

Care of the Soul: Faith and Doubt

Hebrews 11:1

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If you've spent very much time around a three-year-old, you have undoubtedly had conversations like this one:

“Why is everyone still sleeping?”

“Because they're tired.”

“Why?”

“Maybe because they stayed up too late.”

“Why?”

“They were watching TV”

“Why?”

“I don't know. You can ask them when they get up.”

“Why is the sky blue?”

Well, you get the idea. Three-year-olds are notorious for asking question after question, often leading adults to the point of either not being able to answer or not wanting to - or both! As much as we may feel like they are doing it just to annoy us, a University of Michigan study found that young children ask a lot of questions because they are trying to understand the world around them. Developmentally, they are ready to soak up as much information about how things work as they can. Asking questions is a fundamental way for them to learn and grow.

So, it stands to reason that asking questions continues to be a means of growth throughout our lives. We are curious, we want to learn, we want to understand. Yet, many of us grew up learning there was one thing we shouldn't or didn't need to ask questions about - our religious beliefs. After all, the beliefs of a Christian are spelled out for us in the Apostles Creed and other statements of doctrine. We only have to accept them.

That is more easily said than done. Since the 4th and 5th centuries when much of Christian doctrine was settled on at great council meetings of church leaders, many things have changed. Humanity has come to understand so much more about how the world works. We are thinking people, and we are deeply influenced by science and all that we've learned by studying the world around us. Like 3-year-olds, we want to understand, but inevitably there is friction between what we are told Christians believe and what we have learned about everything from microbiology to quantum physics. We have doubts about doctrine and so we ask questions to learn more. But does that make us less faithful? Is it impossible to have faith if you have doubts?

This week, we are continuing our sermon series on taking care of our souls as we enter year three of the global pandemic. With all of the challenges we have been facing in these last two years, this seems like a time when we particularly need faith. We need to try to make sense of what is happening and to find a source of hope to sustain us. Yet, faith may not feel very accessible if we've learned that faith is only about accepting doctrine. To care for our souls means to look honestly at what faith is and the relationship between faith and doubt.

In his book *The Heart of Christianity*, Marcus Borg tells us there have been four meanings of the word “faith” in the history of Christianity. One of them, which is what has led us to the predicament we’re in, is that faith is intellectual assent to a set of beliefs. This became the dominant meaning of faith after the Reformation when the focus in many Protestant denomination shifted from worshipping correctly to believing correctly.

Yet, there are three other meanings in Christian history that add much depth to understanding what it means to be faithful. They are faith as radical trust in God, faith as loyalty to God, and faith as a way of seeing God and creation as gracious. Each of these is much more about growing in our relationship to God rather than accepting and being certain of a set of beliefs. This points to faith as more of a journey - a journey toward what Father Richard Rohr describes as **a calm and hopeful trust that God is inherent in all things, and that this whole thing is going somewhere good.**

I think this is faith as we see it reflected in Hebrews 11:1. “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Faith is about finding that radical trust that beyond the pandemic, the political wars, the personal crises we each have in our lives there is a God who is working for good, creating new possibilities, redeeming and reconciling us to God’s self and to each other.

To develop that depth of faith we have to engage our questions and doubts. In fact, if we understand faith to be a journey of growth and relationship, then certainty about our beliefs can actually hamper faith. Furthermore, if we can let go of feeling we have to be 100% sure of our beliefs, then doubt actually becomes a tool of faith, a means of exploration and growth. Doubt leads us to question and, like with a 3-year-old, questions lead us to deeper understanding.

So, what does all of this mean for us today in the middle of the global pandemic? These last two years have been very difficult and full of uncertainty. I am sure many of us have asked some hard questions. Questions like where is God when so many people are sick and dying? Why would God let this happen? Why doesn’t God stop this? Can God heal people who are sick? Why doesn’t God seem to hear my prayers?

Oftentimes, it is the challenging times in life that open the door for us to grow in our faith. Our questions and doubts spur us on to dig deeper, to wrestle with the questions like Jacob wrestled with God, to seek more than simple platitudes, to struggle with doctrine and dogma, scripture and theology until we find what makes sense for us. Until we find a faith that is rooted in the teachings of Jesus, informed by the doctrine of the church, and relevant, meaningful, and helpful to the life we’re living today.

Interestingly, that is how the spiritual journey is already understood in our Methodist tradition. In the United Methodist Book of Discipline is a section called Our Theological Task, which explores what we are called to individually and collectively and says, “Our theological task is both critical and constructive. It is critical in that we test various expressions of faith by asking: Are they true? Appropriate? Clear? Cogent? Credible? Are they based on love? Do they provide the Church and its members with a witness that is faithful to the gospel as reflected in our living heritage and that is authentic and convincing in the light of human experience and the present state of human knowledge? Our theological task is constructive in that every generation must appropriate creatively the wisdom of the past and seek God in their midst in order to think afresh

about God, revelation, sin, redemption, worship, the church, freedom, justice, more responsibility, and other significant theological concerns. Our summons is to understand and receive the gospel promises in our troubled and uncertain times.”

If you are struggling with doubts about your faith, which, if we’re honest, all of us do sometimes, good! That means you are growing, and you are trying to come to an understanding that fits your life and the world we live in!

However, you don’t have to journey alone. This church is a place where it is safe to struggle with doubt, to ask questions, to learn and to grow. We are a community of hope and love and acceptance. If you are looking to understand the doctrine of the church and how it might help you in your journey, you might consider reading some church history or taking a Disciple One class. Engage the questions. Let your doubt feed your growth. Ask what purpose these ideas served for the early church and what purpose they might serve for your faith today.

Alternatively, the focus your journey might be less on doctrine and more on what Jesus said and did. Read the gospels and look for what Jesus paid attention to, what he talked about. You will see his deep compassion for the poor and for people who are on the margins of society, how much time he spent healing people, how much he talked about money, how important scripture was to him, how often he prayed. What does that teach you about what you believe about being a Christ-follower?

However, if what you most need is the deep assurance that God is with us, the world is good and there is hope for the future, you may need to just spend some time with God. Take on a spiritual practice - we’ll be learning new practices and forms of prayer during our Lenten sermon series.

Finally, consider writing your own affirmation of faith or your own creed. Write down what you believe about God and Jesus right now in words that are meaningful to you. Then ask more questions. Study more. Pray more. And come back to what you wrote a year or two from now. What has changed? What has stayed the same?

God created us to be in relationship with God. And God created us to learn and to grow, to think and to question. When we acknowledge and even embrace our doubts, we actually open the door to deeper faith and God becomes more real to us. So, go ahead and bring out your inner 3-year-old and start asking why.

May it be so. Amen.