

Faith After Doubt: Doubt as Crisis
Rev. Steven M. Conger
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Mark 10:46-52 Common English Bible

Jesus and his followers came into Jericho. As Jesus was leaving Jericho, together with his disciples and a sizable crowd, a blind beggar named Bartimaeus, Timaeus' son, was sitting beside the road. When he heard that Jesus of Nazareth was there, he began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, show me mercy!" Many scolded him, telling him to be quiet, but he shouted even louder, "Son of David, show me mercy!"

Jesus stopped and said, "Call him forward."

They called the blind man, "Be encouraged! Get up! He's calling you."

Throwing his coat to the side, he jumped up and came to Jesus.

Jesus asked him, "What do you want me to do for you?"

The blind man said, "Teacher, I want to see."

Jesus said, "Go, your faith has healed you." At once he was able to see, and he began to follow Jesus on the way.

The other day someone mentioned that they have a friend who says that they have no doubts.

I bet we all know a few people like that

But that is not me!

I wish I could live without doubts --- but I can't.

It sometimes seems as if doubt is wired into my DNA --- and from what many of you have said to me this past week --- I don't think I am alone.

Almost 15 years ago, I received this email from an 18-year-old college student. A young woman who grew up in the church and believes strongly in the ethic of helping one another.

She wrote to me:

"I think it's a really good thing that you're working on a curriculum designed to help people deal with the questions and doubts that they should have about their faith. When I got old enough to realize how historically unreliable and intellectually fallible the Christian Bible is, I pretty much just gave it all up and was really angry because I felt like I had been lied to my whole life by teachers I thought I could trust at church. Kind of how a kid might feel when they finally figure out that Santa isn't real and that they were being systematically lied to. As much as I wish I didn't, I still feel resentful. It's really fascinating though, what an incredibly huge role religion plays in shaping the beliefs, views, and actions of huge groups of people all over the world. I am actually considering taking on a theology major because I think it would be a huge asset in my quest to better understand why the world works the way that it does. Right now, I am taking a class called "Women In The Bible" and it is really very interesting, but I feel weird because the people in the class all believe in God and Jesus. I don't have anything against any person of any faith, but I guess I just feel like they probably look down on people like me.

One of my biggest struggles with Christianity is that we are known for shooting our wounded.

If you are active in a Christian Church --- particularly a more conservative form of Christianity (although they do not hold all of these cards) and you come out with your doubts --- you will quickly be instructed on the things that you need to believe --- and you need to believe them NOW.

For me it became a crisis of faith.

It wasn't the doubts that created the crisis, but rather the dishonesty that had to surround those doubts.

I couldn't talk about them

So, I had to find ways to avoid or hide those doubts

And what I realized is that the hypocrisy and self-deception became more dangerous than the doubts.

The pretending was where the real tension in my life came to play

As I look back the crisis was not really over my doubts, but how others saw my wrestling with God.

And it came to a head over 20 years ago on a Sunday morning.

On the way out of the service a woman stopped me and complained about the translations we used, and she said: "If the King James was good enough for Jesus, it is good enough for me!" and she stormed off.

I was dumbfounded --- I had no idea what to even say --- but as I reflected on it --- a few lightbulbs went off in my head.

I had absolutely no doubts that Jesus NEVER spoke the King James English --- he didn't speak ANY English. Aramaic would have been his native language --- but that fact did not seem important to that woman. She was not about to let facts get in the way of her certainty.

I began to realize that the fear that some people put into me was unfounded --- You know --- the idea that if we question one moral absolute then you will soon be questioning them all.

The notion that doubt was a slippery slope and would lead to more doubt

But I was realizing that just wasn't true

I came to understand my faith --- my religion --- not as a fortress to protect me --- but instead I began to understand faith as being a journey --- a path --- a road --- and one that I don't always know where it is leading me.

Brian McLaren in *Faith After Doubt* writes:

The ancient truths weren't the destinations. They were like milestones or road signs, inviting people to reach them and then keep moving, looking for the next milestone or road sign, and the next, and so on. Jesus wasn't abolishing them; he was fulfilling their intention. Their intention was to invite people to grow, to keep exploring, to continue the journey on the road of faith. But so many churches are using them to hold people and keep them from growing. We've turned milestones into roadblocks.

One of the things that I have seen over my nearly 40 years is that confirmation becomes one of those milestones, but instead of inviting people to continue on to a more mature journey --- it becomes an exit ramp from active faith. The number of youth (and families) that disappear after confirmation should be alarming to us all!

For me, seeing my faith as a journey allowed me to look at the questions, not as limits on my relationship with God, but instead as opportunities to grown.

In his book, *Faith After Doubt*, Brian McLaren develops the idea that there are four stages of growth in faith development.

Doubt, he argues is the passageway from one stage to the next.

Without questioning and wrestling with doubt we can grow within a stage, but we are unable to breakthrough to the next stage.

He developed the idea of faith being like rings in a tree --- each stage includes and transcends its predecessors.

I want to spend a few minutes this morning talking about what he considers the first stage of growth --- he calls this first stage SIMPLICITY.

He uses that term because everything revolves around a simple mental function of sorting almost everything into one of two categories.

In this first stage we master the mental skills of dualism --- learning to distinguish between this and that --- Good and bad --- right and wrong.

Important things that we all must learn to stay safe --- but simplicity can only take us so far on our journey.

This dualism --- particularly social dualism --- creates a strong sense of loyalty and identity among us.

But it also creates a strong sense of anxiety and even hostility about "others", outsiders, and the outcasts.

This first stage is built on trust.

The young woman in my email trusted her teachers when they told her that Adam and Eve ate an apple given by a talking snake.

Just like she trusted her parents that Santa and the Easter Bunny were real

What matters in this first stage is Simple trust

Simple obedience

Simple unquestioning loyalty

The sad reality is that faith and religion are a strictly stage one phenomenon for millions if not billions of people.

In this first stage --- God is the up there --- setting the rules --- demanding trust --- requiring obedience and mandating punishment when rules are broken.

In this first stage God is much like a parent to a small child

But any of you who have had children know --- they eventually grow up and move into adolescence and the parenting skills and practices that you used with a toddler don't work well with a teenager.

This stage of simplicity is in many ways like school --- we are taught the basics; we learn the morals necessary for independence and as we learn these things we want to move out and live with that newfound freedom.

The only way out of this stage is doubt.

It is kind of funny --- the one group in the church that often wrestles openly with this doubt are those young people going through confirmation.

They begin questioning that the rules are always absolute

Why is homosexuality an absolute but tattoos, or mixed cloth garments aren't?

Why is slavery allowed in the bible?

Questions most of us want to avoid.

They notice inconsistencies in the biblical stories.

How we react to their questioning and doubts makes a huge difference if they continue on this journey or check out after reaching the milestone called confirmation.

Next week I will look further at these stages, particularly the second and third stages. Just so you can begin thinking about it --- McLaren calls the second stage COMPLEXITY.

The stage of Simplicity focuses on dualism.

In our Gospel story this morning we are told that Jesus has been at the town of Jericho and is now getting ready to make the trek up to Jerusalem as the next story in Mark's Gospel is Jesus' triumphal entry into the holy city.

As Jesus was leaving Jericho, together with his disciples and a sizable crowd, a blind beggar named Bartimaeus, Timaeus' son, was sitting beside the road.

When he heard that Jesus of Nazareth was there, he began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, show me mercy!" Many scolded him, telling him to be quiet,

What is going on here?

As Jesus is leaving town, with a large crowd gathered around him, and a blind outcast man begins to shout at Jesus.

You don't do that

Can you imagine if the beggars around our city --- instead of walking back and forth carrying their signs on the street corners --- instead began shouting at us!

The rules of society today and in Jesus' time was that the outcasts were to keep quiet and not bother the rest of us. And so, we should not be surprised when the crowd begins to tell him to be quiet.

But what does Bartimaeus do?

"he shouted even louder, "Son of David, show me mercy!"

The rules were simple --- blind people were that way because either they or their parents had sinned, and the blindness was God's punishment on them.

Bartimaeus refused to believe those rules and thought there was more to faith than what he had been taught. And he had heard the stories of Jesus saying "You have been told, but I tell you", in which he would re-interpret the rules in a new way. He wanted to experience that faith --- even if the crowd didn't want him to.

Jesus said to his disciples and the crowd, "Call him forward." . . .

Throwing his coat to the side, he jumped up and came to Jesus.

Jesus asked him, "What do you want me to do for you?"

The blind man said, "Teacher, I want to see."

Jesus said, "Go, your faith has healed you." At once he was able to see, and he began to follow Jesus on the way.

His faith made him well --- I love that statement --- where did he show FAITH?

He broke the rules of society!

If he had faith --- it was that Jesus was bigger than those rules!

Simplicity is like a well-worn cozy blanket that we wrap ourselves in.

It gives us the rules and the norms to live in society.

But --- when things are not so neat and easy

When a baby dies

A child gets cancer

A loved one loses their job

Then we are stuck with trying to figure out what we do.

And at that point we have a choice --- we can sit quietly (like Bartimaeus was supposed to do) or we can do what he did and seek another way.

I love the book Life of Pi and the quote from it at the top of your bulletin.

If Christ spent an anguished night in prayer, if He burst out from the Cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" then surely we are also permitted doubt. But we must move on. To choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation.

And that is the goal --- to use our doubt to help us grow in our relationship with God and each other --- not to stay stuck in it.

Where do you doubt

What are the sticking places in your faith journey?

Bring them to God and allow God to help us use them as we grow in love for God and each other. Amen.