



Ordinary Time 17 February 2019

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Genesis 45:3-11, 15, John 20:24-29

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Introduction

Almost as soon as I told Kara that I would take faith and doubt as my topic for this sermon series, I began to regret it. That was the first, and far from the last, doubt I had in the course of preparing this sermon. When I started, one of the first things that came to mind was today's Gospel. "Doubting Thomas," as he is often called, does not have such a good reputation in Christian circles. However, that is not fair. He is actually a very modern individual. He is one of us. He thinks the way we have been trained to think, critically. He is actually doing what I try to teach my pupils to do: Don't just take someone's word for something. Check it out yourself; think for yourself.

I

Faith and doubt are not opposites

A superficial reading of John 20 leads to a stark contrast between faith and doubt. Faith and doubt are thus considered to be opposites. So if you doubt, you begin to feel guilty – or at least not very good. Some persons consider doubt to be a sin. That is not only wrong; it is also unhealthy. It makes more sense – and is better for our spiritual and mental health – to look at doubt as a byproduct of the limitations of our understanding.

Because we don't have all the answers, we shall, of course, struggle with all the big questions – Does God exist?, Why is there evil, How should we understand the resurrection? and so on – as well as with a lot of the smaller ones, too. Once we acknowledge our limitations, we can accept our doubts and engage them. Moreover, we can do that without feelings of guilt or perhaps fear, but with honesty – and the exciting anticipation that we are on the way to achieving deeper understanding.

Faith is often seen as the opposite of doubt. But that perspective needs to be flipped. The opposite of faith is not doubt. The opposite of faith is certainty; where there is certainty there is no room for faith. When we know something, when we are absolutely certain about it, we may have knowledge, but we do not have faith.

II

Faith is movement

When faith is not the opposite of doubt, what is it then? It is perhaps easier to start with what faith is not. It is not static. It is not something that once cast never changes.

This is the fundamental insight of Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher. Faith is movement, dynamic, not something we have or do not have.

He rejects the classic opposition of reason and faith that was so dominant in his time to emphasize that faith describes a becoming, a process. Faith does not mean now I have got it right, nor is faith irrational. Faith

means I am on the way. I am learning better to understand what God's will for me is.

Theologians call this growth sanctification. It is the continuation in our lives of what happened when we accepted Christ.

To explain this, I need to back up a minute. All Christians, whether Protestant, Catholic or Orthodox, recognize that we are all sinners, so God can never accept us as we are. As a result, many Christians in the history of the Church have tried to do all kinds of things – like buy indulgences – to convince God to accept them. The fundamental, radical insight that ignited the Reformation is Luther's re-discovery of Paul's recognition that we do not have to do all these things. We just have to accept Christ. That is justification. It is a once and for all thing. We are accepted – and that's it.

However, it does not stop there. Our life continues after we have accepted Christ. We proceed to live in the wake of this grace we have received. This phase is what theologians call sanctification. John Wesley described it as "growing in grace."

It does not matter whether we use Kierkegaard or John Wesley or just common sense to try to understand this. The point is faith is dynamic. It changes. It develops. It gets stronger – and sometimes it gets weaker.

Doubt is an important element in all of this – an ultimately positive element – an element we can name, we can accept – and we do not need to be afraid of or ashamed of.

Doubt is restless, searching, seeking; always growing, asking, probing, yearning. This longing can lead one towards faith – just as it can lead one away from it.

III

Faith is a relationship

When Søren Kierkegaard rejected the classic opposition of reason and faith, he was asserting a biblical position. For Jesus and for Paul faith describes a relationship, not assent to certain doctrines. Jesus did not expect that his disciples agree with his exegesis of the Torah; he invited them to follow him. Paul also did not demand that all Christians share all of his theological opinions. He often couched them as considered recommendations or as suggestions. However, he did insist that they trust Christ, that they enter into a relationship with him.

Faith is not belief – "belief" is an intellectual belief, while "faith" is a matter of trust that leads to action.

Faith is something we live out. It is something that shows. It does not have to be flashy or apparent, but it is not something that just plays out in our heads or in sophisticated discussions.

Faith can do many things. It can give hope. It can help us in many ways. However, it cannot block out darkness, or doubt. No relationship can ever do that. Just as courage is persisting in the face of fear, so faith is persisting in the presence of doubt.

Faith becomes then an active movement of trusting in God – and a practice, living that trust. This trust is usually sustained by belief – because we do have reasons. We do not enter into this relationship blindly. We have our reasons. But these are our personal reasons. No one else can really understand them.

Have you ever tried to explain to someone why you love that particular woman or that particular man? It does not ever work. No one else can ever truly understand why you love him or her.

Faith is more or less the same. We have our reasons for this relationship with God, for our trust. The last leap, however, we must make ourselves.

Doubt is thus not just something that rocks us, that shakes us up; it can also be a strength. Doubt acknowledges our own limitations and confirms — or challenges — fundamental beliefs, and is not a detractor of belief but a crucial part of it.

If we do not accept both the commonality and importance of doubt, we do not allow for the possibility of mistakes or misjudgments. While certainty frequently calcifies into rigidity, intolerance and self-righteousness, doubt can deepen, clarify and explain. This, of course, goes far beyond religious faith.¹

Faith is not for cowards. As Paul Tillich once said, “The affirmation that Jesus is the Christ is an act of faith and consequently of daring courage.... [D]oubt is not the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith. Therefore, there is no faith without risk.”²

When we appeal to some infallible foundation, be it a book, a person or an office, we are trying to ban all doubt. But when we ban all doubt, we have gutted faith. We are abandoning faith for certainty. That is understandable – and it is human, but it is not Christian. For, as we can read in Hebrews, *[t]o have faith is to be sure of the things we hope for, to be certain of the things we cannot see.* (Hebrews 11:1)
Amen!

¹ Julia Baird, Doubt as a Sign of Faith: <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/26/opinion/julia-baird-doubt-as-a-sign-of-faith.html>, 2/16/2019 12:01 PM

² Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 2* (University of Chicago Press: Feb. 15, 1975), pp 116-7.