
The spiritual gift of doubt
Martin Grove United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on John 20:19-31

At Irv Reid's funeral this week one of the family members shared a joke that he knew Irv would have loved since Irv was a long-time hockey fan. Here it is. "The surest sign of spring is that the Leafs are out". But another sure sign of spring is that we get the story of the person we call "Doubting Thomas". That story always comes soon after Easter, because the story is about the disciples seeing the risen Jesus first without, and then with, Thomas in the room.

And poor Thomas anyway. We label him "Doubting Thomas" even though he only wants the same proof that his friends had already had. We always imagine that if another disciple - Peter let's say - missed the first showing of Jesus that Peter would not have doubted, but the Bible doesn't say that. All that we know is that Thomas didn't believe his friends when they told him a story that he could not possibly have believed. Perhaps we feel the need to label Thomas because of our own insecurities. But that's another story.

The story always makes it sound like it is bad to have doubts. But I confess that I doubt that myself. For one thing, Jesus does not chastise Thomas for his doubt, Jesus simply understands and then shows his wounds to Thomas. Nothing in Jesus's actions suggests that doubt is bad. For another thing, ... well, let's see.

But what is doubt anyway? Doubt is sometimes seen as the opposite of faith, but I don't believe that is right. The opposite of faith is not doubt. The opposite of faith is unbelief. To misquote Sproul - there is a huge difference between unbelief that is closed-minded certainty and the open-minded uncertainty of doubt.¹ When doubt is open-minded and uncertain, when doubt is in the form of a question rather than an answer, then doubt is usually a positive thing. Open-minded doubt springs from the realization that life can be understood, and perhaps made better. We should applaud doubters. Let's applaud the doubters who said, "What if the earth isn't flat?". Let's praise the doubters

¹ <https://www.whatchristianswanttoknow.com/is-doubt-a-sin-can-it-be-a-good-thing/>

who said, “Why are women not allowed to vote?” Let’s cheer the doubters who said, “Isn’t there a better way to travel than on horseback?” Or in more religious circles, let’s celebrate the doubters who said, “Since we are all children of God, do we really have to kill each other?” Doubt of the status quo can help us evolve and mature, as individuals and as a society. Perhaps doubt can even be a catalyst to strengthen our faith.

There is a cool Latin phrase that pulls this all together. I’m not a huge fan of using Latin in church, but this expression is fun to say, so perhaps it will catch on. “Ubi dubium, ibi libertas”, which means “where doubt exists, there is freedom”. So the truth will set us free, but so will doubt. Who knew? It’s almost as if doubt leads to truth! Incidentally, this “positive doubt” I’m speaking about does not include self-doubt which is always negative, and it does not mean closed-minded doubt. The doubt that is helpful, the doubt that is liberating, the doubt that gives life is open-minded and uncertain. Unbelief is the rejection of faith. Doubt - liberating doubt - actually calls us to deepen our faith. That type of doubt is truly a spiritual gift.

Fun fact. If it were not for doubt, we would not know each other. It was not my faith that led me into ministry, it was my doubt. Well, it was both really, because for me faith and doubt are the same thing. But it was my questions about Christianity that drove me into the seminary. I had a lot of questions, and decided I needed to find some answers. I still remember walking into Emmanuel College my first day. And I remember walking in with 2 ideas in my head. One idea was that within that ancient building - that looks like it’s right out of a Harry Potter movie - I would find my best opportunities to find answers to my questions. I decided that over the years I was a student I would take every single question I had about Christianity into that building because it was probably the best shot I would have in my whole life to find answers to questions of faith. The other idea I carried in my head was a bit more disturbing. I walking in the door and realized that in 4 years I would be in a position where I could destroy a church, so I’d better pay attention. And don’t worry, I did pay attention. But that’s another story.

As for asking questions in seminary, I quickly learned that Emmanuel College was a good place to ask questions of faith. But that had limits too. It appears that seminary professors are actually human beings too. Some of the profs were natural

doubters themselves, and you could ask them anything. In fact, if you had a question that was only partly-formed, they would even help you figure out your question first before moving anywhere near an answer. And they always had the most interesting answers. Other profs were not natural doubters, but they helped me too, by helping me understand human nature better.

In any case, I state boldly that doubt - positive, open-minded, hopeful doubt - is a spiritual gift. And if that's true, then very likely, some of us have that gift, and others do not. Scientists have made that observation many times, getting their knuckles wrapped for discovering things that church authorities didn't like. I'm reminded of the story of the German physicist, mathematician, and theologian, Johannes Kepler born in 1571. Kepler is best known for his laws of planetary motion, and his work on optimizing the size of wine casks. That work was driven by the fact he thought he paid too much for the wine he purchased for his wedding but in fact give insights that later led to the development of Calculus. And if you know the history of Kepler's dealings with the church, you know he had good reasons to drink!

Kepler's study of astronomy was driven largely by his belief "that God created the cosmos in an orderly fashion which caused him to attempt to determine and comprehend the laws that govern the natural world, most profoundly in astronomy. The phrase 'I am merely thinking God's thoughts after Him' has been attributed to Kepler"² In spite of his piety, Kepler was excommunicated in 1613 because he believed that the moon was a solid body. Lutheran theologians at the time had decided that the moon could not be a solid body because in Genesis the moon is describes as a "lesser light to rule the night", and since the moon was a "light", it could not be solid.³

Open-minded doubters that ask interesting questions have frequently come afoul of church leaders who prefer simplistic answers. In Kepler's case, he wanted to see the mind of God by observing the heavens using astronomy. In Thomas's case, he wanted to see Christ by looking at Jesus's wounds. Thomas was labeled a doubter and Kepler, a heretic. It's sort of funny that Thomas wanted to use his sight to confirm the presence of

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johannes_Kepler#Christianity

³ <http://dermottmullan.com/kepler.htm>

Jesus in his midst and we are good with that. But Kepler used almost the same method. Kepler used his sight and his insight to look for the creator of the heavens in the heavens themselves. His observations led to a number of theories, as well as to the conclusion that the moon must in fact be solid. And for using his God-given sight, and insight, Kepler was ejected from the church.

You might think that open-minded doubt is the business of scientists, but in fact open-minded doubt is woven into the fabric of our church. And it is woven in as a spiritual gift. In 1517, Martin Luther dared to ask, “What if the church is wrong?” which is a great question from a very pious and faithful doubter. Doubt was also woven into the fabric of the United Church of Canada. As you may know, when the United Church of Canada came into being in 1925, it was created by an Act of the Canadian Government. It was a merger between the Congregational, Methodist, and most of the Presbyterian Churches in Canada. The foundational document is called “The Basis of Union” which includes a section called “The Twenty Articles of Doctrine” which describes in fair detail 20 elements of Christian faith. Each of the 20 articles is a paragraph that gives Christian doctrine on a specific topic. The 20 articles discuss God, revelation, divine purpose, creation and providence, sin, grace, Jesus, the holy spirit, regeneration, faith and repentance, justification and membership, sanctification, prayer, the law of God, church, sacraments, the ministry, church order and fellowship, resurrection, and Christian service and the final triumph.

If you read the document today, it reads much as you would expect a 100 year old document to read. It is fairly classic Christianity, written in a way that affirms the sexism and racism of its day. But it is classic Christianity. For example, Article 1 is labelled “Of God” and states “We believe in the one only living and true God, a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in His being and perfections; the Lord Almighty, who is love, most just in all His ways, most glorious in holiness, unsearchable in wisdom, plenteous in mercy, full of compassion, and abundant in goodness and truth. We worship Him in the unity of the Godhead and the mystery of the Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, three persons of the same substance, equal in power and glory.”⁴

⁴ The Manual, 2019. Pg 17.

The articles themselves are fairly clear and do not have much wiggle-room for doubt. However, the spirit is given latitude for doubt in a very interesting way which was completely intentional. The space for doubt is not found within the articles themselves. The space for doubt is found in the way the document is used. Because from 1925 until sometime after I was ordained, the 20 articles were really only used for 1 purpose. And that purpose was to test potential ministers to make sure that their faith was consistent with United Church of Canada doctrine before they were allowed to be ordained. Bright, hopeful ministers, prior to their ordination, were asked this question. “Are you in essential agreement with the articles of faith?” The space for open-minded doubt was expressed in the single word, “essential”. But that one word is enough. The point is made. Faith is given space for questions, for doubts, for change, for growth. In the United Church of Canada, ministers are not expected to agree with the 20 articles, but they are to “essentially agree” with them. And even better, when potential ministers are asked the question, they do not answer with a yes or no. They answer by stating where they themselves stand in relation to the articles. Faith - in the United Church - is a living faith that leaves room for many things, including doubt.

Which is a somewhat long-winded way to say that Thomas would be welcome here. That all of us are welcome here. Here, in this place where some ministers are also scientists. Here in this place where some faithful people also doubt. Here in this place where not all of us are Christian. Here in this place where it’s ok to bring questions in the door with you. Here in this place where some of us come with wounds, with wounded hands and feet, and we are accepted as we are. Here in this place where you are free to be yourself. Here in this place where we understand that the essence - the essential essence - of Christian faith is love.

Thank you for being here.

Amen.