

“Faith and Doubt”

a sermon by

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Text: “Immediately the father of the child cried out, ‘I believe; help my unbelief!’” (Mark 9:24).

Two weeks ago I was on study leave at Princeton Seminary. One of the enjoyable aspects of that time away was to spend the weekend in New York City. There is something very appealing to me about New York. It is, as you know, in many ways a difficult city. I took the train from Princeton to Penn Station. Then I took a cab over to the hotel. New York cab drivers are a breed unto themselves. I asked the cabbie if he had change for a ten-dollar bill. He replied, “In New York ten dollars is change.”

On Friday night I had the chance to see the play “Doubt,” which won the Tony award for “Best Play of 2005.” It is a haunting play about a Roman Catholic priest who is serving a parish, teaching in the parish school, and coaching the basketball team. He is apparently well liked by his students and the members of the parish, but early on in the play there are dark clouds. The principal of the school, a resolute older nun, is convinced that this priest is molesting one of the male students in the school.

There are a number of troubling themes in the play. One, of course, is whether this priest has really acted in an inappropriate way toward this student or whether the principal is just jealous over this popular priest and coach. The other is the role that the hierarchy plays in the church. The structure of the church is such that accountability can often be ignored and often there are cover-ups which cause great suffering.

I.

There is a passage in Mark's gospel that deals quite eloquently with the theme of "faith and doubt." The Scripture this morning follows immediately after the story of the "Transfiguration," when Jesus returns from the mountain to find a situation of turmoil. A man has brought his epileptic son to the disciples of Jesus for healing, but the disciples were not able to heal this young boy. A number of commentators have accurately observed that there are really two sections to this passage: 1) a dispute between Jesus and his disciples (verse 19) and 2) the healing story itself (verses 14-18, 20-29).

One of the most compelling figures in the story is the boy's father. He has watched helplessly through the years as his son struggled with these terrible fits, which often cast the boy into the water or fire. In sheer desperation the father says to Jesus, "If you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us" (Mark 9:22).

Jesus responded by saying, "If you are able! - all things are possible for the one who believes." Then Mark says, "Immediately the father of the child cried out, 'I believe; help my unbelief.'"

This story is powerful on a number of different levels, but certainly one of those levels is the tension between faith and doubt.

II.

In the vocabulary of religion the word "doubt" has often had bad press. How many preachers have you heard use it in a positive way? "Faith" is the great word. Faith, as we said last week, is the victory that overcomes the world. And is not doubt the great enemy of faith?

So this morning I want to say a good word about "doubt." After all, it is one of the noblest powers that we possess. There are very few realms in life where doubt has not had an important role in the development of our understanding.

Take, if you will, the scientific realm. For thousands of years people believed that the world was flat. That is the cosmology of Scripture itself. And, yet, there were doubters-- Copernicus and Galileo to name two. They saw in their telescopes evidence that caused them to question this most basic assumption. Their mathematical calculations began to make them wonder about the force of the sun on the planets and vice versa. Galileo was right when he called doubt the "father of discovery."

The same is true in the life of faith. Jesus himself showed this magnificent power of critical thinking. “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth”—that was the Law of Moses. But Jesus doubted that. He saw the Pharisees with their long prayers, broad phylacteries, rigid Sabbath rules, dietary laws, and he doubted them all. He heard people say that the Samaritans were a despised and inferior race, but he scorned that notion. A good Samaritan, he said, is better than a bad priest.

You see, sometimes the strongest faith is reached through deep personal struggles. Someone once observed that there are two ways a person comes to faith. One is to inherit it, to borrow it, or to swallow it without question. But generally that kind of faith is not really yours. You never had to fight for it.

The other way that a person comes to faith is through deep struggles that move a person from doubt to faith. The Bible is certainly a book of faith. It is also a book that is filled with the struggles of individuals who wrestled with their doubts and unbelief. Listen to Gideon, one of the great judges of Israel, “If God is with us, then why has all this befallen us?” Or the Psalmist who said, “My tears have been my food day and night, while they continually say to me, ‘Where is your God?’” Listen to Job complaining to God: “I cry to you, and you do not answer me” or to Jeremiah calling God “a deceitful brook” and “waters that fail.”

We like to think that the Bible is a book of faith. Well, of course it is! But listen to those other voices: “Vanity of vanity,” writes Ecclesiastes, “All is vanity.” Certainly there is nothing more moving than the words of Jesus on the cross, “My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?” This morning I am speaking to someone here who is struggling with doubt. The Bible is not your enemy; it is your friend. All its faith was hammered out on the hard anvil of doubt.

III.

Doubt, then, is not the enemy of faith. It is often the door to which a person enters “the holy of holies.” Paul Tillich in his little book, *The Dynamics of Faith*, speaks of the necessity of doubt. Faith demands trust. It demands courage. Therefore, by its very nature, doubt is a part of faith. In dealing with young people—and particularly teenagers—we need to understand that. The development of faith in the life of a young person includes doubt. It includes the right to question, to learn, to compare, and to make up one’s own mind. G. K. Chesterton once observed, “Who never doubted never half believed.”

But let us be honest about one thing. If we are going to doubt our faith, let us be sure to doubt our doubts as well. One of the fiercest battles in our society today is the struggle between those who hold the theory of evolution and those who argue for what they call the theory of intelligent design. In this kind of debate we need to be very careful. The Christian church has been on the wrong side of the debate between science and religion more times than you can count on the fingers of both your hands. We must not be afraid of science or of scientific inquiry. But on the other hand, we must also acknowledge our conviction that the world in which we live is a world that owes its origin not to chance but a benevolent creator. In the Presbyterian Church we are free to believe both in evolution and a creator God.

You see, it may be important for a person to doubt his or her faith, but it is also important to doubt our doubts as well. I thought of that several years ago when I visited the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., and read once again the immortal words carved in stone of the Gettysburg Address. A newspaper editor in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, heard President Lincoln give the Gettysburg Address. Listen to what he wrote in the Harrisburg Newspaper: "We will pass over the silly remarks of the President; for the credit of the nation, we are willing that the veil of oblivion shall be dropped over them, and they shall no more be repeated or thought of." Here was a man who stood in the presence of greatness and he disbelieved.

The older I grow the more I ponder Judas Iscariot. He came so near to not betraying Jesus. He was a loyal disciple. Jesus had trusted him with the finances of that group. Then his doubts began. What kind of messiah, he wondered, is this, who will not stand up to the Roman occupation? So the doubts grew, and one day they exploded. He betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. He came so near not doing it, and when he realized what he had done, he hanged himself. If only he had waited. He stood in the presence of divine greatness and disbelieved.

I think you understand what I am trying to say. Believers can be naïve and credulous, but disbelievers can be fools as well. Don't join their company. Take a long look at the Christ! The world desperately needs him. He is the way, the truth, and the life.

Amen