

“The Gift of Faith and Doubt”

Sermon for February 1, 2009 by the Rev. Joe Summers

(Readings Deut. 18:15-20, 1st Corinthians 8:1-13, Mark 1:21-28)

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, those who practice it have good understanding.” Psalm 111.

My conscience, the conscience that I inherited in part through my parents and our culture, tends to be pretty violent. When I do something that goes against what it thinks is right, such as when I stood up against what it said about homosexuality, or if it thinks I haven't been gentle enough with others, then it does its best to kick me in the gutter and stomp on me.

In contrast, Madeline L'engle says that in her experience, the voice of true conscience, the conscience that comes to us through the Holy Spirit, is a voice that speaks very simply and quietly as it lets her know a particular action is something she never wants to do again.

Practicing the fear of the Lord is about practicing listening for the still small voice that tells us how to keep from losing the connection to what we most fear to lose.

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When, as a teenager, I was lost and confused and needing help, the Catholic Charismatic Renewal said it had the answers. I remember one conversation where one of the leaders asked me, “Do you know what God is telling you to do?” I said, “no.” He said, “Well we do.” I remember thinking at the time, “Well if I don't know what God wants me to do and they do, it simply makes sense that I go along with what they say.”

Later, when I went to one of the founders of the renewal and said I wanted to do social justice work, he said I could do it, but it was the equivalent of being a garbage collector in the Kingdom of Heaven. I remember thinking, “well at least someone has to take out the trash.” Later though, it came to me, what am I going to tell God if God asks why I didn't spend more time feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, speaking up against injustice. These folks can say they didn't do it because they didn't believe it was that important, but in my heart of hearts this seems really important, so I don't have their same excuse. And so I began to leave their understanding of Christianity behind for my much more uncertain path.

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Our scripture today tells us Jesus spoke as one who had authority. So many translate that to mean that if one has faith one is to speak with certainty. If you listen to the TV preachers, over and over they say that doubt is the opposite of faith.

There is a kind of doubt that is the opposite of faith, but I think it is better translated “unbelief” as in “Lord I believe, help thou my unbelief.” Unbelief can leave us paralyzed, unable to act. But this is very different from the kind of doubt which is about questioning.

If by authority one means people who have expertise, those who have real grounds for the claims they make, then it seems clear to me that doubt is a vital gift, because I don’t think anyone becomes a real expert in anything without questioning things, without doubting things.

Jesus spoke with the kind of authority about spiritual things that was clearly rooted in his own experience; that is, his authority was not derivative; it was not based on the authority of the scriptures; he spoke out of his own experience. That’s why he could make up all these stories that tell such powerful truths. In striking contrast to almost all the other Rabbis of his time, who spoke as if all authority lay in the scriptures, Jesus at times radically rejects one part of the scriptures or another.

And Jesus clearly embraced doubt as in questioning. He allowed himself to doubt/radically question the whole dominant religious belief system of his time. He allowed himself to doubt/radically question the whole dominant social-political order of his time. He even allowed himself to doubt his own sense of what he was called to do: “Lord if it be thy will take this cup from me.” And he gave all his followers permission to articulate their doubts even about God: “My God, My God, why has thou forsaken me.”

Faith is about belief in things unseen. Thus true religious faith is not about certainty. In fact, as seen in all the verdicts where DNA evidence has overturned eyewitness testimony, we need to have room to doubt even things we think we do see.*

Rather than certainty, faith is about saying “yes” to the Spirit. A robust faith, that is a faith worthy of the name, is a faith that’s able to grow through questioning. Doubt, as in radical questioning, is so often the beginning of wisdom, the beginning of seeing that there is a larger reality that we’ve been missing. So let us embrace faith, that radical openness to the Spirit that leaves us able to be moved and act, and let us embrace doubt.

These reflections on the gift of doubt came out of my hearing Bill Ayers and Bernadine Dorhen talk at the University this week. There are the two former Weathermen leaders whom President Obama was accused of being friends with. I went partly to support Karl Pohrt, who was getting a lot of flack about inviting them, but also because I was interested in how two people, who at one point in the late 1960’s and early 70’s went pretty crazy, now understood what they had been about.

The words that struck me the most were Bill Ayer’s last words about action and doubt. He said first it is vital to not be paralyzed by inaction. Unless we act, we remain spectators and become mired in passivity. (I would add that those who are impassive in the face of suffering become cynical as a way to justify themselves, because if no one else is doing anything that makes any

real difference, then we are not to blame for not doing anything.) He also said action is a vital part of our epistemology, how we know what we know, for it's through action that we discover the nature of what we're up against, and who we are and what we need to be about. So--action is vital.

At the same time, he said, we need doubt, for "without doubt we become arrogant and narcissistic." That simple line: "without doubt we become arrogant and narcissistic" is so powerful for me, for it explains so much about how so many involved in radical groups in the 1960's, seeking to be heroic and make a real difference, ended up isolated, living in self-created realities cut off from the rest of the world, often at best tilting at windmills, often really hurting themselves and others in the process.

That concept that "without doubt we become arrogant and narcissistic" also speaks so clearly to my own experience of what went wrong in so many of the religious movements that began to spread throughout the world in the late 60's and early 70s, and how and why people, who sincerely wanted to give their lives to God, ended up using and abusing people and re-creating so much of what is worst about the dominant culture.

"Without doubt we become arrogant and narcissistic" also speaks to me about some of the worst group dynamics I run into again and again, wherein a group of people who feel victimized, or feel someone or group they care about has been victimized, will get together and end up so certain about what they believe about that situation that they are essentially closed to reality; their minds won't be changed by anything you say or anything they encounter; everything just becomes more fodder for their self-justifying reality. Everything works to make them the good guys and anyone not with them--the bad guys.

Think about Bush and Cheney and the group around them and their unwillingness to listen to so many, many people (military leaders, foreign policy experts, religious leaders, academics, scientists, leaders of other countries) who warned them again and again about the potentially disastrous consequences of their actions. Why couldn't they listen? Because they were certain and they wouldn't let themselves doubt themselves, and I see this phenomenon happening a lot.*

Our reading from Deuteronomy today speaks of the awesome responsibilities of the prophet of the living God. The living God is a Spirit, and the Spirit on its own can't stop trains taking people to death camps. The Spirit on its own can't hold one frightened and alone in the night. The Spirit on its own can't feed the starving or speak up against injustice. We need prophets, people open to the still small voice, people able to reawaken the Spirit in us, not only to restore our own souls, but also to reach out and be God's hands, arms, eyes, and voice, so that the Spirit can act in and through us.

In the way our Anglican tradition likes to hold up paradoxical truths, this reading about being a prophet is balanced with a reading from Paul that says, don't get too hung up on being a prophet, just because you prophesy something--don't assume it's true. The Corinthian church had a

lot of folks who thought they were channeling God 's Spirit, but Paul does his best to show that what they were really channeling was the spirit of empire and patronage. How does he know that their knowledge and prophecy is wrong ? Because their knowledge puffs up, leaves them arrogant, but love builds up. Because their words have led to divisions and the neglect of the poor and needy, rather than unity and compassion and the care of all.

Jesus called on his followers to read the times. To their credit the Weather people took seriously the need to be prophets. They understood the need for people to confront the evils our society was immersed in: a genocidal war in Vietnam that ultimately killed something like 3 million people, a culture still rooted in racial supremacy, a politics that justified imperial domination around the world, a people that has somehow lost sight of the vision that the our enormous wealth and natural resources were not meant to be just for our consumption but for the well being of all. Their names suggest some attempt to be humble about all this as it's taken from the Bob Dylan line "You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows." But the story of what happened to these passionate, moral, intelligent, young people is a powerful testimony to our need to embrace the gift of doubt and questioning.

Doubt without faith leaves us paralyzed and unable to speak and act, so let us then gather in faith so we are not transformed into spectral ghosts standing on the sidelines of life and history.

Faith without doubt becomes arrogance and leaves us trapped in our own creations, cut off from ourselves, from others, from reality, and from God. So let us also embrace doubt as one of faith's key allies and vital if we are to walk the path of truth.

Gathered in spirit and in truth, faith and doubt, let us let the Spirit help us question our smaller truths, so that we might move towards greater truth. Let us let the Spirit help us feel okay about being imperfect, often wrong, and having a brain that enables us to consider whether what we are doing might lead to unintended consequences that are the very opposite of what we intend. That's not just the voice of doubt; that's the voice of wisdom. Let us let faith help us open the door to doubt and not be paralyzed by the fact that questioning will help us to discover that we are often seriously wrong about things, maybe even 20 times a day--minimum!

Let us let our faith help us to act to the best of our ability, but also be okay with not being certain, because uncertainty is vital if we are going to stay open. Let us let our faith help us be okay with only being able to do the best we can. However radically imperfect, it is enough through God's grace, for each of us is only a tiny droplet in this sea of life and the work of the Spirit.

Let us be humble prophets, people who awaken in ourselves and others the Spirit who watches over all, loves all and cares for all, but who are also aware that we are also a pilgrim people, people whose prophecy is imperfect, people whose knowledge is imperfect, and people who, only through love, can perceive the distant star of universal truth towards which we travel. And if we are willing God is able, and if we are ready, God has already gone ahead to prepare a way for us. Amen.

Footnotes:

*We even need to have doubt about our doubt. There is a kind of deconstructive reasoning that takes us nowhere, as it is so arrogant in the certainty of its assumptions and its logic that it can even make the very ground beneath our feet disappear. Popular in the academy right now, it seems pretty fruitless as seen in the endless (futile) quest to find an absolute grounds for knowing. It's a stance that also seems to justify the ghostly and ghastly stance of the spectator who sees himself as above the struggles of human history.

On the other side, however, we might appreciate Paul's humility in being willing to work with frameworks that are meaningful to others. It's clearly not helpful to so deny the ground you are standing on, that you become "all things to all people."

I also want to add a word about the narcissism that arrogance can lead you into. In the myth of Narcissus, Narcissus becomes so entranced with his image while staring in the water that he turns into the flower that bears that name. Freud then used this term to describe a mental illness that can happen when babies are cut off from their mothers and conclude that there is something they must have done to drive them away, so they end up trying to create a personality that doesn't need others to survive. On the surface, they may appear to be in love with themselves, dynamic and outgoing, but beneath the surface is the terror that, at some point, all their rage and loss and needs may come to the surface, so they avoid anything or anyone who challenges the image they have created about themselves. This also leads them to view real intimacy as a threat. Christopher Lasch then took Freud's concept to suggest that the narcissistic personality, this personality that tries to spend all its time suppressing its feelings of need, loss and anger through projecting a grandiose image of itself, has become one of the dominant personality types in our society, as people in our society have become increasingly despairing of being able to establish sustainable intimate relationships in which their needs can be met.

The idea that groups become narcissistic when they try to suppress reality and feelings by essentially cutting themselves off from anyone who questions their realities is, I think, really helpful and a testimony to how much we need to keep embracing doubt, if we wish to remain in reality, if we want real connections with others, and if we wish to really engage others.