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Mark 9:14-29

John 20:19-29

## FAITH AND DOUBT

Those who are parents have experienced it and those who aren't parents I think can understand it – when someone's child is not doing well, most parents will do whatever is in their power to address that. I have to imagine that the father in our story in Mark had explored a number of options in seeking healing for his son who was described in ways that make it sound like he had a serious form of epilepsy. In desperation, we parents may even try something we don't really think is going to work. When the father heard that followers of a rabbi named Jesus were in the area, he asked for their help for his son. But when they prayed for the boy, he did not receive any immediate healing. This avenue appeared to be a dead end. But then the rabbi himself showed up, and the father asked him that if he was able, to please heal his son. Jesus tells him that faith makes a difference and the father replies, "I believe; help my unbelief." When Jesus hears this, he tells the man, "I was going to heal your son, but because your faith is tarnished with doubts, I'm not going to do so after all," and he walks away from the father and his son. Wait a second - that's not how the story goes, is it?

A second story – Jesus has been crucified, but there was a tale from one of his followers that she had just seen Jesus alive and that he had spoken to her. The other followers didn't know whether to believe this incredible news or not. They were together in a room talking about how they wanted to believe but still had doubts, when suddenly, Jesus appeared to them. But one of them named Thomas had not been with them when Jesus showed up. When this man heard of the experience of the others, he said he would not believe unless he got to see Jesus with his own eyes and got to look at and touch the crucifixion wounds on his body. When Jesus got wind about what Thomas had said, he told his other followers that they should kick Thomas out of the community of faith because his doubts disqualified him from further participation. He added that there was no

way that he was going to come back to show himself alive to someone filled with such doubts. Hey – that’s the wrong ending to that story too.

And yet, the church and we as individuals sometimes act toward the honest expression of doubt as if the stories happened in the ways I just told them. In this series of sermons where we are exploring the nature of our faith, we look today at how we are to understand the experience of doubt. As we explore what doubts are, we seek a definition of faith. The most common scriptural definition comes from the Book of Hebrews: “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”<sup>1</sup> Faith is assurance and conviction. It and knowledge are not the same thing, but there are people who think that faith is supposed to be akin to certainty. If that is the expectation people have, then it is likely that when difficulties arise, when a child is ill or even when there is good news that seems to be totally incredible, it may lead to a time of questioning. There are some people who think that honest inquiry and expression of qualms don’t have a place in a community of faith. In some churches, unfortunately, the expectation is that even in bewildering times, that people ought to be able to say, “I believe,” and ignore any questions that invade their minds and hearts.

I can understand why some would be attracted to expressions of certainty instead of the, at times, difficult exploration of a life of faith, particularly in periods of a fair amount of change and upheaval. But such an approach which is averse to honest questioning has unwittingly pushed many people away from their faith communities and even from a life of faith itself. After all, what do you do when your faith experience doesn’t ‘measure up?’ If only these people were aware of the many biblical characters who grappled with doubts along with their faith. Jacob was a patriarch whose confidence in God was sometimes lacking. But God stuck with him and even changed his name to ‘Israel,’ which means one who wrestles with God. It became a fitting name for a whole group of God’s people.

A faith that has a capacity to take on and explore certain questions and even doubts is one that has a capacity to grow. It also can respect those who come up with some answers that are somewhat different from our own understanding. Not everyone wants the kind of faith that requires such wrestling and work, but our

gospel stories today seem to indicate that God honors the willingness to explore and question and search.

In our passage from Mark's Gospel, what a father brings to Jesus is among the deepest, most profound things in his life: his love and concern for his son. What he brings to Jesus is his own deep need and his theological honesty, saying "I believe, help my unbelief." What he does is act, in spite of his own uncertainty, and by God's grace, his son receives healing. As we heard from John's Gospel, after Thomas expresses his doubts, he is still welcomed into the fold of the followers of Jesus, and it is in that context that he has his own encounter with his resurrected Lord. He ends up saying to him, "My Lord and my God!" Thus, the often-called 'Doubting' Thomas gives one of the greatest affirmations of faith found anywhere in the bible. In both of these stories, doubts are honestly expressed, and at least we can say that they do not derail a positive, faith-building experience with Jesus.

Faith is seeking to trust God even as we navigate our doubts. And when a family member does not get well or when our faith experiences are different from that of others, these are challenges to a life of faith. But even when some things don't make theological sense, God can help us take a risk in believing, betting on the merciful and loving power of God even while not being intellectually certain of it. Some things in life are not provable, but are still worth believing in – among those is that God still loves us even when we are struggling with our doubts. Being with others as part of a faith community is a good place to be when encountering such struggles. After his spouse died, there was a man in one of my previous congregations who said he struggled to be able to affirm every word of the affirmation of faith we said during the worship services, but he very much needed to be with people who believed during that period of time when he couldn't. We don't have to have every faith question figured out in order to believe. Our doubts can keep our faith from becoming a rigid arrogance. And our faith keeps our doubts from becoming dismal cynicism. Having a mix of faith and doubts is not always the most comfortable place to be, but it is a much better place to be than to have a faith that is fake or dishonest. With our lives and with our tongues we can say to God, "I believe; help my unbelief." And then, by

God's grace, at some point we'll also be able to say with our tongues and with our lives: "My Lord and my God!"

<sup>1</sup>Hebrews 11:1