

A Faith Big Enough for Doubt

“Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not. ... But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.”

“If you can’?” said Jesus. “Everything is possible for one who believes.”

Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, “I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:17-18, 22-24)

There is the cry of an honest man. A man who wants to believe, wants his child to be healed. And he does believe. He believed enough to bring his son to Jesus. But he also knew deep in his heart that he had doubt.

Last week we talked about how we can investigate our faith and know that our faith is big enough for reason. This week I want to talk about how our faith is big enough for doubt.

First, what does the Bible have to say about doubt? Second, let’s look at some doubters and how they dealt with their doubt. Then finally, we will examine how we can use our doubt to strengthen our faith.

What does the Bible have to say about doubt?

In James 1:6 tells us we should ask in faith, never doubting for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind.

But is that practical? It wasn’t for the man in our Scripture lesson. But what was Jesus’s reaction when he said, “Help my unbelief?” Did Jesus turn away, lecture the man, tell him he wasn’t worthy of his help? No, Jesus simply healed the man’s son.

John 20:31 says “But these things are written so that you may know Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his

name.” What John is telling us is that we will have questions – and that when we do we have a source to turn to, a source to help us resolve those questions. In 1 John 5:13, John says, “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know you have eternal life.” John is writing to those who have belief – but even with that belief they want to have assurance – and he is telling them they can.

Then there are the words of the Apostle Paul in 1 Timothy 3:14-16. “But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.” If just believing is good enough, why do we need teaching and training to make us proficient in our faith? It is so that our questions are answered, to equip us for what lies ahead.

Second, let’s look at a couple biblical examples of doubters and how they dealt with their issue of doubt.

When Fuller Seminary OT expert John Goldingay was interviewed, he was asked if there is anything we cannot say to God. He cited Job in his response. A great thing about the story of Job is that Job beats on God’s chest for ages and ages, and eventually God answers back. Job perhaps slightly wishes he hadn’t said some of those things, but that doesn’t take away from the fact that it’s a real relationship. Real things go on between Job and God.

“Does it please you [God] to oppress me,
to spurn the work of your hands,
while you smile on the schemes of the wicked?” Job 10:3

“He [God] throws me into the mud,
and I am reduced to dust and ashes.
I cry out to you, O God, but you do not answer;
I stand up, but you merely look at me.” Job 30:19-20

“Oh, that I had someone to hear me!
– let the Almighty answer me.” Job 31:35

“As surely as God lives, who has denied me justice,
the Almighty, who has made me taste bitterness of soul...” Job 27:1

“...then know that God has wronged me
and drawn his net around me.
Though I cry, ‘I’ve been wronged!’ I get no response;
though I call for help, there is no justice.” Job 19:6-7

Or what about John the Baptist. In John 1:30, John sees Jesus walking towards him and immediately says, “Here is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” And later in John 1:35, John tells 2 of his disciples, “Look, here is the lamb of God!” In Matthew 3, John proclaims that he should not be baptizing Jesus but instead should be baptized by Jesus. But, John the Baptist, after he had baptized Jesus, was arrested and thrown into prison. Locked away, he spends hour after hour in a prison cell. What happens when he is alone and it seems dark? Fears and doubts creep in. So, what does John do? In Matthew 11:3, he gets it out in the open, asking that a question be sent to Jesus for an answer: “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” How does Jesus respond? With words of condemnation, or with anger? No, Jesus reassures John, telling him that the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. Jesus understands and offers words of assurance to a man who needs to hear them.

So, what do we do with our doubt? How do we use our doubt to strengthen our faith?

As United Methodists, we can look to John Wesley for inspiration. Even this fearless evangelist experienced moments of doubt. He chronicled one of those times in his journal during March 1738 when Wesley wrote, “I was...clearly convinced of unbelief... Immediately it struck into my mind, ‘Leave off preaching...’ I asked [Peter] Bohler whether he thought I should leave it off or not. He answered, ‘By no means... Preach faith till you have it; and then, because you have it, you will preach faith.’” Each of us can “pray faith,” even when we are

living through doubt and pain. And each of us can “preach faith” because we all have a pulpit – a voice to talk to family, friends, strangers about our faith and what Jesus means to us.

Doubt helps us stay humble. It is a reminder that we are not God. Doubt prompts us to continue learning. It can push us to pursue the truth, to grow. Finally, doubt is what makes trusting possible. Doubt is a requirement for faith.

Take control of your doubt. It may be comforting to remember that John the Baptist and John Wesley had doubt. It is as we work through our doubt that we can have the blessed assurance that Jesus is real and his teaching is true. If you don't doubt, if you don't ask, you will never soar.

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