word:

Be merciful to those who doubt. - Jude 22

This was the mind of Jesus. When Thomas was having trouble accepting news of Christ's post resurrection appearances, Jesus sought him out and guided his hand that he might grow beyond his questions and into a faith.

This morning I want to speak of doubt.

From the start I need to acknowledge that there is some truth on the side of that father. Doubt can be a detriment to faith.

In college one of my Freshman year professors was fond of ferreting out our most cherished convictions and then making fun of them. "That may sound like the truth to gullible hearts in Altoona, but you must doubt!" Another of his favorite sayings was a question taken from Archibald MacLeish's play, *J.B.*:

Have you the spunk to spit on Christmas?

The man was a bully. He took great pleasure in crushing faith buds before they could bloom. There was in him no tolerance, no courtesy. Such attention to doubt is undoubtedly a deterrent to a young person's faith.

And there is a type of doubt that is cowardice. It doubts everything and stands for nothing. It spreads like a wet blanket over any enthusiasm. It breeds in church meetings. I remember attending a workshop led by the musicians Richard Avery and Donald Marsh. They were suggesting some very exciting uses of music in worship, but over and over they were hearing: "That's all fine and good but it will never fly in my church!" After a full day of this Donald Marsh posed a question that is now commonplace but then I was hearing it then for the first time: "How can we soar with eagles when we have to work with turkeys?" and I don't think he was talking about the congregations back home.

Doubt, in the hands of a coward, can be an act of avoidance. Doubt, in the hands of a bully can crush another's faith.

But doubt, without a doubt, can be a blessing. I count it a wonderful gift from God.

It was the Rev. Graham Baldwin, school chaplain, who had shared those thoughts with us about the book of Jonah. I had, all on my own, decided that Jonah was a fish story and if he had insisted that I swallow it, I would have been lost to all useful learning in that class. Instead he used doubt as a tool for learning. Why was this tale kept in the canon for more than 1,000 years? And he came up with a reason that made the story seem noble and a logical part of God's goodness: "Why do you, Oh Israel, keep the good news of my love to yourselves?. Go share it with others. When you go into your self-protective, keep-it-for-me posture you become as trapped as if you were sitting in the stomach of a whale."

More recently Bishop John Shelby Spong has written about his doubt that Jesus or Peter ever walked on the water. He has enlivened my imagination by seeing that story as one in a series of stories told and retold by the early church to demonstrate that Jesus was a superior replacement for Moses. Sure, Moses parted the Red Sea waters but Jesus wouldn't have to. He can walk right across the top. This doubt about the historical reality of the story has opened for me a whole new area of inquiry regarding the tensions between the old and the new and the ageless need to be better.

Doubt is so often the first step toward creative inquiry that I am without a doubt that it is intended as a gift to us from God.

But the thing I most want to say about doubt is that it is one of the two legs I rely upon. The other leg is faith. Every once in a while I find it beneficial to shift my weight.

Emily Dickinson once wrote:

*We both believe and disbelieve a hundred times an hour
which keeps believing nimble.*

A philosopher, Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy once insisted:

Faith cannot live unless it is intermittent. - The Christian Future, pg. 90

Belief and doubt in tandem are like the two spigots we need so that our bath does not burn us. Holding the two in tandem we can make sense of the father's cry:

I believe, help my unbelief! - Mark 9:24

I believe in doubt. I embrace it as one of the two legs I have been given for stability.

Faith can sometimes build a cathedral. Doubt keeps the cathedral from becoming an idol unto itself. Doubt opens new avenues for inquiry. Faith finds avenues the mind cannot see.

The Methodist Bishop, Gerald Kennedy, once quoted a man named David Roberts. I have no idea who David Roberts was but I think we must be related:

I spent 20 years trying to come to terms with my doubts.

Then one day I decided to affirm what I had come to accept. Now I have passed from struggling with questions I cannot answer to struggling with answers I cannot escape and it's a great relief. - A Second Reader's Notebook, pp. 114-115.

It sounds to me like he shifted feet. That's healthy. That's using all of God's gifts.

I believe in faith and I believe in doubt.