

Doubters United
(John 3: 1-17)

*Now, O Lord, take my lips and speak through them;
Take our minds and think through them;
Take our hearts and set them on fire with Yourself,
God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.
Amen.*

I was excited a few weeks ago when Brother Reg asked if I would cover for Bishop Patrick today. That was until I got home and discovered that today is Trinity Sunday. Probably the most theologically mind-boggling Sunday in the Christian calendar. Who really can wrap their mind around the concept of the Holy Trinity? God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, each Singular, yet all One? No wonder the Bishop was so keen to get out of Dodge today!

But ... Oh, there's always a but. ... Do you ever ponder about the reality of the Holy Trinity? Just exactly what is it? Physically we can't touch it, feel it, smell it, taste it, hear it, or see it. So how do we know it is real?

We know it is real because our deep seated convictions of faith have led us to conclude that.

Or, have they? I must admit there moments when my wondering slips into pondering and then starts sliding down the slippery slope of doubting. Oh, that word *doubt*. A dangerous word when it comes to matters of faith, no? Because doesn't doubting surely lead to denying?

It doesn't have to. Nor should it. Why? Because doubt is integral to faith. One could say that faith and doubt are the opposite sides of the same coin.

Take a moment. I invite you to think about something in your own faith that has caused you angst. It could be a statement of doctrine. Have you ever wondered about some lines of the Apostles or Nicene Creeds that we recite every Sunday? It could be something in your own personal relationship with God. Have you ever doubted God in a moment of despair? Have you ever said, "I just don't know"?

If you have, here's a chance to be a little vulnerable. I invite you to please raise your hand with me if you've ever had doubts about your faith. Have you ever wondered or doubted about matters of your faith? Look around. Oh my gosh! What good company we are in!

Well, isn't this a pretty pickle! Here we are, a community of faith presumably rock solid in our convictions. And yet here we stand, a group of the faithful who admit to doubting. Welcome to Doubters United, Holy Trinity Chapter, Thornhill.

Interestingly enough this morning's reading from John has something to say about doubting. We know the story well - the encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus. Nicodemus came to Jesus seeking confirmation how Jesus had the power to do the things he had been doing. In his often annoying way Jesus deflected, leading Nicodemus to ask, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time the mother's womb and be born?" We expect him, a Pharisee, a learned person, a man of God, to get it. Surely, he should have known better. But, just as we have admitted a moment ago, Nicodemus was a questioner, a doubter. He was a man of faith open to a new revelation. He wasn't clueless. He was courageous. He was willing to question to get a fuller understanding of who this man Jesus really was.

It turns out that Scripture and history are chock-full of doubters. Moses doubted. Jeremiah doubted. Peter doubted. Thomas doubted. At the very end of Matthew's gospel when the disciples had gathered in Galilee, we read, "When they saw him they worshiped him; but some doubted". But some doubted. Luther. John Wesley. C. S. Lewis. Mother Teresa. Pope Francis. They all have doubted. I have had moments of doubt. The list is lonnggg. So my friends we are in good company.

For some of my next remarks I am indebted to Martin Thielen. Martin is a retired minister of the United Methodist Church in the U.S. He now writes and speaks frequently about faith and doubt. To be human is to have doubts. We can accept them and wrestle with them or we can tie ourselves up in knots trying to deny them. I choose the former.

To doubt is to be open to opportunity. To wonder and question is to open ourselves up to God's mysterious and wonderful ways. Clearly, something

had rubbed off on Nicodemus when showed up at the end of John's gospel, bringing spices and offering to help Joseph of Arimathea give Jesus a proper burial.

Doubt is necessary. Without it we wouldn't question strident biblical literalism, such as God condones slavery or women are to be treated as chattels; that homosexuality is an abomination; that everything that happens in life is God's will, as if God actually wants children to get leukemia, or willed the gunning down this week of Natalie and Davy Lloyd and Jude Montis, missionaries in Haiti, or for global pandemics to run rampant throughout the world.

Doubting is not denying. We need to be clear on this. The opposite of faith, the act of trusting and believing, is not doubting. The opposite of faith is certitude. When we doubt we are uncertain. When we deny we are certain. To be sure, doubt in the extreme can lead to *the dark night of our soul*, or a crisis of faith, and even ultimate denial of our faith. But much more importantly, doubt can lead to a stronger faith and greater wholesomeness if we choose to be open to the possibility.

Doubt is painful, oh so painful. It is no bed of roses. It can be disorienting, agonizing and traumatizing. Mother Teresa wrote, "the silence and emptiness are so great that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear". Friends, it can hurt like hell.

Now for the good news. Doubt is beneficial. Think about the phrase "the benefit of the doubt". Today's usage of this phrase does not really see doubt as beneficial. But in our context doubt can lead to profound insight and growth. It can help us discard toxic beliefs. It can help us develop a healthier and more mature faith. It can lead us away from a faith based solely on doctrinal propositions to one focussed on behaviour and how to live a fuller life based on love.

I admire Nicodemus. He was willing to step away from the norms of his faith to see what doubt might offer. He was willing to change the lens through which he saw and lived life.

I hope I am not giving you the idea that we should seek out doubt as if it is something we have to do to be more faithful. Absolutely not! Doubt will find

us. Trust me. Just like change, it is part of life. How we choose to deal with it is the question.

Let me share with you a personal example of doubt in my own faith journey. At the end of our reading Jesus says, “*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*” This is probably the most quoted verse in the whole Bible. I have seen it on bumper stickers and on billboards in the South. We all know it. It expresses the heart of what many people believe.

For the longest time I felt pretty warm and fuzzy with it. As I gained confidence in my faith, though, I began to have some questions. I was increasingly uncomfortable with the thought that God gave us Jesus to be a sacrifice. Even though that is what we profess each Sunday, it clashed with my conviction that God is love. Then the part about not perishing and having eternal life seemed conditional on believing in Jesus. Well, I said to myself, what about the billions of people on earth who are not Christians? Are they cut off from God and all of God’s blessings? Finally, what did Jesus mean by “*eternal life*”? Something to be enjoyed only after death? Now, I know that I am heading for the departure gate but I haven’t heard my flight called yet, so that kind of eternal life will just have to wait.

At one time I saw doubt as something to be avoided, something that might even be sinful. But as my faith matured I became more confident about being curious, even skeptical. I came to realize that questioning was okay. Having faith was about accepting uncertainty. This kind of doubting doesn’t throw the baby out with the bath water. Rather, it opens the door for new and wonderful insights.

How do I understand John 3:16? First of all, God truly loves this world. Not the humanly created world of cultures with their domination systems, but the whole of creation. The giving of his Son refers to the gift of Jesus’ incarnation, the opening to us of the reality of God, and much less so to the death of Jesus. Believing in Jesus does not mean so much believing a set of theological statements about Jesus as it does in *loving* Jesus, that is giving my heart, my loyalty, my fidelity and my commitment to Jesus. Finally, my understanding of *eternal life* as used by John means living the resurrected life both now and in the age to come. It is not something to be waited for. It is something to be experienced now as well as into the future.

In short, this verse to me is about loving Jesus and loving God as known in Jesus, as known in the incarnation, and living life with God now, not sometime later on after my flight has been called.

So there you have how doubt and questioning have led me to to a more confident and sure relationship with God. Be assured, faithful doubting is all right. Done with an open and prayerful heart it does not lead to denial. *Au contraire*, just the opposite. On this Trinity Sunday, let us be confident we can ask God questions about our faith and at the same time still continue to revel in God's infinite mystery.

Let me close with this prayer:

Holy One in Three and Three in One,

Let us dance with you.

We may not understand how you can be three distinct persons living in unity,

How you can sing in unison and harmony at the same time.

But we do not need to understand in order to trust your Presence.

We need not know in order to Love

As you love,

As you open the circle to us and invite us into your dance,

Into your grace,

Into your wholeness and holiness,

And into your love.

Let it be so.

May we dance with you, God.

Amen.

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