

The First Baptist Church, Midland
October 25, 2009
John 20:19-29

The Confessions of a Doubter
A Sermon by the Rev. John P. Dick

Last year a fascinating movie made its debut. It was a courageous if not confusing story set in 1964 in a catholic school in the Bronx. The title of the film? *Doubt*. Did you see it?

A charismatic priest named Father Flynn (played by Philip Seymore Hoffman) was trying to upend the schools' strict customs, which had long been fiercely guarded by Sister Aloysius (played by Meryl Streep). This iron-gloved nun served as the school's principal and believed in the power of fear and discipline. Yet the winds of political change were sweeping through the community and Sister Aloysius was not accepting it well. And when the school accepted its first black student, the situation grew tense. This young boy who found himself in a predominantly Irish/Italian school was buffeted about with only Father Flynn coming to his rescue.

Sister Aloysius began to question the relationship that was emerging between the priest and this new student and set off on a personal crusade to unearth the truth and to expunge Flynn from the school. Her agenda was clear... she was out to destroy the priest. Her suspicions had not a shard of truth, but her moral superiority drove her behavior and soon this priest and nun were locked into a battle of wills which threatened to tear apart the community as well as the school. And in the process, the seeds of doubt were deeply planted. *Was Father Flynn pursuing an inappropriate relationship with this young boy? Was Sister Aloysius a vindictive nun who could not abide the social change engulfing her community? Was the school growing antiquated in its ability to respond to the needs of the city? Was the child a pawn in this much larger psycho/spiritual drama?* And here's the thing. When the movie ended, there was no clarity around any of the major questions. The viewer was simply left with doubt related to the whole situation. It was a fascinating film.

I wonder... have you ever had such a time when you were doubting some of your fundamental values or beliefs? Have you ever struggled with wondering if it's okay to question some of those things you've held inviolable all your life in the light of the significant societal change taking place all around? That's what was happening in this film.

There's a great poem called *A Doubter's Prayer* by Anne Bronte which speaks to what I'm wondering. (Poems By Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell. Charlotte, Anne, and Emily Bronte. Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1848.)

ETERNAL Power, of earth and air!
Unseen, yet seen in all around,
Remote, but dwelling everywhere,
Though silent, heard in every sound;

If e'er thine ear in mercy bent,
When wretched mortals cried to Thee,
And if, indeed, Thy Son was sent,
To save lost sinners such as me:

Then hear me now, while kneeling here,
I lift to thee my heart and eye,
And all my soul ascends in prayer,
OH, GIVE ME--GIVE ME FAITH! I cry.

Without some glimmering in my heart,
I could not raise this fervent prayer;
But, oh! a stronger light impart,
And in Thy mercy fix it there.

While Faith is with me, I am blest;
It turns my darkest night to day;
But while I clasp it to my breast,
I often feel it slide away.

Then, cold and dark, my spirit sinks,
To see my light of life depart;
And every fiend of Hell, methinks,
Enjoys the anguish of my heart.

What shall I do, if all my love,
My hopes, my toil, are cast away,
And if there be no God above,
To hear and bless me when I pray?

If this be vain delusion all,
If death be an eternal sleep,
And none can hear my secret call,
Or see the silent tears I weep!

Oh, help me, God! For thou alone
Canst my distracted soul relieve;
Forsake it not: it is thine own,
Though weak, yet longing to believe.

What a powerful expression. I'll ask it again. Have you ever found yourself in such a state? Has life ever sapped your vitality and stolen your faith? Have you ever had moments of serious doubt? This "Doubter's Prayer" is probably expressive of a spiritual reality that has touched us all at some point along the way... maybe more than once. For who among us can say we have never experienced that sense of emptiness... that feeling of distance from God?

The sentiment of the Psalmist writing in the 22nd Psalm is descriptive of what I mean:

**"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
And by night, but find no rest..."**

Of course, these were the very words borrowed by Jesus himself as he suffered the terrible indignity, the crude belligerence, and the incredible pain of the cross. So yes, I suppose we are on safe ground when suggesting that we all find those moments of doubt creeping into our faith.

Yet it is at the same time in our moments of deepest despair that God can come to transform our spirits and change our attitudes. Tennyson in his famous *In Memoriam* said it so well: "There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds." I think he is right. For it is in those moments of deepest angst that God can bring us to the threshold of new discovery. And this morning we have the story of one who illustrates exactly what I mean.

It was the evening of the first day of the week, Sunday night, the night following the morning resurrection and there they were huddled together, this small band of badly disillusioned and frightened people. There were ten of them, we guess, for Judas has by now hanged himself and Thomas somehow missed the memo calling the meeting. Can you imagine what they must have been feeling... the questions they must have been raising? Have you ever wondered about Jesus and this business of the cross and the resurrection? Have you ever asked yourself *is my faith anything more than just superstition?* Have you ever questioned why you believe what you believe? Well if ever you have then you know what was happening in that upper room. And you also understand that this was a pivotal moment.

Conversations were unfolding and decisions were emerging. All the experiences of the preceding three years were being put to the test... the lessons about loving and hoping were being challenged and the very foundations for believing were being desperately questioned. The events of the past 48 hours had turned their world upside down and now there was only one prevailing emotion...despair. No, make that two prevailing emotions... despair and DOUBT!

This is the picture that John is painting with his words in this 20th chapter. **“When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews.”** (verse 19) He wants us not only to understand the predicament of the moment but the passion as well. These guys were confused... they were broken... and they were frightened for their own lives. Their confession of faith had turned into an expression of doubt. And John wants us to understand that this is okay! He wants us to know that it is acceptable to have doubts related to our faith. It is part of being human. In fact, to take this a step further he wants us to know that sometimes it is when we are in the very throws of our deepest doubt that one’s encounter with God can be most persuasive and life changing. For it was in that moment when the valley was just as deep as a valley can be that God in the person of Christ entered their lives once again. In the words of John: **“Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’”**

Immediately the disciples responded. They grew excited and overwhelmed. At once they recognized their Savior and their friend. The story says, **“the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.”** Isn’t it a shame that Thomas missed the moment? The truth is I feel kind of sorry for the guy because he has had to carry a heavy burden. Oh, he was an apostle all right... went through all that discipleship training... there is even some evidence that he would later go to India and establish the church in that great nation. Yet how do we remember him?

Next to Judas he is probably the most maligned of the disciples. We see him as weak and not even present at that defining moment. And then because his humanity shows through and his doubt waves its ugly head he is forever branded. What do we call him? You know the label... *Doubting Thomas*. Here we are 2,000 years after his moment of indiscretion and he is still the patron saint of doubters. When told by the others that they had seen the Lord he said, **“Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”** All he said was I need some proof... I need to experience for myself that what you say is true.

I have a hunch that there are more than a few right here this morning that can identify with this approach to life. Let’s face it... in a community like Midland with a heavy orientation to research this is the way we see the world. We want proof! And for that slight impropriety Thomas was forever misunderstood.

Oh my goodness... what if I were remembered for every mistake I ever made. What if I were remembered for every question I ever had about the resurrection or every doubt I ever expressed about my faith. Chances are my ministry would have long ago come crashing down around me. But I’ve been one of the lucky ones... my doubting moments have gone unnoticed. Not so for Thomas.

And that leads me to make a confession. I have to say that I am not happy with the way history has painted his portrait. No, I have to express that I’m not happy with those who are quick to say he was misguided and without substance. More to the point, I

rather like Thomas. And my affinity has nothing to do with the fact that his weaknesses are my weaknesses, too. No, I am drawn to Thomas because even though he is not the hero in the story... even though he quickly fades from view following this episode in John's 20th chapter... even though his faith is not as strong as Peter's, he was still a person of integrity. Thomas spoke from his heart not with pious platitudes but with precious sincerity. Here was a man who was saying, *I must work this through for myself. I cannot believe simply because you say it is so... I cannot believe simply because you believe... No, I must make sense of my faith from within. Faith is, for me, a gift of critical reason and impassioned experience.*

Please note: Thomas never said the disciples were wrong. He never called them liars or questioned their sanity. He simply spoke out of his own life experience. Unless I can have a living encounter with God... unless my mind can be joined with my heart to move toward confession of faith, it will hold no meaning. I'll say it again... I see Thomas as a person of integrity whose doubts lead to the strengthening of his faith.

I don't know about you, but I think we need more Thomases in this old world of ours. I think sometimes we rush to judgment and we believe for all the wrong reasons. Faith becomes an insurance policy that we quickly embrace in order to keep the ugly side of life at bay. And sometimes we hesitate to admit we might have a question or two or even a healthy dose of skepticism.

But through the years I have grown to understand that this is okay. In fact, it isn't until we can creatively and intentionally confess to our doubts that we can move forward to more clearly understand and define what we believe.

So all in all, never forget that it's okay to have a reservation or two... to confess that there are pieces of our faith that just don't seem to fit into place... to admit that we don't have all the answers and that sometimes when life gets tough, questions may loom. Thomas Paine said it so well. During the long dark night of the Revolutionary War when people both north and south wondered if any good would come of it all, he wrote in the *American Crisis I*: "These are the times that try men's souls."

Yes dear friends, we all face those critical crossroads in life when we so much want to believe but somehow find that we simply cannot. Understand that what seems like such a clear call to faith for one generation may be very foreign to our children and our children's children. And that's okay... for understand too, that like Thomas of old we must pursue with integrity for ourselves the hard questions of meaning which define who we are in the eyes of God and why we are here. For then and only then as the answers begin to emerge with some clarity from life's experience will we begin to take ownership and really believe in the God who created us and the Lord who sustains us. For remember, it was in the midst of his deepest struggle to make sense out of the world in which he found himself that God one day broke through to clear the mind of Thomas and touch his heart leading him to proclaim, "**My Lord and my God!**"

You see, God did not punish Thomas for his doubting ways. To the contrary, he rewarded him. And how much more will he reward us, too. For always remember...
“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Amen and AMEN!