

Sermon Series: The D/F Wrestling Match: Doubt vs. Faith
“But I Thought I Knew?”
Psalm 111; Mark 1:21-28; I Corinthians 8:1-4, 6-13
Salem United Methodist Church
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Rev. Sue Shorb-Sterling

This is Epiphany season in the church, the season in which God is made known to us. During this time we are exploring doubt and faith. Just when we think we know all about faith, well, sometimes life happens and we ask, “But I thought I knew?”

This week was the 70th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp. Many survivors still doubt the presence of God in the camps. They wonder why God seemed distant, mute, or non-existent. We ask, “How could God allow for such a horrible thing to happen? How can a loving and powerful God allow so much hatred, evil, and suffering to go on in the world? Why do oppressors prosper and victims suffer?” Doubting God is totally normal. It is also normal to not be honest about our doubts. We can be embarrassed by them. They eat away at our confidence and control. Ken Wytsma in his book called, *The Grand Paradox: The Messiness of Life, the Mystery of God and the Necessity of Faith*, lists six different reasons we encounter doubt. 1) Some begin to doubt when we encounter the complexity of the universe. When I was a young adult and became much more aware of how vast and complicated the world is and everything beyond it, I began to doubt how there could be a God who ran the whole show. There are folks who just can't or won't believe that there is a God in charge of it all. Yet, for me it was this same encounter with the complexity of the universe that made me realize that there has to be a God. I came down on the side that only a deity much greater than any human could create such beauty and massive expanse.

2) We can begin to doubt when we recognize or encounter evil in the world, such as the Holocaust or ISIS, or rape, crime, or any other senseless acts of violence where one human deliberately harms another. Victims and their loved ones often doubt God. The unfairness and injustice in the world creates a tension in us. We want God to give us answers. Throughout human history, we have wrestled with God so much so that there is a term given for the argument that attempts to reconcile the existence of God with the existence of evil. The term is called theodicy which literally means from the Greek, God's justification.

3) We can begin to doubt when we discover evil in ourselves. For some, discovering evil within one's self causes them to leave the faith. They hit the brakes and turn away from God, creating a distance. And then they embrace the evil within, their sinful nature. All of us have evil in us. It's part of the human condition. That's why we confess our sins to God. Through confession we face the evil within. God has the grace and power to forgive and draw us closer. But if we put on the brakes and turn away, what happens? We grow deeper into evil and further away from God. However, as we turn our back on God, the evil within is very much aware of who God is and power that God has over evil. Today's Gospel lesson speaks to this. It was an evil spirit who identified Jesus as the Son of God and the One with the power to destroy evil. The evil within will work hard to keep us away from the One who has the power to destroy it.

4) We can begin to doubt when we feel lost or broken. Sometimes this happens when a loved one is killed suddenly or is diagnosed with a terminal illness, when we are diagnosed with a terminal illness, when we are abandoned by a loved one, or when we lose a job. This kind of doubt can sneak up on us. We can think we are stand firm in our faith and then there is this wallop that knocks us off balance. C. S. Lewis who might be most famous for writing the children's books, the Chronicles of Narnia, also wrote other theological material. When he was in his forties, he wrote a book called, *The Problem of Pain*. In this book he attempted to explain suffering and defends God. Lewis was a

confirmed bachelor until he met the love of his life at age fifty-nine. She died three years later of cancer. For only three years Lewis experienced true love. Before his wife died, Lewis could explain intellectually why people suffer and die, but when he experienced his wife dying, he wrote about the unfairness and injustice of the sudden loss of his beloved wife in another book called, *A Grief Observed*. He wrote, "God has not been trying an experiment on my faith or love in order to find out their quality. God knew it already. It was I who didn't. God always knew that my temple was a house of cards. God's only way of making me realize the fact was to knock it down." Lewis didn't remain doubtful, but his illustration that his faith is a house of cards is a good one to describe how any one of us can have our faith collapse when faced with crisis, even if it is just for a moment.

5) We can begin to doubt when we can't find God. Even the strongest of faith can feel that God isn't present with us. Mother Teresa, the saint of Calcutta who helped the suffering of the poorest of the poor wrote in her private journal. "There is so much deep contradiction in my soul. Such deep longing for God - so deep that it is painful - a suffering continual - and yet not wanted by God - repulsed - empty - no faith - no love - no zeal. Souls hold no attraction - Heaven means nothing - to me it looks like an empty place - the thought of it means nothing to me and yet this torturing longing for God. Pray for me please that I keep smiling at Him in spite of everything. For I am only His - so He has every right over me. I am perfectly happy to be nobody even to God." These words show us Mother Teresa's humanity and the fact that all of us can struggle with doubt and faith. Even in our doubts we can seek God while God seeks us.

6) We can begin to doubt when we are overcome with guilt. This is similar to discovering evil in ourselves. For many the first reaction is to turn away from God. People who are riddled with guilt may say, "I'm really struggling with my faith. I need a break from church for a while." Because they aren't sure that God exists or loves them, they isolate themselves from God, God's Word, and the people who believe in God. They believe that if they turn to whatever gives them pleasure, they will be satisfied until they can believe in God again. This is like staying away from the doctor when we are sick. It won't get better by ignoring it. Turning to God, naming the doubt, calling God to the mat to wrestle with God as Jacob did, will begin the process of letting go of the guilt and rebooting the faith process.

There will be times in life in which we will doubt. Even Jesus wrestled with doubt and faith when he faced the cross. He confronted God and pleaded not to go to the cross. God, however, saw the bigger picture. Jesus did not run away from God, but turned to God. Through it all, Jesus came out of his wrestling match with God in the garden stronger in his faith to face his tomorrow. When things happen where we do doubt, when we scream out the pain, anguish and anger, when we ask those questions, name the doubt and lean into the goodness of God. Take a step closer to God, but seek the answers among those who also wrestle and yet still believe. Doubt is not the opposite of faith or the absence of faith. Doubt is the first step in truly finding faith. Ken Wytsma wrote, "Only a faith that has been doubted can be confirmed. Only a life that has been risked can be redeemed. Only a God who has been trusted can prove to be trustworthy." The Psalmist who wrote Psalm 111 understood this and wrote, "Fear of the Lord is where wisdom begins." Which means, when we develop a healthy respect for the power of God in all things, then our faith, our wisdom will grow.

Reflection Questions: Do you know anyone who is wrestling with doubt and faith? How can you walk alongside them and help direct them to turn to faith? Are you wrestling with doubt and faith? How can we as a church walk alongside you and help direct you to faith?

Resources: *The Grand Paradox: The Messiness of Life, the Mystery of God and the Necessity of Faith* by Ken Wytsma; *A Grief Observed* by C. S. Lewis; *Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the Saint of Calcutta* by Mother Teresa

