

"Doubt"
July 5, 2020
St. Paul's UCC Church
Rev. Mary Beth Mardis-LeCroy

Job 7:1-8, 19-21

[Then Job answered:] "Do not human beings have a hard service on earth, and are not their days like the days of a laborer? Like a slave who longs for the shadow, and like laborers who look for their wages, so I am allotted months of emptiness, and nights of misery are apportioned to me. When I lie down I say, 'When shall I rise?' But the night is long, and I am full of tossing until dawn. My flesh is clothed with worms and dirt; my skin hardens, then breaks out again. My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle, and come to their end without hope.

"Remember that my life is a breath; my eye will never again see good. The eye that beholds me will see me no more; while your eyes are upon me, I shall be gone.

"Will you not look away from me for a while, let me alone until I swallow my spittle? If I sin, what do I do to you, you watcher of humanity? Why have you made me your target? Why have I become a burden to you? Why do you not pardon my transgression and take away my iniquity? For now I shall lie in the earth; you will seek me, but I shall not be."

Welcome back to our summer preaching series, "Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith"! For at least a portion of the summer, I will be preaching from a book that has influenced me immensely over the last fifteen years or so – a book also entitled "Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith" by Kathleen Norris.

In her book, Norris takes words like salvation, or incarnation, or doubt – words that many of us may have heard all our lives if we were church goers – and begins to imagine these words in fresh, new ways.

...And that's we will be doing, too. Each week, I choose one of my favorite words from Norris' book; each week, we explore together we might start to hear some of these words as if we, too, are hearing them afresh and anew.

Last week, we looked together at the word "prayer." We reflected on some of the things that might block us from God's Spirit when we pray: our grudges, our resentments, our anger, our shame, our fear, our need to control. We wondered if the most faithful prayer might not be so much beautiful and intelligent words tossed up to God, might not be so much a to-do list of what we think should happen, but rather a question: "Lord, what do you want of me? Lord, what do you want of *us*?" Could that be our most faithful prayer?

“Prayer” was last week. This week, we are examining the word “doubt.”

Have you ever heard it said that “doubt is the opposite of faith”? I think the idea here is that if you *really* believe in God, if you are a *truly* faithful Christian, then there is simply no room for doubt. We tend to talk about faith and doubt as if they were mutually exclusive – if you have one, you can’t have the other. Period. But is that the way it really is? Does doubt really mean an absence of faith?

After Mother Teresa died several years ago, a little book of her correspondences was published – letters she had written over sixty years or more of her life.¹ Well, that little book caused quite a bit of controversy. The reason? In some of these letters, Mother Teresa clearly expresses doubt – big doubt, bold doubt, existential doubt. Just to take one example, in a letter to a friend, she writes: “Jesus has a very special love for you. [But] as for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great, that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear...”²

That’s some pretty serious doubt. And it caused a lot of dismay, and even some anger at the kindly saint who spent her life caring for the sick, feeding the hungry, and hanging out with outcasts. Folks were shocked. How could *Mother Teresa*, of all people, *ever* have such doubts?

But I’ve got to wonder about those people, the ones who were so shocked that Mother Teresa had her doubts. Had they never read about Jacob wrestling with God the whole dark night through? Had they forgotten about the poetry of the Psalms, pleading with God out of the depths of despair and hopelessness? Had they never heard Mark’s Gospel, where Jesus, in agony, cries out from the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

In her book, Kathleen Norris talks about a time when she was younger, and struggling mightily with her own doubts – doubts about God, the church, you name it. She describes spending a few days at a monastery, and talking to some of the monks about all her doubts. She was surprised to find them completely unconcerned. She writes, “One old monk blithely stated that doubt is merely the seed of faith, a sign that faith is alive and ready to grow.”³

Doubt, she seems to be saying, is not the opposite of faith at all, but *part* of it. And an essential part, at that.

But don’t take my word for it, or even Kathleen Norris’. Just look at our passage from scripture today from the book of Job, a book full of faithful expressions of doubt. In fact, in preparing for this sermon, I had a doozie of a time picking out just one passage from Job, because pretty much every time Job speaks, he expresses some combination of frustration, anger, fear, and, most of all, doubt.

¹ Mother Teresa: *Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the Saint of Calcutta*. (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2007).

²“Mother Teresa’s Crisis of Faith.” *Time*. August 23, 2007.

³ Norris, Kathleen, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (Riverhead Books, New York, 1998), p. 63.

I ended up choosing one of Job's earlier prayers, found in chapter seven. When we meet Job today, he has lost everything he owns; his children have all died; and, as if that's not enough, he is inflicted with sores all over his body. His three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar have all come to comfort him; but, it turns out, they would have probably been better off keeping their mouths shut. Instead of engaging with him in his profound grief, they only offer up platitudes and facile advice.

When we hear from Job today, we hear a prayer that is raw and real: he talks about empty days and miserable nights; he laments that despair and hopelessness are all he knows. He cries out, he howls, he beats his breast, he keens, he *doubts*.

It's the very last part of Job's prayer that really gets to me: "Will you not look away from me for a while, let me alone until I swallow my spittle? If I sin, what do I do to you, you watcher of humanity? Why have you made me your target? Why have I become a burden to you? Why do you not pardon my transgression and take away my iniquity?" Wow. Job is angry. So very angry at God. Job has some serious doubts about what God is up to in his life. And he is not afraid to let God know exactly what he is thinking and feeling. "Why have you made me your target? Why have I become a burden to you?" Why... why...? His words remind me of Jesus' words on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Good, God-fearing, upright, *faithful* Job. Full of anger. Full of cynicism. Full of doubt.

I never knew this until I studied Hebrew in seminary: *there is no word in the Hebrew language for "doubt."* Out of all those words in our Hebrew Bible, not one for "doubt"! Fascinating, isn't it?

Now, this is very significant. It means that in the Hebrew mind, *doubt does not exist*. It means that what we call "doubt," our *Bible* calls "faith." Our questions, our anger, our fears, our wondering how in the world any of this makes sense... *all* of that... is not doubt at all, but *faith*.

So what we call "doubt" is not something to be afraid of, not something to be punished for, not something to make us feel that we are a hopeless, hapless, doomed lot. Quite the contrary. Doubt puts us in the company of Job and others who have come before: Sarah, Hagar, Jacob, the Psalmist, Jesus crying out on the cross.

"Doubt is the *opposite* of faith?" No. Doubt is a *part* of our faith. Doubt is a crucial part of our faith.

Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian minister, and one of my favorite theological writers, says that "...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."⁴ This reminds me of the monk from Kathleen Norris' story, telling her that doubt is merely the seed of faith, a sign that faith is alive and ready to grow. Church, we *need* our doubts, in

⁴ Frederick Buechner, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederick_Buechner.

other words. We need them to make us more honest, to humble us, to wake us up; we need our doubts to help form us into the people God would have us to be.

So what might a community – say, ours – look like, if we were free to take seriously these so-called “ants in our pants”? What if we were encouraged to embrace our doubts as *part* of our faith, rather than as separate from it? What if we were able to express our doubts without fear of being judged, ridiculed, or shamed into feeling like a “less-than” Christian? Would we be more honest with ourselves, with each other and with God about what is really going on in the inside? Would we become quieter, more humble, more holy?

Through our faithful doubts, would we grow more fully into the people that God intends for us to be?

Thanks be to God.