

“Faith Isn’t Certainty”

#2 in the *CREDO* series

Text: Mark 9:14-24

Sermon by Dr. Robert Lee Hill

Sunday, March 20, 2011

8:30 a.m. (Chapel) , 9:20 a.m. and 10:45 am (Sanctuary)

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Lent is a time for deepening faith. I hope and trust you’re experiencing such a deepening. I hope and trust that you’re experiencing the Lenten season as a blessing for your faith, that your prayers are becoming deeper, that your study times are taking on new urgency, that you’re being quickened to greater service, that worship is becoming more energized.

Today we come to one of the most important aspects of what we believe as Christians and how we embody that belief in the 21st century. The theme for this Sunday in our Lenten *CREDO* sermon series is the relationship between “Faith” and “Doubt.” Faith is a presupposition of the classical creeds of the church. That we believe in Christ, that we hold basic tenets of faith about God and the reality of God’s love and grace are assumed by most folks who are part of Christian congregations.

But this morning we’re honing in on the basic tension that also abides in our hearts and minds as part of the Christian faith tradition, as part of the “Christian Matrix,” to use a reference to one of the better movie series related to faith and mystery and belief.

A Time for Questions

A significant part of the deepening of faith has to do with engaging new questions, teasing out new answers to old questions and often replacing time-worn and tattered answers with fresh ones.

The questions remain, and that’s a good thing.

An Age-Old Dilemma

Dealing with questions that life presents to faith was put into a classical formula in the 5th century by Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo in North Africa. Eventually it came to be known as “*Fides quaerens intellectum.*” In English that translates “Faith seeking understanding.” “For there are some things which we do not believe unless we understand them, and there are other

things which we do not understand unless we believe them.”¹

Later on in the 13th century, Thomas Aquinas would reverse that phrasing to read “Understanding seeking faith.”

Doubts

Six hundred years later Paul Tillich would declare that doubt is always an essential part of seeking to understand what faith is all about.² “Doubt isn't the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith,” he said. And he would go on to describe the methodological, skeptical and existential sorts of doubting there are within human experience.

One of his students, Frederick Buechner, picked up on this note as he took classes from Paul Tillich at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. Buechner would go on to write novels and literary and faith-related essays and to compose some of the most daringly positive descriptions of doubt’s essential connection to faith. He said, “... if you don’t have any doubts, you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.”³

What About Certainty?

Now, there are some believers, some theologians, some denominations that would hold that doubt has no place in the Christian faith. Certainty, they would contend, is what the Christian way promises and delivers. To raise the specter of doubt is to cast suspicion on the whole enterprise of believing. Some folks in this camp would go so far as to condemn my sermon title this morning, so sure are they that faith casts away all doubts.

The Dangers of Certainty

But there are more than a few dangers when it comes to casting out all doubts from faith.

- *To maintain that faith always leads to certainty in all matters pertaining to God results in confusion.* Certainty runs counter to our experience of all of God’s mysterious, wondrous ways.
- *It takes away all the fun “why” questions,* as well as all the vexing ones, too. In other words, certainty is boringly dependable but also deadening, as far as an interesting life goes.
- *Certainty in religion also almost always leads to some sort of violence* – physically, emotionally, relationally, politically. Nazi Germany was founded on Hitler’s certainty.

Fred Phelps and his family minions have made a pathetic, sick career of certainty. And the basis for suicide bombers around the globe, including those that have attacked the U.S., is always the certainty of their positions.

When we are honest about our faith, however, we know that some how certainty and faith don't really go together, but faith and doubt do.

Anne Lamott puts it succinctly: "The opposite of faith is not doubt: It is certainty. It is madness. You can tell you have created God in your own image when it turns out that he or she hates all the same people you do. The first holy truth in God 101 is that men and women of true faith have always had to accept the mystery of God's identity and love and ways. I hate that, but it's the truth."⁴

"Certainty is missing the point entirely. Faith includes noticing the mess, and emptiness and discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns. Faith also means reaching deeply within for the sense one was born with, the sense to go for a walk."⁵

Faith and doubt go together, in other words, really, hand in hand.

Belief and Unbelief in An Encounter with Jesus

Regarding faith and doubt, the 9th chapter of Mark's gospel contains one of the greatest nameless characters in the entirety of Holy Writ. Though Matthew and Luke have the semblance of this story of the healing of a boy – suffering apparently from epileptic seizures – Mark alone gives voice to one of the most profound utterances that faithful people ever can make: "I believe, help my unbelief." This utterance gives us our cue this morning about the true nature of faith.

The scene in Mark is a big affair. Jesus has come down from the mount of transfiguration and happens upon a dispute going on between his disciples and the scribes. Before Jesus can determine what the argument is all about, the crowd rushes toward him and a voice from the back plaintively describes the situation: "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not." (vss. 17-18). In today's scientifically dominated culture, we would diagnose the boy as having some sort of epilepsy. In Jesus' day, the likely cause for the

boy's condition would be understood to be a demonic presence. In fact, when the boy is brought near to Jesus so he can see him, Mark says that a "spirit" sees Jesus and immediately convulses the boy, causing him to fall on the ground, roll about and foam at the mouth. The poor father, delirious with loving worry and worrisome love cries out to Jesus, "This has been going on forever. If you are able to do something to help my boy, please do it now."

To which Jesus takes offense because the man said "if you are able." "If!? Come on now, you have no idea who you are dealing with. All things can be done for the one who believes." Then comes the father's desperate, divinely prompted, tender declaration. Douglas John Hall says "No Biblical verse is more existentially meaningful . . . than this prayer...."⁶ "I believe, help my unbelief," says the loving father.

Declaration of Belief

Hall is right. It's hard to imagine a more commendable, succinct way of showing your faith. He simply declares that he believes. His statement echoes what the Epistle to the Hebrews declares: "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." - Hebrews 11:1. The father is offering an honest summation of his faith, however limited it may be.

Humble Petition for Help with Unbelief

The father shows his humility by being honest and forthright about the limits of his belief. He doesn't believe everything. He knows himself well enough to ask for help. He's like the driver who's become humble and mature enough to ask directions when he's lost.

In 1903, a young poet Franz Xavier Kappus began writing letters to the great German poet Rilke wrote. The correspondence would last over five years. Rilke eventually published his half of the correspondence in what has now become a classic text, *Letters to a Young Poet*. Of all the advice and counsel Rilke gave to Kappus, one of the most profound pieces was "be patient towards all that is unsolved in your heart and ... try to love the questions themselves... you will [then] live into the answers."⁷

MYSTERY

"O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his

judgments and how inscrutable his ways! “ - Romans 11:33

Mother Teresa was, for all intents and purposes, a person of absolute faith, wasn't she? The energy and inspiration for Mother Teresa's extraordinary capacity for loving others, she said, again and again, derived from prayer. For her, the best life possible is a life lived in a disciplined rhythm of prayer and service. Prayer, she counseled, was the best activity in which we can discover God's exceeding love for each one of us individually and for the world as a whole. Mother Teresa was a person of seemingly absolute faith.

And yet, since her death, Mother Teresa has given another distinct “gift” to the world through the revelations about the extended season of despair in her spiritual life. In *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light*, a collection of her letters to her spiritual advisors, directors, and confessors,⁸ she expressed that she felt as if God were absent from her, except in fleeting moments, during the last fifty years of her life as a nun.

Some people were deeply disturbed by these disclosures. Some Christian fundamentalists pointed to the revelations of her despair as evidence of her not truly being a Christian. Some said she was “damned to hell” despite her countless good works. Others said they were offended that anyone would reveal anything negative like doubt in connection to Mother Teresa. But the doubting side of Mother's journey as a Christian is really a blessed bequest. Like all of us, if and when we are radically honest, Mother Teresa knew hesitation in her hopefulness, reluctance in her trust, and an absence of absolute certainty.

Indeed there was within Mother Teresa's experience of despair a deep, resonating bond with the one she followed as the Savior of her life: “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*”⁹ That she had such tormenting years of struggle and yet still acted in the spirit of God's love on behalf of the poorest of the poor, is one of the main reasons she is a premier great soul, and an inspiring exemplar.

Three Pieces of Homework

Before I close, I want to give you three pieces of homework.

- (1) Like the father who so graphically loved his son did, ***declare your beliefs as much as you know them to be true.*** Be ready to say what you believe, and be forthright and straightforward about them. As he was be humble and bold in your declaration, all at the same time.

- (2) As the pleading father and as Mother Teresa did, *petition God for help with your unbelief*. Make an appointment with any one of us on the ministerial staff. We are here for you. My times of counseling and listening to people stretching and going deeper has nearly doubled this Lenten season. It is always an honor to be with people in their spiritual transformations. But also make an appointment with God on a regular basis, on your calendar, your Iphone or Blackberry, whatever device you use, electronic or hard paper copy: "God, 3:00 p.m., Wednesday afternoon." And then show up for that appointment. You will be surprised, at first, at how God will come to meet you. And if God doesn't seem to meet you in exactly the way you desire, the discipline of your showing up will direct your ways in good ways, as it did with Mother Teresa, to do good service to people in need.
- (3) *Shape your prayers as thanksgiving prayers for God's presence with you even when you don't feel it*. Express your gratitude with the following prayer: "Gracious God, there's a common bond between the beseeching father in Mark's gospel and the young poet friend of Rilke and Mother Teresa and all other fellow strugglers and me: I don't always trust that You are there. Sometimes I can't see any evidence whatsoever that You even care. Yet, like Mother Teresa did – and like the beseeching father and the young poet and my fellow strugglers – I will keep on saying the words and keeping my appointments with You and showing up and acting in love toward others. And in doing those actions, I am trusting that I will eventually have a sure sense of Your presence, through Jesus Christ. Amen."

NOTES

- 1 Augustine, *Confessions* CXVIII
- 2 Paul Tillich, *The Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957)
- 3 Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p. ___]
- 4 Anne Lamott, *Salon.com*, April 27, 2005, http://dir.salon.com/opinion/feature/2005/04/27/gods_warning_signs/index.html.)
- 5 Anne Lamott, *Salon.com*, Dec. 5, 2003, <http://www.salon.com/life/col/lamott/2003/12/05/advent>.)
- 6 Douglas John Hall, *Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), p. 250.
- 7 Quoted in William Sloane Coffin, *Letters to A Young Doubter* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), p. ix.
- 8 Mother Teresa. *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the Saint of Calcutta*, compiled and edited by Brian Kolodiejchuk (New York: Doubleday, 2007)
- 9 Matthew 27:46