

They came upon a man who had a sick son. The boy had a spirit which sometimes seized him, made him roll around on the ground foaming at the mouth, like an epileptic. And the disciples could not do anything to help him. And so the father said to Jesus, "If you can do anything, have pity on us, and help us." And Jesus answered, "What do you mean if I am able. All things are possible with God." But the man replied, "Yes, I believe, but help my unbelief!"

We have been trying to answer "Questions Which People Ask." We have asked, "What do we do now?" wondering about the purpose of life amidst its changes. We have considered the importance of forgiveness. And today we come face to face with the problem of faith in and doubt.

"I believe. Help my unbelief!" Here is the question before us this morning. How can we live in faith in a world like this?

A little girl in California feels the earth rock beneath her bed and watches her home destroyed by fire, and wonders, with dismay in her voice, "Why is God so angry at us?" Why do bad things happen to sweet little girls and their families? They begin to wonder if God cares at all.

A teenager sitting in the pew with his mother in church, listening to the scripture reading, nudges her elbow and speaks out loud, "How do we know that all those things in the Bible are true?" How do we know? What happens to faith when questions arise as young people mature into adults?

A man, well into his 60's, who has been an elder in the church for 20 years, walks into the pastor's office, sits down and pours out his doubt, "I don't know what is wrong. God isn't real to me anymore. It just isn't real to me." And what about those people who want more than words and ritual, for whom faith has dried up and it is now the winter of the soul? They cry out like the man with the epileptic son, "I believe. Help my unbelief."

What word is there for those for whom doubt is more than a word, but a real life issue; who wonder about a good God in a tough world; who have questions about the scriptures; and who cry out for help but find little relief?

There is much to say, and it cannot all be said in a single sermon. And what I say cannot satisfy all those who face this life issue; but I offer this word of affirmation; which comes from the perspective of Christian faith which is shared by many Christians who have stumbled through the land of doubt.

First, let me say – I believe in doubt!

This may surprise you; but it is offered to all who wander through a wilderness of doubt. I believe in doubt when it is a sincere questioning, searching, probing, wondering why, not being satisfied with conventional answers. Doubt when it means an honest searching for truth.

Some people would have us believe that doubt is sin, a symptom of weak faith, some kind of spiritual sickness. But such an attitude is only arrogance and blindness...that we think God is so weak that must be shielded from question.

Someone said,

"Many believe that God is fragile and must be shielded from questions as though someone will ask the final, great question which will make faith impossible and will smash God into a thousand unrecognizable pieces like some piece of clay pottery."

"No, our God is not that fragile. God is very real and very present and very tough, and is not in danger of disappearing...because of our questions."

Doubt can indeed be good when it leads to life, truth, knowledge.

They once said the earth was flat, but people dating all the way back to Aristotle doubted it was true; and some adventurous souls proved by their doubting that they would not sail off the edge of the world if they sailed far out to sea.

They used to say that the earth was the center of the universe; everyone said it was so; even the church agreed, but men like Copernicus and Galileo doubted the conventional wisdom, and discovered the truth, and watched the earth and the planets revolving around the sun.

They used to say that the way to make a sick person well was to cut the skin, and bleed the illness out of the body; bleeding was the common practice; but thank God, some physicians began to doubt the common wisdom, and began to uncover the truth about diseases.

I believe in doubt when it means honest questioning, searching, seeking after truth; because it can lead to truth.

Let me also say – I believe in patience!

Leslie Weatherhead mentioned that whenever he was troubled by some doubt or question of faith which he could not answer he would tuck it away in a corner of his mind, as though putting it in a drawer, labeled, "Awaiting further light." He would open it now and again, but not worry about it, and simply wait to answer it until some further light came to illuminate the truth.

It is like hanging the laundry out to dry. Do you remember the days when everyone had a clothes line in the back yard? Every apartment had a clothes line from the back window out to the garage, and one could always tell which housewife had done the laundry that afternoon by the clothes hanging out on the line. And nobody in their right mind would let their neighbors see their dirty laundry. Now, we throw things in the dryer and expect them to be done in thirty minutes. But it didn't use to be so! There was always a time to wait until the clothes dried on the line.

And so it is with faith and doubt. Horace Bushnell, famous Protestant pastor wrote,

Time is one of the grand elements in thought as truly as in motion. If you can not open a doubt today, keep it till tomorrow; do not be afraid to keep it for whole years.

One of the greatest talents in religious discovery is the finding how to hang up questions and let them hang without being at all anxious about them. Turn a free glance on them now and as they hang, move freely about them, and see them, first on one side, and then on another, and by and by when you turn some corner of thought, you will be delighted and astonished to see how quietly and easily they open their secret and let you in."

I believe in patience. In fact, I prefer doubt to faith which is nothing more than blind foolishness. I prefer honest doubting and questioning to jumping at any easy answer which comes along. Because honest doubting, searching and questioning leaves the mind open for truth's fresh light to break in and illuminate the soul.

Patient waiting can leave the mind open to truth's fresh, brilliant light.

Let me also say, – I believe in friends.

A young couple was anxiously waiting the birth of their first child. As the pregnancy progressed their excitement grew as they learned it was going to be twins. The time came and the trip to the hospital, but their joy was turned to great sadness when a problem developed with the delivery, and the two beautiful boys were born still. Their hopes were dashed, and they were destroyed with grief. Some well-meaning friends wanted something to say, "You weren't ready to be parents yet. God can now take care of them better than you ever could." And someone else echoed the old adage, "Well, it must be God's will." And yet another person said, "Well, we aren't supposed to understand." And none of those explanations helped those two young people at all.

"Why did God let this happen to them?" Who knows? It is was one of those questions which they could not answer, and which, in fact, was one which they had to put in a drawer, and wait for more light to come. Which is what they did when their next set of twins was born.

How did they survive such a terrible grief? One way was to become involved in a support group for parents who had lost children in death. The Compassionate Friends

support group meetings gave them an opportunity to vent their anger, share their questions and grief with other couples who had lost children. It was a cathartic experience for them, cleansing and healing, where they learned they were not alone their grief.

But a second experience which helped them stand up under such a problem was the support of their Sunday School class. It too became like a support group for them. The weekly class meetings were filled with people who cared about them, who helped them come through it all. A few class members offered divine explanations which were not helpful, but mostly their friends were just there, mostly they simply cared, and that is what enabled them to stand the pain and hurt of their grief.

William Temple, a few generations ago pastor of City Temple Methodist Church in London, said that for all people of faith, who are honest with themselves, there come dry times faith wanes; when they pray they find that nothing happens; when they seek the awareness of God there is little light. This experience may last for months or even years. All the saints of faith have experienced it. There is always a winter to be passed through before the spring arrives.

Let those who struggle with faith and are gripped by doubt remember you are not alone. You are in great company.

I know that may not sound like much. I know that someone, with sarcasm in his voice with say, "Well, you are saying the ship has capsized and we are all out here in the ocean, splashing, thrashing the water. We are all drowning, but at least we are in this together. What good is that?"

Well, it is a reminder that out here with us in this ocean of doubt are those who can testify that we won't have to drown, who know that we can make it if - if we keep on treading water, if we if we keep the faith. And this is the fourth affirmation I offer to those who are troubled by doubt.

I believe in faith!

Let us be clear about faith. Faith does not mean the acceptance of something we don't know to be true or not. Faith does not here mean agreeing with the accumulation of doctrine. Although in the New Testament faith sometimes refers to sum of the gospel, the content of what is believed by the church, as in the book of James, which reminds us that "faith without works is dead," where faith means probably believing in doctrines and words of Christ.

When I say, I believe in faith, I am talking about trust, commitment, surrendering control of one's life to another person. That is faith, entrusting one's life to someone else.

How can we describe it? Faith is handing your car keys over to your teenager and saying, "OK! You drive! I'll ride shotgun!"

Faith is walking on ice on a frozen pond on a winter day. I was reminded of it about a week ago while I was driving home the back way. Coming down Scott Boulevard just up there north of the Little League baseball fields there is a pond on the west side of the road. As I drove by I noticed that the ice was still on the pond, and there were tire tracks on the ice. If I didn't know better I would say that someone has been riding a four wheel ATV on the pond. Can you imagine such a thing! It takes faith to walk on frozen water. But to ride an ATV on the pond!

That's what faith is all about! Elton Trueblood put it this way:

"The words 'I believe in God' do not mean I incline to the opinion that in all probability there exists a Being who may not inappropriately be called God! The words, if they mean anything at all, mean the determination to live and act in the light of the declared conviction. It is to do what the Wright brothers did at Kitty Hawk. They did not merely voice the opinion that flight with a heavier-than-air machine was possible; they got into the machine."

What word is there for those who are gripped by the problem of doubt?  
Who want to believe yet are beset by doubt and uncertainty?

One of the bible commentators put it this way,

"...in the difficulties and perplexities of life; if we will dare to believe in the [goodness] of God, we shall find that in every deed there is Someone to whom it matters what happens to us...who brings us through what we could have never managed by ourselves."

As the man handed over his son to Jesus, saying, "If you are able to do anything, have pity and help us," let us offer our hearts and minds to Christ in the same way, saying, "Here is my soul; my life, do what you can."

Who knows how we will surprised with what he can do with our faith and doubt!