

FAITH AFTER DOUBT: BUILDING A COMMUNITY OF LOVE

James 1:22-27

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18 July 2021

I have a nephew who was a very picky eater as a child - I would usually see him at my parents' home, and my mom would always have something special prepared for him, because he wouldn't eat what the rest of us were eating. He would eat macaroni and cheese, chicken nuggets, plain cheese pizza - the kinds of food a lot of young children eat - except for him this habit lasted well into adolescence. Last fall, I brought dinner to prepare at my parents' home, and when I heard he was coming from the University of Cincinnati to join us for dinner, I was worried - unsure if he would eat the salmon and vegetables and salad I had planned. To my surprise and delight, I learned that college changed my nephew. Sometimes peer pressure is positive; he made the choice to learn to like a variety of foods. He ate everything I prepared and seemed to enjoy it. He's grown up, expanded his horizons.

I didn't ask him about it; I didn't want to embarrass him. But I imagine that trying new foods was a bit of a leap of faith for him - venturing into the unknown, leaving his comfort zone. But that's always the way growth happens, isn't it?

If we never explore or take risks, we stay stuck.

Imagine what kind of a life you would have if you only watched the television shows you watched when you were a child or a teenager. What if the last book you read was one you were assigned in school?

The people who find life most interesting are the people who continue to grow and develop at every age and stage.

The same is true for our spiritual lives. If you feel that your prayer life is stale, if you think that your understanding of God just doesn't make sense in today's world, if your faith doesn't seem to help you anymore, it could be that your faith development hasn't kept up with the rest of your life. Some people were given the impression that once they were confirmed, once they joined a church, once they became an adult — then they didn't have to think about religion anymore. That's done, check it off the list. After all, there are a lot of other things to worry about in life. But leaving your faith in a box for years means it becomes dusty, musty; if it's been there since 8th grade confirmation, it's probably not going to fit anymore.

Today's sermon is inspired by a book that was just published this year, entitled Faith After Doubt, by Brian McLaren. He writes that, for many adults, their experience of living the Christian life is no longer truly meaningful. At best, they maintain a sense of faith and tradition but they feel less than excited about it, they don't share it with others; it doesn't enhance their life in a robust way. At worst, they leave church altogether but feel that something is missing; they long for a sense of community and a way of life that brings more joy and purpose. McLaren also puts this situation into a larger perspective. Not only do **people** need **meaning**, but the **world needs people** who are enthusiastically and passionately engaged. At a time when the planet is imperiled, and people are suffering from the effects of poverty, addiction, violence, racism and so many other problems, the world is crying out for faith that shows itself in love.

McLaren particularly writes for and about people who grew up with the understanding that faith is a rigid set of beliefs and doctrines. He himself grew up that way, in a traditional conservative Evangelical fundamentalist church. He was told not to

question anything he'd been taught, and that eventually led him to a crisis point, followed by a time of discovery and spiritual growth.

But he also writes for Catholics who may appreciate many aspects of the liturgy but feel uncomfortable with some of the church's social stances and scandals.

And he writes for people in mainline Protestant churches who long for their leaders to speak with a sense of moral urgency about the problems of our day.

In other words, he doesn't point fingers in one direction only or let any of us off the hook. He also speaks for many people I have been in conversation with recently who do not want to give up on their faith but who feel a sense of disconnect between what they've experienced in various churches and the questions that are arising in their hearts.

I know that some of you in this room and some of you watching this service are here because you very much want your faith to be relevant to your life and to the causes that are tugging at your conscience. Some of you may relate to this example from the book, Faith After Doubt.

Sam grew up in a church where he was told to take the Bible literally, to not believe in evolution, to have absolute certainty in the church's teachings. He came to think of his faith as a fortress where he was secure from all of the world's problems. But as he went to college and read more, he began to question what he'd been taught - "Was the earth really created in six literal days? Why would God create the universe with a deceptive appearance of age? Is an all-male church leadership really required by Jesus Christ?" On and on the questions came. "Gradually, I realized I was trapped by a false dichotomy, an impossible choice between two unacceptable options. Stay in the

fortress of certainty and pretend to be satisfied with its answers, or leave the fortress and experience absolute meaninglessness.” But then he was exposed to a new way of thinking about faith, a third way - if you will. “Maybe faith was never supposed to be a fortress. Maybe it was supposed to be a road, a road that led into the unknown. Finally I reached a decision I could live with. I would keep faith, but rather than a faith that forbids all doubt, I would move forward with the faith that any God worth believing in would be able to love me as a doubter.”

It is our doubts and our questions that lead us on the road towards a faith that is alive and robust and sturdy enough to support us in our own life challenges and as we take on the injustices of our world.

Our passage for today from the book of James calls us to be people who hear God’s word and then put it into action in our lives. “Don’t just be hearers of the word,” James says, but also be “doers of the word.” Study God’s word, and then live it. Care for those who are most vulnerable in society.

In this congregation, we make an intentional effort to offer opportunities on this continuum of faith. We offer Bible study classes, book studies, retreats, for the purpose of learning - environments where questions are always welcome - AND through our Mission Team, our Social Justice Team, our mission trips and in other ways, we offer opportunities for advocacy and hands-on care for those who are most vulnerable.

We are striving to embody what McLaren calls “a new kind of faith”...here’s how he describes it: **“a faith after doubt - a faith characterized by humility rather than arrogance, solidarity with the other rather than exclusion and antagonism,**

courage rather than fear, collaboration rather than competition, and love rather than self-interest.”

The world needs us to be that kind of church. Brian McLaren speaks around the country, and he says that everywhere he goes, he finds people who ask him, “Where can I find a faith community that welcomes doubters like me and my friends, a good place in which to raise children, a fellowship that helps us move toward faith expressing itself in love?”

I can't think of a better way to describe the church that we are trying to become!

Don't be afraid of doubts and questions - they almost always indicate an energetic curiosity, a desire for a faith that makes sense in a complex world. Doubts and questions rarely lead people away from faith altogether. Complacency and apathy do that.

People who question their understanding of God often end up with a more expansive vision of who God is. People who ask hard questions of the Bible usually end up discarding trite answers and finding the Bible to be a worthy conversation partner. Through this process of doubting and questioning, reading, learning, exploring, faith becomes more vibrant; it becomes a faith that can engage real-world problems, the kind of problems Jesus would care about if he were walking this earth today, the kind of problems that we know grieve the heart of God.

Here was a scene from the extreme flooding in Germany last week,

<https://images.app.goo.gl/O63CMXY4gSoXrArVA> and here is the bootleg fire in Oregon:

<https://images.app.goo.gl/WhHmXDaeVC2iyJGp8>. Officials say both events are the result of climate change.

Do we have a faith that addresses this environmental crisis? Do we have the courage to try to make a difference for the sake of future generations?

Our church has made a commitment to hosting 3 AA groups weekly and to supporting several sober living facilities in our county. The need has never been greater. Here is another headline from just this week:

<https://images.app.goo.gl/qyVCpLYxF6AeX9q9A>. US overdose deaths soared during the pandemic.

What does it mean for faith to express itself in love in the midst of this humanitarian crisis and so many others?

How do we help those in our own community, our own neighborhoods, our own circles of friends, our own families, grow a faith that will provide the strength and encouragement they need to face the challenges of their daily lives?

Sometimes we're motivated by our passion to address one of the world's problems, and sometimes we're motivated by the moments in our own lives when we've experienced God's presence in a real and powerful way...one of those mountaintop moments that has transformed our lives and that we want to share.

One day one of Brian McLaren's friends said this to him, "I used to think that if I didn't have answers, I would only be left with questions. But now I'm starting to realize that if I live into the questions, if I don't have to fix or solve every problem, then I can welcome all the unknowns with wonder and reverence. In the midst of all my questions, I keep finding gratitude. And wonder. And joy. And this feeling of companionship and freedom. It's not such a bad thing, living in a world of wonders rather than a world of answers. It's actually very, very good."

As we continue to live into our mission statement, "Growing People to Serve God and Others," I pledge to you that I will do everything I can to ensure that our church is teaching, preaching and embodying a vibrant faith, where questions and doubts are welcome, and where the end goal is a faith that expresses itself in love.

I close by sharing this prayer with you:

"May God bless you, keep you, be gracious to you.

May God give you grace never to sell yourself - or God - short.

Grace to risk something big for something good.

Grace to remember that the world is now too dangerous for anything but truth.

And too small for anything but love.

So may God take your mind and think through it.

May God take your lips and speak through them.

May God take your hands and do good with them.

May God take your heart and set it on fire."

Amen.