

DOUBTING THOMAS
A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
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Today's gospel lesson in the common Christian lectionaryⁱ is about Doubting Thomas. This is how this one of the twelve original male disciples of Jesus is best known now: As a doubter to the resurrection of Jesus after his crucifixion and burial. He wasn't with the other disciples when Jesus appears to them one evening and shows them the wounds in his hands and in his side. So, understandably, to me, when Thomas is later told by the other disciples that they've seen Jesus alive again, Thomas is incredulous and states that he won't believe them without seeing with his own eyes. Then when Jesus appears in the disciples' house a week later, his resurrected body passing through shut and locked doors for a second time, he asks Thomas to check out his wounds too, even putting his fingers into Jesus's hands and side. "Do not doubt, but believe," Jesus says. And now Thomas does, without further question.

Now is this doubt such a bad thing, as it's so often been portrayed? After all, Jesus on the cross seems to doubt God's love and special relationship to him when he cries out in a loud voice just before dying, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"ⁱⁱ That is, Jesus dies with the first line of Psalm 22 on his lips, and the Psalm goes on to say, as Richard Duncan read earlier,ⁱⁱⁱ "Why are you so far from helping me...O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer... In you our ancestors trusted...and you delivered them... Let him rescue the one in whom he delights!"

The human reality is that we all have doubts, and we should worry if we don't. My own university chaplain used to say that he was "so hard on fundamentalist preachers because it is

right to be stabbed by doubt...It's wrong to require certitude to the point of blind stupidity.”

This was the Rev. William Sloane Coffin. At eighty years old he wrote a book entitled *Letters to a Young Doubter*, imagining an exchange of letters between himself and a bright eighteen-year-old college freshman over the nine months of an academic year. He wrote that “In my experience, religious faith despite doubts is far stronger than one without doubts.”^{iv} As he put it, “Doubts move you forward, not backward, just as long as you doubt out of love of the truth, not out of some pathological need to doubt.”^v It can't be coincidence that this imaginary student to whom Coffin is writing is named Tom. My chaplain went on to say, “It's clear that while blind belief of any religious stripe is bad for us, the nation, and the world, the answer to blind belief is not blind unbelief.”^{vi} While he quoted Pascal's statement that “human beings never do evil so cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction,”^{vii} he also was concerned that self-righteousness, whether of believers or non-believers, “is the bane of human relations” in that it “blocks our capacity for self-criticism, destroys humility, and undermines the sense of oneness that should bind us all.”^{viii} That is, “Self-righteousness makes believers of all faiths doctrinaire, dogmatic, and mindlessly militant. And, of course, it can just as easily do the same for nonbelievers.”^{ix}

The fact is that the Bible is full of stories of doubters of the highest esteem: Abraham, Moses, David, John the Baptist, Peter. Their doubts included whether or not God was there, if God had actually called them to do certain things, and if God would be with them.^x Job in his pain and suffering doubts not only God's love but also his justice: “I will say to God...Does it seem good to you to oppress, to despise the work of your hands and favor the schemes of the wicked?”^{xi} Ecclesiastes doubts God's concern about wickedness and oppression here on earth:^{xii}

“I saw all the oppressions that are practiced under the sun. Look, the tears of the oppressed – with no one to comfort them.”^{xiii}

The Rev. Adam Hamilton, pastor of one of the largest Methodist churches in America, who grew up fundamentalist and now calls himself a liberal evangelical,^{xiv} wrote a chapter called “In Praise of Honest Doubt” in a 2008 book called *Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White*. He describes doubt as a universal human experience, true for both atheists and believers, true in the rest of life as much as in religion. “Certainty is hard to come by,” and “when it comes to questions of whether there is a God or not – we can certainly expect a measure of uncertainty... We are all going to have periods of doubt when our faith seems ridiculous and we have more questions than answers.”^{xv}

Hamilton goes on to say that doubt is not only natural, it’s also healthy to the extent it pushes us to reflect more deeply and search for what is true. Certain periods in one life, especially the college years, when we have challenging classroom experiences and encounter fellow students who see the world very differently from ourselves, are times naturally disposed to doubt, and rightly so. In the extreme, we hit crisis points, where everything we thought we knew for sure is called into question, and all of our philosophical, religious and moral foundations are shaken. Usually one of three things then happens. We reject everything we thought we knew, including God. Or, we suppress our feelings and retreat into an inflexible faith where everything is accepted as certain and questions are no longer asked. Or, we face our doubts directly, carefully re-examining what we’ve previously assumed to be true, and working on re-constructing an adult understanding of the world and of faith. Hamilton, of course, prefers the third approach.^{xvi}

On the other side of the theological spectrum, author Annie Lamott, an ultra-liberal Presbyterian, affirms that “The opposite of faith is not doubt. The opposite of faith is certainty.”^{xvii} That can be religious certainty or atheist certainty. She was raised by atheist parents in Marin County, California: “I was raised to think that Christians are idiots... I was raised to think it was the opiate of [the] people. I was raised by parents who... worshipped at the temple of Miles Davis and who were culturally hip, bohemian types.” Her father, as she explains, “was raised by Presbyterian missionaries in Japan and hated Christians, especially Presbyterians, which is who I turned out to be, and he always called them God’s frozen people, and I turned out to be one of them.”^{xviii}

Now she would say that most people who come to hear her lectures or readings, or who buy her books, are progressives and Democrats, many of whom, unlike herself, were raised in fundamentalist Christian households and never thought they would go back to church. Somehow in Lamott, though, they are able to find “some sense of play or spaciousness, where the spirituality inside them doesn’t feel so frightened to come forth.”^{xix}

“I don’t find spiritual insight sitting around thinking ‘thinky’ thoughts about what it all means and who God is,” she explains. I find God in the utter *daily*ness and mess of it all... “I’m a worried fifty-one-year-old now with a lot of faith... My faith is not a white paper – [like] ‘I have a position paper on what it means to be a Christian.’ In fact, my faith has been so challenged by having America be under the thumb of fundamentalist Christians.”^{xx}

Lamott was grasped by the palpable presence of Jesus when she was thirty and wandered into a Presbyterian Church vestibule, pulled in by the music – in the throes of a hangover after just having had an abortion. The best-selling *Traveling Mercies*, published in 1999 traces her road to faith. She had long struggled with addiction, bulimia, sexual promiscuity and self-

loathing.^{xxi} But a typical Christian bookstore now won't carry her books, because, as she says, "I'm irreverent, I have a very dark sense of humor... I have a very playful relationship with Jesus, I imagine. If Jesus doesn't have a sense of humor, I am so doomed that none of this matters anyway. But assuming that Jesus does and God does – that he or she does have a sense of humor – my relationship is reflective of that. I feel that presence of goodness, or holiness, and deep, sweet dearness kind of rolling its eyes. Sometimes I can imagine God shaking his or her head going, 'Oh, Annie, whatever.' Other times, when I have been at my most awful, most feeling cast out and lost and hopeless, I feel the love of a mother-father God. I feel loved like a baby would be."^{xxii}

This may be the real answer to why doctrinal certainty is the opposite of faith and why doubt is the handmaiden to faith. Jesus loves Peter even after he's denied him three times.^{xxiii} Jesus loves the young rich man, even though the man was about to reject his teaching that in order to inherit eternal life the man must sell all he owns and follow Jesus.^{xxiv}

William Sloane Coffin, as he read the French existentialists like Sartre and Camus in college, and as he read theologians like Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich, found that "my mind went toward the atheists, but my heart was pulled toward the theologians."^{xxv} Going to the university chapel, "Sunday by Sunday Jesus became more real to me. I loved the way he relied on narrative and example rather than on precept and principle. What he said, what he did, struck me as words and deeds of 'breathtaking rightness,' ... knowing that caring is the greatest thing in life ([that is]... tough-minded unsentimental love)."^{xxvi} Coffin explains, that, "The most important truths in life are to be found in human relations, not in facts and figures. The leap of faith is not a leap of thought but of action... You have to act wholeheartedly without absolute certainty."^{xxvii} Elsewhere Coffin has said that, "doctrines can divide, while compassion can only

unite.”^{xxviii} Also, Descartes was mistaken when he said, “I think therefore I am.” Nonsense, says Coffin: “I love, therefore I am.”^{xxix}

Annie LaMott writes, “I’m so surrounded by love. I was born and raised in this county [Marin County]. I’ve lived here for fifty-one years. I go to church every Sunday, which is like going to the gas station once a week and filling up.”^{xxx}

As for doubt, William Sloane Coffin quotes the German poet Rilke in giving the advice “to be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves.” Gradually, then, he suggests, “you will live into the answers.”^{xxxi} Especially regarding the questions about God, Coffin suggests, “We learn more when we don’t try to understand too soon.” As Emily Dickinson once said, “The Truth must dazzle gradually / or every man be blind.”^{xxxii}

So, I want always to be a Doubting Thomas. I want to have personal, tangible, direct experiences of the living, loving Christ -- not dogmatic, doctrinal statements about him made by others with the request that I simply believe. I want to be patient toward all that is unsolved for me. I want to love the questions, and live experientially into the answers. I want to learn gradually so that I’m not blinded by the truth. I long to hear the risen Christ say, as he said to his errant disciples, “Peace be with you. Peace be with you.”^{xxxiii}

BENEDICTION

The peace which passes understanding, the peace of God,
Which the world can neither give nor take away,
Be among us, and abide in our hearts, now and always. Amen.

NOTES

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- ⁱ John 20: 19-31.
- ⁱⁱ Mark 15:34; Matthew 27:46.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Psalm 22: 1-8.
- ^{iv} William Sloane Coffin, *Letters to a Young Doubter* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), p. x.
- ^v *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- ^{vi} *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- ^{vii} *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- ^{viii} *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.
- ^{ix} *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.
- ^x Adam Hamilton, *Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White: Thoughts on Religion, Morality, and Politics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), p. 136.
- ^{xi} Job 10:2-3.
- ^{xii} Ecclesiastes 3:16 – 4:3.
- ^{xiii} Ecclesiastes 4:1.
- ^{xiv} Adam Hamilton, Personal letter to Daniel Clendenin.
- ^{xv} Hamilton, *Seeing Gray*, pp. 133-134.
- ^{xvi} *Ibid.*, p. 134.
- ^{xvii} Annie Lamott, “O Annie, Whatever” in Bob Abernethy and William Bole, *The Life of Meaning: Reflections on Faith, Doubt, and Repairing the World* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), p. 384.
- ^{xviii} *Ibid.*, p. 383.
- ^{xix} *Ibid.*, p. 380.
- ^{xx} *Ibid.*, p. 381.
- ^{xxi} *Ibid.*, p. 379.
- ^{xxii} *Ibid.*, p. 383.
- ^{xxiii} John 21:15-19.
- ^{xxiv} Mark 10:17-22.
- ^{xxv} Coffin, *Letters to a Young Doubter*, p. 37.
- ^{xxvi} *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- ^{xxvii} *Ibid.*, p. 150.
- ^{xxviii} William Sloane Coffin, *Credo Louisville*: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 9.
- ^{xxix} *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- ^{xxx} LaMott, “O Annie, Whatever,” p. 384.
- ^{xxxi} Coffin, *Letters to a Young Doubter*, p. ix.
- ^{xxxii} *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- ^{xxxiii} John 20: 21,26.