

“Living with Doubt”

John 20:19-31

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San Dimas Community, United Church of Christ

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In my opinion, poor Thomas gets a bad rap. Whenever we hear his name, we think “doubting Thomas.” But just a few chapters earlier, as Jesus announces he’s going to Jerusalem, this very same Thomas says: “Shall we go with him to die there?” Seems to me with such awareness and expressed conviction, he’d earned the right to now have some doubts. People often struggle with whether having doubts is an OK thing, or whether doubting is a sign of spiritual defect. I am struck with how Jesus responds to Thomas. He doesn’t say “Oh, ye of little faith.” He doesn’t turn his back on him. Rather, Jesus says “peace be with you” and then invites him to see and feel for himself, to experience the risen Christ. Now, I know that last verse sounds a bit judgmental. But think about it. John is writing to a congregation who didn’t have the chance to experience Jesus’ ministry on this earth. He is blessing them for their willingness to follow and yes, even be persecuted for being one of Jesus’ disciples without having known Jesus in the flesh. So I read this verse as a recognition that Thomas had the opportunity to ground his faith in experience but now John’s church forms their beliefs on testimony, and they should be blessed for that!

Doubts don’t seem to bother Jesus; he seems quite capable of handling doubts. I would suggest that even today God can handle our “living with doubt.” Also, I am convinced that sound bites were designed to entice us towards ill-formed doubt. They can instill fear and uncertainty; they can warp the truth; they deny the listener a chance for conversation, questions, and doubts. We’ve heard a lot of sound bites, recently some about our own United Church of Christ denomination.

In 1973 I graduated from college eagerly anticipating a career in teaching. One week after graduation I traveled by car to Atlanta, Georgia where I was going to live. It was my first time to travel Interstate 10 through the deep south. I remember passing a highway sign announcing “Tallulah, Mississippi, gateway to happiness,” and then approaching the town on the left were one room, bare board houses, where the poor people lived, and then we entered the town, crossed the railroad tracks, and suddenly on the right side of the road was a beautiful stream with huge mansions sitting above on the hilltops. This was my introduction to the south I had never known.

In Atlanta in 1973 there were more teachers than positions. Due to a vacancy mid-year, I finally received a contract to teach 1st grade in the inner city of Atlanta. I was excited, and I believed I could make a difference in the lives of children. I was also naive and unprepared. Five white teachers integrated that school, and although the wise tenured African-American teachers nurtured us and appreciated our passion, naive as it was, but others did not. I remember one particular school assembly when we gathered in the auditorium, and it was clear to me that the young African-American teacher who was speaking was building up her community by criticizing the oppressors outside her community of which I was the same color. I finished my contract that spring but did not renew it; I left teaching feeling like a failure and having my feelings a little hurt.

Fast forward about 18 years....Quite suddenly, I found myself entrapped in an intensively abusive situation that lasted a couple of years, and I was surprised at myself and overwhelmed with the anger that welded up within me. Even after being free from that situation, it took years for me to get over my anger; in fact, owning my anger was part of the healing process for me.

When I entered Claremont School of Theology in January of 1999, I took a class in the history of American Christianity. With two little girls to raise, it was my habit to get up at 4:30

in the morning with a full pot of coffee and use this quiet time for my reading. The required readings for this particular class included the history of Christian churches towards slaves. I remember one morning as I read about the history of abuse by Christians towards their slaves, Christians who even used the Bible to justify their abuse, I began to weep, and I wept a long time. In class we watched some of the documentary "Eyes On the Prize." Suddenly, I better understood the anger behind the Watts riots because it touched the edges of my own deep anger that I was struggling with after my own rather short lived, but intense oppression. And then I began to understand better the role of sanctuary fulfilled by the Black churches in American.

Christianity was not indigenous to the Africans brought to America against their will as slaves. Christianity was imposed upon them. And yet, they made the faith their own. Their churches became sanctuaries. When everywhere else in society put them down and shut them out, the church lifted them up and affirmed them as beloved children of God. The church became for them a place of empowerment, and even today if you worship in a predominantly Afro-American church, you feel the power of being lifted spiritually to higher ground. In a powerful way, the Black church became a sanctuary for the building up of an oppressed community. And the preachers, preach from a prophetic voice, similar to how the prophet Jeremiah did. Now if you just read the first few chapters of the Book of Jeremiah, he describes his beloved country as a whore and repeats the metaphor over and over. This is not a metaphor I would choose to use in a sermon. But this rhetorical style is represented over and over throughout the prophets.

Perhaps you've heard some sound bites of Rev. Jeremiah Wright, retired pastor of Trinity UCC. A lot's been said but one quote that isn't so much a sound bite is from Mike Huckabee. the baptist preacher and governor of Arkansas. As he reflects on the Wright controversy; he says:

*As easy as it is for those of us who are white to look back and say, "That's a terrible statement," I grew up in a very segregated South, and I think that you have to cut some slack. And I'm going to be probably the only conservative in America who's going to say something like this, but I'm just telling you: We've got to cut some slack to people who grew up being called names, being told, "You have to sit in the balcony when you go to the movie. You have to go to the back door to go into the restaurant. And you can't sit out there with everyone else. There's a separate waiting room in the doctor's office. Here's where you sit on the bus. (MSNBC interview)*

I guess you might say that Gov. Huckabee is giving Wright, "the benefit of the doubt." Trinity UCC in the south side of Chicago ministers to a community of poverty, unemployment, gangs, homelessness, and other major social problems, where they empower the powerless. Yet, their faithfulness to Christ's call attracts faithful people from outside their immediate community because they see in Trinity a true witness to Christ.

We're a long way from south Chicago. Here at San Dimas UCC we will try, in our own way, "to bloom where we are planted." It won't look the same as Trinity UCC, but we pray it will be faithful. And I know it won't come as a surprise when I say that I will never preach like Rev. Jeremiah Wright; partly because I'm too timid, but mainly because I have not grown up as a Black man in America, during a time when 399 Black men were unknowing participants in the Tuskegee experiment sanctioned by U.S. health department. They were left untreated for their disease to see how they would die. And unlike Jeremiah Wright, I have never served in the U.S. marines so I have not earned the right to critique policies to the same degree as he. The good news is that in the UCC we embrace differences; we can be San Dimas UCC and Trinity and can be Trinity UCC. I can be called to ordained ministry and so can others who are very different than I and whose experiences result in their preaching and ministering differently than I do. The

reason I belong to the United Church of Christ is because, for better or worse, I can be honest and truthful and even doubtful in my relationship with God, and I believe that truth, even lived in the midst of doubts, is what God wants from me.

Thank you, God, that you do not speak in sound bites but through the long enduring history of your people, through the text of your Word, through the life of the risen Christ, and through the church who commits itself not to perfection, not to absolutes and certainties, but to faithfulness. So whether we are living in doubt, in fear, in hope, we can bring ourselves *just as we* are to live and dwell within the love of God that calls us ever forward to be our best and truest servants for the sake of the gospel. May this be so!