

“When Faith Grows Strong”

a sermon by

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

When one thinks of Christianity, one of the first words that comes to mind is the word “faith.” After all, the entire Bible has a great deal to say about faith:

“Your faith has made you well.” (Mark 5:34)

“Faith is the victory that overcomes the world.” (I John 3:4)

“If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you can move mountains.” (Matthew 17:20)

“Faith, hope, love, these three abide.” (I Corinthians 13: 13)

But what about doubt? One wonders what place it has among the Christian tradition.

I.

In Mark’s gospel there is a remarkable story about Jesus’ healing a young boy with epilepsy. Mark places this narrative immediately following the Transfiguration story on Mt. Hermon. As Jesus descends from the mountain, he encounters a very sad situation. A father has brought his epileptic son to Jesus’ disciples to be healed. But the disciples are unable to heal the boy. So, the father turns to Jesus and says, “If you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help him” (verse 22). Jesus said to him, “If you are able! – All things can be done for the one who believes.” Immediately the father of the child cried out, “I believe; help my unbelief.”

I wonder how many of us find ourselves in the same place as that father. We believe. We believe in God. We believe in Christ. But what about our unbelief?

II.

Well, let me offer two observations. The first is that the capacity to doubt is one of humankind’s noblest powers. Without the capacity to think critically there would be no progress in our world.

Think of this in the realm of science. For centuries people believed the world was flat and that the sun rotated around the earth. But then men like Copernicus and Galileo began to doubt.

They saw in their experiments inconsistencies which led them to conclude that the sun was the center of our solar system and that the earth revolved around the sun and not vice versa. Almost every important scientific discovery has come because someone had the capacity to doubt the common wisdom.

But doubt has an equally important role in our religious life. Paul Tillich in his book *The Dynamics of Faith* speaks of doubt not as an enemy of faith, but as its friend.

Jesus certainly had this capacity to doubt. “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” – that was the true law, they said. Jesus doubted that. He saw the Pharisees, standing on the corner, praying long prayers, with broad phylacteries, rigid Sabbath rules, dietary laws as essential to true religion, and he doubted them all.

The Jews of Jesus’ day hated the Samaritans. But he scorned that. He told of a Samaritan who stopped on the road to Jericho to help a wounded man and concluded that a Good Samaritan was better than a bad priest.

III.

The second observation I would make is that the strongest faith has almost always come out of the struggle with doubt. Someone once observed that there are only two ways to come to the Christian faith. One is to inherit it, borrow it, and swallow it without question.

But that is seldom the way that a great faith comes. A great faith comes through disappointment, hardship, suffering, and despair.

The person who does not understand this does not understand the Bible. It is a book of faith, to be sure. But it is also a remarkable depository of individuals struggling with doubt and disbelief.

Listen to Gideon, one of the judges of Israel, “If the Lord is with us, why has all this fallen upon us?”

Listen to the Psalmist, who says,
“My tears have been my food day and night,
While they continually say to me,
‘Where is your God?’”

The Bible only a book of faith? But listen to Ecclesiastes: “Vanity of vanity, all is vanity. That which befalls the sons of men befalls beasts ... as the one dies, so dies the other.”

Or, listen to Christ on the cross. “My God, my God, why have thou forsaken me?”

This witness is true in the life of some of the great believers in the history of the church. Take John Knox, the great Scottish Reformer.

Here was a person of great faith and action, who almost singlehandedly won the faith of Scotland for the Protestant cause. Yet, Knox also tells of a time when his soul was filled with

“anger, wrath, and indignation, which it conceived against God and called all of God’s promises into doubt.”

We sing Martin Luther’s great hymn, “A Mighty Fortress is Our God,” but Luther once wrote in his diary, “For more than a week, Christ was totally lost. I was shaken by desperation and blasphemy against God.”

So, I wonder if there is any one of us here who has not had periods of doubt. Sometimes our doubts are intellectual. We wonder how one reconciles the study of science with religion. We struggle to understand how a good God allows all the suffering in the world.

But sometimes doubt is personal. Why is my child suffering this terrible disease? Why did my marriage fail? Why did I have to be the one to come down with this disabling disease?

That, of course, brings us to the real issue. How does faith overcome doubt?

IV.

Today, I emphasize one central matter that I think is part of every great person of faith. They struggled with disbelief until one day they begin to doubt their doubts.

I thought of that some weeks ago when I was in Washington, D.C. and stood before the Lincoln Memorial and saw the noble figure who is seated there. On one wall of the Lincoln Memorial are inscribed the words of Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address. On the other side are the immortal words of the Gettysburg Address.

One of the people who was present at Gettysburg on that day was a newspaper editor from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, just thirty-five miles from Gettysburg. The next day he wrote in his newspaper, “We 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 that they shall no more be repeated or thought of.”

Here was a man who stood in the presence of greatness and was blind. It was he, the skeptic, who could not recognize greatness. If only he had doubted his doubts.

The older I grow the more I ponder Judas Iscariot. He came so near to not betraying Jesus. He was a loyal disciple. It took courage to join that little band of believers and Judas had that in him. Jesus trusted Judas. He made him the treasurer of that little group of disciples.

Then the doubts begin to set in. What kind of Messiah was it, Judas wondered, that refused to engage in a violent revolution against the hated Romans – a messiah who talked about loving one’s enemies and turning the other cheek?

So the doubts grew until finally Judas decided to betray his master for thirty pieces of silver. He came so close to not doing this, and when he saw what he had done, he was overcome with guilt and shame and he hanged himself. If only he had waited until Easter, until Pentecost and the coming of St. Paul. He stood in the presence of greatness and disbelieved.

Do you see what I am trying to say? Often we look around us and see the way that religion is being marketed as if it were a formula for wealth and success. Some of the excesses of religious groups are beyond belief. To be sure, believers can be credulous. But disbelievers can be mistaken as well. Don't join their company. Take a long look at Christ. He is the way, the truth and the life.

As I look around me today, I see a lot of people who are struggling mightily. They are struggling in their marriages, they are struggling in their jobs, and they are struggling with their children. They are frightened about the future. "Look at me," someone is no doubt saying, "God would have to work a miracle to change me."

Well, that is the kind of thing that God has been doing for a long time: changing Jacob to Israel, Simon to Peter, Saul to Paul. The gospel of Jesus Christ is a transforming gospel that can change people's lives.

There is nothing more critical for our nation, our community, and our church than that we have people who can move from doubt to faith, who can trust the transforming power of God to turn their lives in a radically different way.

"Lord, we believe. Help our Unbelief."

Amen!