

First Presbyterian Church
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Sermon: "Questions People Ask I: Do Doubts Disqualify? Must One Believe All of It?"
July 9, 2017
John 20: 24-28

Doubts never disqualify. Rarely do we use them for what God intends – to prod us to fresh discoveries of what we believe!

Welcome to a summer's sermon series. Questions People Ask. It's not your typical schedule of related themes from Scripture or tenets of Faith. Instead, it comes from you, your questions- matters which puzzle you, or perplex you, such as what about the goodness of God and the reality of evil in the world? Or what is heaven, after all, and who gets in and who is left behind? When is violence justified according to Christian teachings? And what about the short comings of clergy themselves? What are we to make of a pastor's fallibility, his/her feet of clay? I'm grateful for thoughtful questions. None should be dismissed as irrelevant, nor should they be answered glibly. Instead, they serve as the challenges of Faith – the means by which we live our lives on the journey toward wisdom and peace. I have often said, our maturity will not be found in the answers we recite, but in the questions we ask; so pass along yours – scribble it on a napkin during brunch.

Today's question carries over from my time in Westhampton. It is asked by members of Westhampton Presbyterian Church. They speak for all of us: "Can someone be a faithful church member who likes being part of the church community, seeks answers to ultimate questions, and wants to believe in a caring God? But sustains doubts about the existence and nature of God – the resurrection of the body, and life after death?"

Prior to the enlightenment – the answer would be an angry, unequivocal "No". Heretics were burned at the stake for denying certainty of these basics that are part of our Creeds. Church traditionalists scorned and repudiated those whose dissent made their beliefs unorthodox. History is replete with illustrations of those whose doubts led them to take a different stand. Martin Luther himself questioned the infallibility of the pope and was of course sentenced to death. He also questioned the sale of indulgences, a practice which promised that one could get into heaven for a price. There was a time when doubts about the existence of God would not only jeopardize your church membership, but would threaten your very existence. In 1640 – puritans would discipline those who asked troubling questions. Fortunately – those days are over – even though there are still plenty of extremists in the world whose religious views allow no freedom of thought, no questioning, no dissent!

The first step in my answer is from a panel of experts – the mission study committee. Those who wrote the Church Information Form which in 2010 advertised the opening for pastor wrote this about Westhampton: "We are an all-inclusive church. The goal-posts of our beliefs (acceptance) are set wide! We count it a strength that it is our love for God that binds us together, and not a narrow doctrine!" In short –the Pastor Nominating Committee said "No" to rejecting someone for church membership due to doubts and serious questions. What is the essential? A four-letter word – Love. Love for God – and love for one another! In other words, when the church welcomes new members, we explore not their doubts or even the orthodoxy of beliefs. What do we look for? We look for people who are sincere, truthful, and loving toward God and neighbors. If church membership ever requires certainty of beliefs – if adherence to every doctrine must be absolute, then who of us would be eligible? If the goal-posts (to borrow the metaphor) become too narrow – then what do we do with the Confirmation student who struggles to discover a fuller experience of God? What do we do with the person whose understanding of fairness would not allow her to accept the parable of the Prodigal Son? Freedom of thought/Freedom of conscience are, to me, evidence of the nearness of God, not God's absence!! Our doubts can be springboards to further discovery of who God is and what God requires!!

There are but three essential questions we answer when we sign on for church...1) Do you turn from the ways of sin, renouncing evil and its power in the world? 2) Is Jesus Christ your Lord and Savior? 3) Will you be His disciple; obeying His word, showing His love? Notice what is not there. There is no pledge never to doubt. There is no commitment to ignore your questions. There is no subscription oath, declaring your loyalty to every last doctrine in our confession or creeds. To be a church member begins with a series of concentric circles with the essentials in the

middle. In the middle is the belief – Jesus is Lord and Savior! Non-negotiable! In the middle is the call to love your neighbor as yourself! In the center is the invitation to love God with all your heart, mind and strength.

Can someone be a faithful member of our church who likes being part of the church, seeks answer to ultimate questions? Wants to believe in a caring God, but sustains doubts? You know the answer. It is yes, of course you can be a member with those questions. I have a hunch that Jesus himself would prefer that kind of member to the one who is puffed up and self-assured. I have a hunch that He welcomes the kind of questions that make the powerful uncomfortable. I have a hunch that He prefers the open-minded debate to the close-minded inquisition! I have a hunch that the endurance of the church, when so many forces would dismiss it – is God’s answer to these questions which keep us up at night! The age of enlightenment calls for us to be able to think for ourselves, draw our own conclusions, and use our brains, our knowledge. The Church of Jesus Christ is never a fortress against the inquiries of its people. It is instead the place where such inquiries are welcome. They are needed if we are to grow closer to God and to one another!

But, I ask your permission to take the questions further! It is one thing to be open and quite another if such openness leads us to conclude that our experience, our answers are the only measure, only criteria for God. If the liberal side of me suggests that doubts are welcome, the conservative side of me declares that they are but a step toward greater discovery! One of my good friends at McCormick Seminary in Chicago is Robert Cathey – head of the Theology and Ethics field. I am sure Bob has read every book there is to read, he quotes the tomes of theologians ad nauseum! He loves to talk complex philosophy and suggested that I read a French intellectual named Jacques Derrida – he has never forgotten a fact entered his mind. We team taught a class on atonement theory. At registration a student said to me half-seriously and half-jokingly, “Can you keep Bob grounded? Can you keep Bob from soaring into the heavens of complexity?” I smiled and winked so as to confess my helplessness at such a task! But, here is what Bob asked me one day. And he asked me this question while offering the prayer at Wednesday worship. “Lord, he prayed: Help us to doubt our doubts.” As if to question their ultimate validity. If I doubt the reality of Easter, and the promise that Jesus lives, let me doubt this doubt, questioning its conclusion. If I doubt the nature of God – that God cares for you or for me – let me doubt that doubt so that I can reclaim what I believe. If I doubt that there is life after death, let me doubt that doubt, so that I can struggle even more with the promise that neither life nor death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord!!

Of course we need to be honest about our questions. My plea today is simple. Let them not have the last word. Instead, let them prod us to a more profound Alleluia – Let them never lead us to give up on what we hold most dear. Our questions will never veto 2000 years of Jesus and His church!

Four times during my 2nd term as pastor at Westhampton I had to do something no pastor wants to do - -bury a child of the church. I presided at the funerals of four young men – ages 18, 21, 26, and 31. When you bury an aging adult, a mother or father who dies of natural causes – you frame the past and help give that man or woman back to God. But when you bury a child – you bury the future. Cameron Nichols – a recent graduate from WHB, Cory Hubbard – a senior at the University of Maryland. Joe Taylor who waited for a heart transplant – and Michael Miller of the Coast Guard. Each family was wracked by grief. Each family was plagued by the question “Why?” Here were gifted – talented young people whose lives were cut short. What could anyone say that would remove the sting of death? What could I say or do that would restore meaning to a family and church’s shattered universe? Talk about doubt! Talk about questioning! Talk about despair!

Was there a place to turn? Yes – but not the usual resources. Not slogans that we are used to hearing – that this was the will of God. It is not God’s will that we drink and drive and see how fast we can make a car go! Where to then? The psalm just before the 23rd. The psalm Jesus quotes while hanging from his cross – “My God, My God Why hast thou forsaken me? Yet, I will seek you nonetheless!” We referenced the word of Jesus on Good Friday. Not because they erased the doubts, the anguish, but because they presented them to God out of our needs. We referred to the young men themselves, declaring that they are alive in our hearts because that’s where love is real; That if they died, they live in the hearts – broken hearts of those who still love them today! Is this an adequate explanation? No. What is it? An assurance that love is the force which can ultimately defeat the death and doubts that could destroy us!

There are few things that are stronger than death, stronger than despair. But, the one force which is stronger than the doubts which rob us of peace is love – the agape love that comes from a church like you! Of a church that sets the goal-posts wide rather than too narrow. And says on behalf of God, “come unto me, all you who labor and are overburdened. I will give you rest.” I not only believe this without a doubt. I have seen it enacted.

Blaise Pascal – the French Philosopher – wrote a book called *Pensées* - his thoughts. I find him worthy because he declared what I needed to hear at one time in my life. He said that when we get to the end of words – Faith in God is a great leap beyond. I like the image. I like it because it declares that we humans travel from discovery to discovery, and eventually leap into the world of uncertainty and I believe into the love – the everlasting love of God. It’s not a leap from absolute to absolute, but a leap from faith to faith.

Can someone – can anyone be a faithful member of a church – but sustain doubts about the existence and nature of God? The answer of course is yes. If perfection were required – who among us would be worthy? Faith means going beyond our imperfect knowledge, persisting in asking the divine questions, and refusing to give up on the love that keeps our hearts inspired, now and always!

Send in your questions please. They promise to keep me faithful – and whatever I say grounded in God’s reality!