

at Clayton Valley Presbyterian Church, Sunday, September 20, 2009
by David TenBrook

Holy Spirit, work in and through us this morning. Where our hearts listen, speak. Where our minds consider, challenge. Where our very beings yearn, dwell. Amen.

In case you haven't heard, today has been named Seminary Sunday by the Presbyterian Church, which allows for seminaries around the country to gain more exposure through Minutes for Mission. However, in light of Gail's vacay, I was asked to fill in for the entire sermon and since it's always a joy to come back to CVPC, I was honored to accept. In light of today's denominational theme, I found great inspiration in our second Scripture reading this morning, which is the story of the apostle Thomas meeting the risen Jesus. May God grant us insight into the Word this morning as it comes to us in John 20: 19-29 (NRSV).

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

There have been many sermons on why Thomas is actually a model for faith since he is the everyman (or woman), naturally doubting a surprising claim, but then professing his faith upon seeing Jesus for himself. And this Hegelian process of thesis (doubt), antithesis (proof), synthesis (new insight) is upheld for all to see and praise because Thomas comes around to declare Jesus as, "My Lord and my God!" But this process is not so simple. The act, nay, the condition of doubting is rarely so quick and painless when it touches the soul. The ever-famous Doubting Thomas earns his title in less than 5 verses. If only it were so easy!

Genuine doubt, when it involves re-examining one's very being, can hardly be considered easy. Quite to the contrary, it can be utterly terrifying. Everything once considered staple, all that was

once sacred, suddenly becomes suspect. The sheer terror involved in Doubt, with a capital D, is enough to deter anyone from even opening that Pandora's Box, let alone actively diving headlong into it. There is a further complication where our own faith tradition has a history of denigrating doubt and its corollary, curiosity. To quote the highly-influential *Confessions* of Saint Augustine, "Beside the lust of the flesh which inheres in the delight given by all pleasures of the senses... there exists in the soul... a cupidity which does not take delight in carnal pleasure but in perceptions acquired through the flesh. It is a vain inquisitiveness dignified with the title of knowledge and science. As this is rooted in the appetite of knowing, and as among the senses the eyes play a leading role in acquiring knowledge, the divine word calls it 'the lust of the eyes' (35.54)." It is not difficult to hear this condemnation of favoring the sense of sight and combine it with the Risen Christ's blessing of "those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" in this morning's Scripture lesson. Throw in Romans 14:23, "But those who have doubts are condemned if they eat, because they do not act from faith; for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin" or 2 Corinthians 5:7, "for we walk by faith, not by sight" and it is not difficult to find Scriptural justification for suspicion of what we see and experience in this world.

But we cannot accept a simple dichotomy of seen/unseen. The very narrative of Doubting Thomas shows us this. Jesus does not merely appear and rebuke Thomas. He comes to Thomas and offers something I feel most of us wouldn't mind an opportunity to do: to touch the wounds. To test our faith. To empirically prove that which we uphold as foundational to our purpose and being in this world. Jesus offered Thomas this opportunity. Jesus resurrect did not merely condemn Thomas' doubt, nor did he simplistically commend it either. There is an invitation to satiate it, but then an exhortation to not let it be a debilitating obstacle. Blessed are those who have not seen yet believe. But also blessed are those who actively seek God instead of merely accepting what is said, for they will be supported in their Search.

Doubt occupies a curious position in the West. Western philosophy was indelibly changed by France's René Descartes who founded his epistemology on doubt, "That is why I consider that I shall not be acting amiss, if, taking of set purpose a contrary belief, I allow myself to be deceived, and for a certain time pretend that all these opinions are entirely false and imaginary, until at last, having thus balanced my former prejudices with my latter [so that they cannot divert my opinions more to one side than to the other], my judgment will no longer be dominated by bad usage or turned away from the right knowledge of the truth" (*Meditations on First Philosophy*, pg. 33). He also said, "If you would be a real seeker after truth, it is necessary that at least once in your life you doubt, as far as possible, all things" (attributed). Considered the father of modern philosophy, Descartes succeeded in placing doubt as central to discovering truth. However, the problem, we have come to realize, was that Descartes doubted everything except the Self, which displaces everything except the individual. It is not difficult to see why his profound contribution to the search for Truth has been problematic.

However, Protestantism has its own problematic approach to the issue of doubt. Max Weber, a German sociologist of religion, has an insightful analysis of how John Calvin's theology contributed to the Spirit of Capitalism, "On the one hand it is held to be an absolute duty to consider oneself chosen, and to combat all doubts as temptations of the devil, since lack of self-confidence is the result of insufficient faith, hence of imperfect grace... On the other hand, in order to attain that self-confidence intense worldly activity is recommended as the most suitable

means. It and it alone dispenses religious doubts and gives certainty to grace” (*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, pgs. 111-12). Some theologians have tried to work around this penetrating criticism, but have borne few fruits. When doubt is labeled as antithetical to faith then lives can become unbearable, especially if faith is the absolute necessity for salvation, as Reformers asserted.

So we have two extreme examples of handling doubt in the West. Descartes makes doubt and the human subject central while Calvin banishes doubt and the human subject to the periphery, yet both have been immensely problematic since as we are human, doubt is impossible to live within and to live without. It is a natural part of who we are as finite creatures, especially when called to live in relationship to an Infinite Creator, but doubt is not definitive of our being. We, as Christians, must affirm the healthy place doubt has in our lives, but not let doubt displace God by placing ourselves or something else in the center of our universe. We must uphold Thomas the Doubter while also upholding the Two Greatest Commandments: love the Lord our God with all of our heart, mind, soul, and strength and loving our neighbor as we love ourselves.

As I was considering what I would do after I graduated from UC Santa Barbara, I took a look at some seminaries’ websites. Every time I look into a group or organization, I try to check out their mission statement. If they don’t have one, I am suspicious. Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish one group from the countless others working in the same field, so I was not surprised that a lot of the seminaries had somewhat similar sounding statements. However, I found myself genuinely struck by San Francisco Theological’s: “This Seminary is a community of women and men from diverse cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds that responds to the challenges facing theological education in different contexts, national and international, in the western United States and around the Pacific Rim. We seek to integrate faith and learning through innovative teaching, creative scholarship, and the practical experience of ministry, as we respond to our changing societies and cultures and are shaped by the Christian vocations to which we have been called.” The motto of the seminary is “Whole Leaders for the Whole Church” which takes the Two Great Commandments and epitomizes them. I was encouraged that the goal is to take the whole person (their heart, mind, soul, and strength) and prepare them for serving the whole Church (every neighbor possible), despite the numerous challenges of such a mission. Spiritual formation, skills in arts of ministry, and critical theological reflection are the three pillars of the curriculum and critical theological reflection inherently involves an element of doubt, a need for questioning what we’re told. Or as one of my Old Testament professors, Bob Coote, defines criticism, “To be critical is to make provisional judgments about matters that are significant but uncertain, using evidence and reasoning, expecting assent to argument rather than to assertion or authority. Criticism is rhetorical, serving to persuade rather than to prove.” And there it is, uncertainty, questioning, doubt, wholly integrated into the formation of leaders for the whole Church.

But there are brothers and sisters in our faith who reject such an approach. As we are our brother’s and our sister’s keepers, we must be aware that the strain of Christianity that promulgates anti-intellectualism is our responsibility. From their perspective, pure and unadulterated faith is held aloft as a virtue that can be obtained so long as we don’t let too much rationality get in the way. Doubting this is not acceptable. We must not allow these

impressively vocal constituents speak unchallenged. We are called to love God with every part of us, including our minds and questioning is a necessity to do so.

However, there are also brothers and sisters outside our faith who disdain even having faith in a god. As we are our brother's and our sister's keepers, we must be aware that the strain of Empiricism that promulgates anti-spirituality is our responsibility. From their perspective, pure and unadulterated science is held aloft as a virtue that can be obtained so long as we don't let too much irrationality get in the way. Doubting this is not acceptable. We must not allow these impressively vocal constituents speak unchallenged. We are called to love our neighbor with every part of us, including our minds and questioning is a necessity to do so.

I found it interesting, as I researched the word "doubt" that it has a couple layers of etymology. The first layer is the Latin word "dubitare" which means "to hesitate." The other layer is the roots that "doubt" comes from: duo and bito, which mean "two" and "way/direction" respectively or, to put it another way, "to stand at a crossroad." I found this fascinating because this changes the idea of doubt from a hesitant stagnation to a time of consideration when two (or more) possible paths are presented. There is more movement involved; a more active seeking rather than passive questioning.

From my own experience, these crossroads of doubt we come to are not lightweight metaphors to be tossed around, but instead important matters to consider. Do we enter the doubt? Do we skirt the issue so we can function (or at least minimize disruption)? Do we start down the difficult path of examination, but take the easiest route offered? Do we sit at the fork and stubbornly proceed no further? Do we despair? One of the most influential experiences of my faith journey led me through physical ailment, relational turmoil, emotional agony, academic disruption, and suicidal contemplation because everything underwent deconstruction. I tried to take the easiest routes. I tried to just sit at the fork. I nearly lost hope. I nearly despaired. Each time, however, someone or something kept me moving until I reached the next crossroads. Doubt is not monolithic when it's of great intensity. It's in waves, or perhaps particles. Really both.

The doubt that our Christian tradition does well to guide us away from is the doubt I nearly succumbed to: that of so crippling a nature that it leads to despair and, eventually, apathy (literally, no longer feeling anything). God is a God of Life and Love and so if doubt triumphs over the desire to live love and love life, then there is an immediate need for support and aid. That is one of those times when loving your neighbor as you love yourself becomes absolutely critical. Not to say we can provide all the answers the person is seeking. That is not our job. Our job is to sit with them, or walk with them, or talk with them or whatever is needed depending on their disposition.

But the doubt that our philosophical tradition does well to guide us towards is the doubt I managed to keep working through: that of so catalyzing a nature that it leads to insight and, eventually, action. If I may digress momentarily, there is an English idiom that bothers me in its usage. Let's say I ask you if I could borrow your car to go get some groceries and you reply, "Oh, by all means!" Generally understood to be the equivalent of "Of course!" or "Certainly!" Every time I hear the phrase, to use the same example, I would depart on many flights of fancy on how many different ways I could possibly borrow your car to get groceries. The next time

you hear someone say or you catch yourself saying “By all means,” consider just how much freedom is being bestowed. But this is exactly what I mean when I say, if someone is in the midst of doubt, by all means, safeguard hope. By all means, help them to not despair. By all means, love your neighbor as you love yourself. For as long as hope remains, doubt will lead to action. But when hope has been lost and despair wins the day, doubt can only lead to apathy.

The reason doubt and faith have such a long and illustrious history of animosity is not because of disputes over various trivia like Gospel authorship, feeding of the 5000, or the parting of the Red Sea, but because of the fear that if one begins to doubt one facet of a system of belief, then the rest of the structure may collapse. But if a system of belief is only held together by the duct tape of faith, then it has failed one of the two greatest commandments: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength. For if we love God with every part of our being, then the vicissitudes of life that foster doubt will not be threatening, but catalyzing. When a part of the human-constructed system fails, we do not have our hope founded upon it, but instead on the God who works in and through all things. The current state of our world is not indicative of our world’s future, nor is evil the consequence of curiosity and doubt when these natural and commendable human qualities are directed towards the Two Greatest Commandments. To allow for curiosity and doubt to lead into despairing apathy is where we, as Christians, must draw the line. To quote Harvey Milk, “The important thing is not that we can live on hope alone, but that life is not worth living without it.” If our neighbor doubts unto the elimination of hope, then it is imperative that we take up our Christian duty to walk with them through the valley of the shadow. We cannot, as a Christian community, afford to allow the evils attributed to Eve’s doubt, or Pandora’s curiosity for that matter (yes, the world is stacked against women), to have the final word for we, with the eyes of faith, see more than what is of this world. We hope in not what is seen, but what is unseen. But we also see with our physical eyes, so neither can we forsake the knowledge and experiences gained in this world. We are to love our Lord our God with all of our heart, mind, soul, and strength. It is perfectly allowable to be Doubting Thomases. In fact, it is precisely because of the sins we observe of this world that we must place our hopes beyond it. I do not find it trivial that after Pandora unwittingly unleashed all of the world’s evils there remained one more aspect of the human condition in her box: hope. Hope, therefore, is not to be found out in the world where all the evils immediately rushed upon release. It is found elsewhere. For us it is found in the same place our Doubting Thomas found it after he was allowed to empirically work out his doubt, he found it in “My Lord and my God!”

Amen.