

An Appreciation for Doubt

Wonder, glory of mystery get swept aside by self-righteousness

By Pastor Peter W. Marty, pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church, Davenport, Iowa. Pastor Marty lectures and writes frequently on faith matters.

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Who doesn't love the experience of having confident faith? There is something thrilling about strapping oneself to a way of life that Jesus considers powerfully God-centered. But Lutheran Christians are at their best when they prize humility more than certainty. Our duty is not to claim to know more than we do. If anything, we have a responsibility to learn how to make wise choices without always needing to be entirely sure.

A popular myth in our day elevates absolute certainty in spiritual matters as the goal to which we all should aspire. Yet certainty becomes a small "g" god when it turns ideological. It assumes incredibly seductive powers. Devout believers start becoming obsessed with being right. They know the precise purposes of God. They are absolutely sure that God dislikes the exact same people and things they do. There is little question of who wins the approval of God and who does not.

This is not a variety of believing around which to fashion a life. It leaves love on the periphery. It voids the surprise that deserves to go with faith. If absolute certainty in knowing the mind of God is imperative, the journey of faith quickly becomes impoverished. All of the incomprehensibles — the unanswerable questions — will have to be ignored or short-changed. The wonder and glory of mystery will have to be shelved. God will look more domesticated than our favorite pet.

Novelist Marilynne Robinson speaks of cultivating a degree of uncertainty in her writing, considering it a form of reverence. "There is something about certainty that makes Christianity very un-Christian," she writes.

Perhaps it is the absence of spiritual modesty, our claiming to know more than we really do. Or maybe it is a misunderstanding of the place of doubt.

The opposite of faith isn't doubt — it's certainty. Doubt is really quite beautiful. For too long we have been denying doubt the respect it deserves. Theologian Frederick Buechner once called it the "ants in the pants of faith." How true. It keeps us on our toes. It rescues us from the excesses of certainty. "It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble," Mark Twain said one time. "It's what you know for sure that just ain't so."

At the very end of Matthew's Gospel account, Jesus commissions his disciples to head out into the world and bear witness to the truth and power of God. Most of us know

this section of Scripture by the oft-repeated line: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations ..." (28:19). It's a culminating moment in the Gospel when the now-resurrected Christ turns over his ministry to the now-seasoned disciples.

Matthew writes of the moment: "When they saw [Jesus], they worshiped him; but some doubted" (28:17).

This is the way most Bibles translate the experience. The problem, as New Testament professor Mark Allan Powell points out, is that the word "some" doesn't appear in Greek manuscripts. Translators have inserted the idea that some doubted, evidently to satisfy their own theology and suggest that doubt is somehow the opposite of faith or worship.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The disciples worshiped and they doubted. Period. All of them. Matthew never suggests that the disciples were free of doubt or that they should have been. Doubt intersects with our faith lives in profound ways, ensuring that we don't become too certain that we are right.

Few things seem to have boiled the blood of Jesus more than religious people who behaved as if they knew all things. Self-righteousness is the fancy name for such behavior. Jesus railed against any number of supremely religious people who knew how to tithe every spice in their cupboard but had no clue how to love their neighbor.

In our day, the most thoughtful forms of faith will always point toward the truth, without claiming to possess it entirely. Integrity in our personal lives and civility in our congregations will grow wherever we figure out that loving others is more important than being right. Isn't that one of the gifts of love — to bring the arrogance of certainty to its knees?