



The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC
Aurora Illinois

DEVOUT DOUBT

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Christian
Matthew 16.13-20

When Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Judeo-Christian:
Psalm 131

*O Lord, my heart is not lifted up,
my eyes are not raised too high;
I do not occupy myself with things
too great and too marvelous for me.
But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
like a weaned child with its mother;
my soul is like the weaned child that is within me.
Hope in the Lord from this time on and forevermore.*

Hinduism:
Srimad Bhagavatam 11.15

Truth has many aspects. Infinite truth has infinite expressions. Though the sages speak in various ways, they express one and the same Truth. Ignorant is the one who says, "What I say and know is true; others are wrong." It is because of this attitude of the ignorant that there have been doubts and misunderstandings about God. It is this attitude that causes dispute. But all doubts vanish when one attains tranquility by realizing the heart of Truth. Thereupon dispute, too, is at an end.

Simon Peter was pretty sure of himself here, and it garnered the accolades of Jesus for the faith he espoused. But this scripture was written some 70 years or more after Jesus had died, which had given the church a long time to sort out their beliefs and doubts, and retell this story in a way that succinctly portrayed the evolution of their belief in this story.

We mustn't forget when we read this passage, however, that this is the same Simon Peter who stepped out of the boat to join Jesus on the surface of the water only to sink beneath its waves because of his doubts. We mustn't forget that this is the same Simon Peter who denied even knowing Jesus when doing so would have meant his own death. The Simon Peter of this story isn't the model of faith we are sometimes told to emulate.

Have you ever doubted your faith; doubted that there is a God; suspected that perhaps God isn't as all-powerful as the Bible tells us she is? Have you ever felt that religion makes no sense; that there is no rhyme nor reason to what happens in the world; that your prayers were falling on deaf ears?

I will admit that the same question, the same doubts have haunted me over the years of my ministry, rendering me mute and dumbfounded in responding to those heart-rending situations where a young child's death seems totally incongruous with a loving God, yet forced to say some word of hope at a funeral service where the grieving are torn apart by the inadequacy of belief.

I have confessed to you before that I have a love/hate relationship with the church and with the God that is often defined by the church. What is the purpose of religion, of church, of ministry if we can't justify the ways of God to a heart-broken world? I continue to search for the answer to that question, but I haven't found a satisfying one yet. I have decided that there will never be an answer to that question, and those who espouse a simple answer blaspheme God. I am deeply suspicious of the certitude that religion is supposed to engender; I weary of those who profess to have all the answers; I get angry when platitudes are used to explain something that makes no sense, statements such as "God only takes the best" or "God must have needed him more than we did." What comfort is that to a 10-year-old who will have to grow up without a father? What kind of God is that to believe in?

I take heart in Nobel Prize-winning Rabbi Isaac Singer's statement: "Doubt is part of all religion. All the religious thinkers were doubters." And I find comfort and company in philosopher Andre Gide's statement: "Believe those who are seeking the truth; doubt those who find it."

A healthy sense of doubt is important for people of faith. I've always maintained that believers of all faiths should be agnostics, for by definition God is indefinable mystery, indescribable spirit who, like the wind, blows wherever it wants. We can know the presence of God in our daily experiences, and know the occasional little and large miracles, but no one knows the ways of God with much certainty. And I think it blasphemous to taut our knowledge of what God thinks, or why God acts, or who God hates and who God rewards. We are finite; God is infinite. As the Psalmist says:

O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high;
I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me.

I have officiated at countless funerals of sad and tragic situations and I have never yet found any words that really comfort. How do you talk about a protecting God when a young wife and husband take their 9 month old baby on a road trip, and he gets out of the car to get something from the trunk and a tire comes off an 18-wheeler, bounces, and snuffs out his life without so much as a warning or a care? How do you talk about a loving God when two young men, friends since first grade, decide to erect a TV antenna to help a neighbor, and in the process connect to an electrical wire that electrocutes both of them on the spot? When I went to the homes of these two young men to tell their families of the tragedy, who am I representing here? God? Which God? The God who promises a long and prosperous life?

I am glad to take the scriptures to task that condemn people to an eternal hell because that seems incongruous to a God who is love unconditional. And when the mother of a young high school boy tells me in preparation for his funeral that he was a rascal, and lived a very bad life, was unkind to people, and selfish, and she fears he is in hell, am I going to quote scripture at the funeral that confirms her fears? Hell no. While I don't know what happens after death, I'm going to err on the side of a loving God who forgives any prodigal, as Jesus taught. I can't actually know this, but I believe it by faith.

We are called people of faith, not people with the answers. We are called to live by faith, not by platitudes or certitudes. Rabbi Daniel Polish reminds us that "this is the most challenging kind of faith: to live with a God we cannot fully understand, whose actions we explain at our own peril. This God is at the center of our lives. This may be a rockier path to walk than that of either simplistic absolutism or of atheism, but it is the faith of honest men and women, a faith defined by spiritual humility." (Rabbi Daniel F. Polish, *America*, Feb 2, 2009 as quoted in *Context* July 2009)

The value of religion in our lives is not for the answers it provides but for the honesty that can be known in relationship. The importance of church is the community that we can trust with our deepest fears, our harshest criticisms, our intense doubts, our deepest, darkest secrets and know that we will still be included. In the face of unexplainable tragedy and unrelenting grief, it is relationships in the communion of others that offer up the presence of God in real and tangible ways. We know God most vividly in the shoulder of the neighbor who has offered it up as an altar for our tears. We know God most tangibly in the silent presence of a friend who walks with us through our anger and our fears without trying to justify what God has done or hasn't done. We know God most powerfully when tragedy spurs us to consciousness-raising action against using cell phones while driving to prevent distracted driving that kills pedestrians or heightened alerts of impending danger from hurricanes. Where was God during the Holocaust? I don't know, but I get a glimpse of her face in those who harbored victims at risk of their own lives.

Faith is about living in community with one another to comfort and console and strengthen and instill joy even when God appears to be the enemy working against us rather than the savior who takes away all our problems. People of faith possess certain keys for locking and unlocking the well-being of others, so regardless of our ability to understand or explain God, we can reach out when it seems God is not there to act on behalf of a God of love.

Though Simon Peter eventually espoused his heartfelt belief with certainty, he, as we, spend a lifetime of doubting before we get there. So having sung our praises and prayed our prayers, we go out to live by faith, embracing a devout doubt about our understanding of God yet committed all the more to unlocking whatever opportunity is ours to create beauty and make music. In spite of, and maybe because of, our doubts, life flows on in endless song, above earth's lamentation; I hear the clear, though far off hymn that hails a new creation. Through all the tumult and the strife, I hear that music ringing. It finds an echo in my soul, how can we keep from singing? Amen.

--Gary L. McCann

PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal Spirit of Life, whom we worship with reverent lips but all too often with insensitive hearts, grant us today a vital experience of your refreshing presence. Clarify our thoughts, elevate our spirits, deepen our faith, and challenge our platitudes, that when we leave this place today we may lay a new claim on life for having been here.

For all that makes life rich and beautiful we thank you. We are grateful for our homes, for our families, and for our friends, that even when we disagree or fight, we are still there for one another. We are reminded of our friends who laugh with us, friends who console us in our grief, friends who know that we're not perfect and who like us anyway, friends who accept us just as we are.

For great books that open our minds to new worlds, causing us to stretch a bit more to accommodate parts of life we would not otherwise encounter; for great music and great art that stretches us beyond our comfort zone; for sporting activities that challenge our bodies as well as our minds; for medical personnel who help us find healing and for mental health practitioners who help us find a sense of function amid our dysfunction, we give thanks.

For those who have gone out of their way or who have risked their lives or even lost life helping someone else, we stand in humble gratitude. For those who, in spite of all the evil this old world spews out, call us to dignity, to peace, to possibility beyond our small concerns, we are thankful.

We lay upon the altar of hope our struggles with what it means to live by faith when so many tragedies and so much sadness permeate our world. We grieve with those who grieve, and rail in anger against the injustices of this world. Give us faith to live when there are no answers and no adequate explanations for why. We pray especially today for those whose lives have been devastated by Hurricane Harvey; give us generous hearts and loose purse strings that we may respond.

And for ourselves we pray that we may be responsible in our call to be the body of Christ. May we not fail in our mission to bring peace, to love people as they are, for who they are and to rise to the occasion that invites our service to the community, the nation and the world. Enlarge our vision, our generosity and our dedication that we may deserve your approval as good and faithful servants. In the spirit of the Christ of peace, Amen.

(Adapted from A Book of Public Prayer by Harry Emerson Fosdick)