

Doubt

Sunday, August 22, 2021
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
Pastor James Haun

John 6:59-69

He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, "Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. And he said, "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father." Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

Doubt has always been a sensitive topic in the Church. Mention of doubt can bring an emotional response, and those responses vary widely. Traditionally doubt has been viewed as a completely bad thing. Doubt is the opposite of faith, and on several occasions, God pleads for us to have faith and to stop doubting. The response to doubt according to many is to stifle it. Hard questions of our faith are to be pushed aside or at least discouraged. The tragedy of this is that many good questions are not brought out into the open before God, and many hurting hearts are discouraged from pouring out their anguished questions, (even though the psalmist and the prophets frequently presented their doubts and hurts). In harsh and unhealthy contrast to this is the attitude held by many modern thinking folks in the Church who are quick to celebrate and glorify doubt. "Doubting Thomas" (John 20:24-31) is their hero, not because of his bold confession of faith at day's end, but because of his boldness to speak his doubts. In the name of modern scientific thought these people relish the collection of critical questions they can gather, and a smug attitude often afflicts them. While it is

good to have questions and to take them to God, these people can begin to sound like the serpent in the Garden ever questioning, “did God really say...?” (Genesis 3:1)

What are we to do with doubt and how shall we avoid these unhealthy extremes? Our Gospel lesson speaks directly to the matter, and the wise teacher in this important lesson is none other than Peter. We love to poke fun at this outspoken apostle as he often misspoke and made a fool of himself, yet here we find a noteworthy eloquence and a depth of truth which demands our close attention. Do you doubt me? Let us read on!

Our Gospel lesson is set in the synagogue at Capernaum as Jesus is concluding a very lengthy and controversial teaching. Jesus was explaining that he was like the manna which God sent down from heaven to Israel while they were in the desert. He called himself the bread of life and also insisted that we must eat his flesh if we are to have eternal life. Knowing that he was the Lamb of God who would soon shed his blood for the sin of the world Jesus also insisted that we must drink his blood. From where we sit, we can see that Jesus was telling us of the communion meal and the necessity of his giving himself on the Cross as a sacrifice for us, much like a sacrificial lamb which would be slaughtered and eaten. Jesus spoke so bluntly and with such little explanation that all were understandably offended and confused. John notes, *When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?”* Jesus’ opponents were becoming increasingly critical of him as his ministry progressed, and now he was even offending his long-time followers. It was a most uncomfortable scene as John further noted, *Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.* When we first hear the word *disciples*, we are shocked as we think of the twelve, however, it becomes obvious that John is not speaking of Jesus’ inner circle. Apparently, these were dedicated students of Jesus who followed him from town to town for weeks and months. This is all a very troubling development as up to this point in time Jesus’ following continued to grow. Suddenly there came this reversal, even among his most dedicated followers, and Jesus seemed unfazed by it all!

The scene is a disheartening one as many are turning away while Jesus appears to do nothing to bring them back. Had we been in that situation you or I probably would be shouting to the crowds to come back and desperately trying to re-explain everything which they had found offensive, but this was not our Lord’s response. The twelve were silent, and Jesus was about to break that silence as he would pose them a question, and that question was very bold!

We might expect a question about their thoughts on his teaching or some exhortation to believe, but instead they were assaulted with a big and frightening question. *So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?”* It appears that Jesus was demanding an immediate answer. Are you in or are you out? You may continue to follow me, or you may go away. Which is your pleasure? We might call it a “bottom

line” kind of question which immediately wanted to know their ultimate intentions. As was often the case, Peter spoke for the twelve, and judging from his remarks the disciples did not appear to be especially frightened or ready to desert.

By asking the big question Jesus kept the focus wide and upon the big picture. This is an important perspective to keep in a time of crisis. The pains and confusion of today consume all of our attention and we can quickly lose a proper vantage on a situation. One might come home from an especially difficult day at work and cry out, “This was the worst day of work I can remember!” The pain of it all may be very real. It may truly have been the worst day of work that this person has ever faced, but let us beware of what too easily follows such an exclamation. “I quit!” is a natural follow-up to such an awful day, but the wise and mature know better than to make this final statement. Those with life experience know that after such a terrible work experience the wise thing to do is to consider not merely that one miserable day, but to also recall their days, weeks, and years of work in that place. How does today fit in with the bigger picture of one’s experience with a particular job or with one’s overall career? It appears that Jesus was trying to keep the twelve in a big-picture mode.

Now we hear from Peter, and while he is known for having made a number of foolish and ill-advised remarks, we here find this lead disciple speaking in a way which was very much attuned to Jesus and the Lord’s plan. *Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”* Peter could see the big picture and could keep that wise perspective. Peter’s remark clearly implied that they too were thoroughly confused by Jesus’ teaching on that day. He made no false claims of being in agreement with the Master, for in actuality the twelve were baffled like the rest. Peter stated clearly and boldly that over the years Jesus had spoken a wisdom like no other. His words were words of life! Even beyond this he affirmed that they believed that Jesus was the Christ. Along with this affirmation of faith Peter spoke of the confusion of that day and the decision which it presented. They were truly confused, but they knew that there was no other rabbi to whom they could go who could teach such truths as Jesus did. “Today is confusing,” Peter was saying, “but it will soon become clear. We do not always grasp your teachings immediately, but we shall persist, and in time we will understand. Jesus, we are standing with you!”

Jesus and Peter appeared to have an amazing understanding, and I cannot help but think of Jesus as being tremendously proud of Peter at that moment. On several occasions Jesus exhorted the disciples not to doubt, and yet Jesus was also very patient with doubt among his followers. It is also apparent that Jesus knew that the real day of decision was still months away. After Jesus would die, rise, and then ascend into heaven the real day of decision would come, and until then Jesus was not going to worry about followers turning away. Soon all would see the big picture and be able to decide, but until then Jesus was patient. Peter recognized that Jesus was a mysterious man and had learned not to fear a little mystery. His remark, *to whom*

shall we go? has the ring of a left-handed compliment as if he were saying, “we tried looking for a better rabbi but couldn’t find one, so we suppose we will keep following you.” Peter’s words may seem awkward, but they spoke the truth well. Jesus was a teacher like no other, so even on a bad day they knew that he was the one to follow.

Peter shows us how doubt is to be handled. He understood the appropriate interplay of healthy faith and honest doubt. Faith is an ongoing work of *integration* and this process is lifelong. We hear our Bible lessons and God’s call to a righteous life, then we go out into a world which tells us to look out for ourselves and seek our own joy. We may be attracted to the world’s message and begin to doubt our faith. Such doubt does not necessarily evaporate immediately, and we may spend years wrestling with these conflicting voices. In time we come to truly understand and believe that seeking the Kingdom is far better than seeking this world’s pleasures. This may all take time and effort, but so it is with the work of faith.

Faith requires real effort, but it is worth it. Our epistle lesson is the Ephesian teaching on the armor of God. Paul tells us plainly that the life of faith is a battle against worldly and invisible forces that will try to destroy our belief and joy. We are called to battle, and as we gain battle experience our faith strengthens and matures! I have long treasured Bill Gothard’s insight that most people have faith, but for too many it is a faith which stopped growing somewhere around the third grade. We learn faith as children, and that faith relationship with Jesus may be very real and powerful, but as we grow older, we become distracted with learning the ways of this world and give no further attention to faith. Our learning of worldly knowledge continues on, but our grasp of faith remains in the third grade. Is it any surprise that many young people claim that their faith was shattered when they came to college and were bombarded by a host of doubts that they could not process? Third grade faith often loses the battle when it engages adult challenges. That immature faith was very real, but it was not challenged and nurtured along the way. Dealing with doubts should be a lifelong work for the believer.

In growing our faith and dealing with doubts we must always keep a big picture perspective. It is sad to learn of the trivial doubts which have derailed people’s faith. I remember a college classmate who explained to me how he could no longer believe in God after considering the question, “If God can do anything, can He create an object so large that He cannot move it?” There is a very logical Christian response to this silliness, but I will not go into it at this moment. What is worthy of note is just how weak and sickly so many people’s faith is in the first place that it can so easily be destroyed. For this young man God was only a feeble concept parked in some corner of his memory. He never bothered to take a look at his life and how God had provided and guided over all those years. He had forgotten all the profound truths he had been taught in Church. He paid no attention to faith, and this led him to a very vulnerable place. Peter kept that big picture perspective. He always remembered, cherished and pondered all that Jesus had taught, and he gladly celebrated his life as a disciple. He

pressed on in service, dealing with doubts and confusing input which came into his life, and he grew mightily in faith. Yes, faith is work. Our bulletin cover shows a girl reading her Bible, and one can see that it is not an easy read for her. It is not an easy read for most of us. Faith requires work.

The final verse of our lesson is usually read like a footnote, and just an echo of Peter's earlier words of faith, but we find in verse 69 the very heart of faith. Faith is more than a huge compilation of teachings, truths, memories and experiences. At the core of all this is *a relationship with God*. Faith is a *commitment*. Peter proclaims, *We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God*, and he is doing much more than proclaiming truths. Peter makes it clear that he *believes!* This is the language of commitment, as Peter had committed his life to Jesus Christ and to a living relationship with God. For too many people their religious beliefs are a collection of doctrines and truths which they hold onto until something comes along and proves otherwise. Peter and the apostles would have nothing to do with such a shallow excuse for faith. They found truth, indeed, they found the One who is the Truth and they committed their lives to that Truth. Faith is to be a committed *relationship* with Jesus Christ and not a mere collection of teachings. The world laughs when it hears us speak of our commitment to Jesus Christ and our joyous walk with our heavenly Father. Let them laugh and let us keep that relationship strong!

Doubts happen. They happen frequently, but there is no reason for fear. Let us be sure to let faith do its work. Integration and understanding come to those who seek a stronger faith, and some day we will understand fully. Until that day, let us listen carefully to Professor Peter, and let us follow with a glad and solid faith.