

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
May 10 & 11, 2014
Debbie Manning
Faith + Doubt: We Are Not Alone in Our Doubts
Luke 7:18-28; Matthew 28:16-20**

Well, good morning everyone and Happy Mother's Day! I'm Debbie Manning. I'm on staff here and get to work as part of the congregational care team. Right now we're in the middle of a series on faith and doubt. Matt Moberg kicked it off a few weeks ago with a conversation around how we hold faith and doubt together. We talked about how as Christians, we often feel like it is not okay to doubt, but we come to the realization that strength of faith can't be defined by how much doubt we do or don't have because our faith is centered in Jesus Christ. Our faith is centered in Christ, not in our own understanding or our own knowledge. When we walk authentically with God, we still may have doubts. Last week Carrie Gleason did a great job talking about wrestling with doubt. We heard the story about Jacob and his wrestling match with God and his commitment to figuring out doubt. What I loved most about Carrie's message was that we saw how God met Jacob right where he was, in the middle of the mess.

Today we're looking at the idea that we are not alone in our doubt. I've been thinking a lot about those we see as faithful heroes of the faith, both in ancient Biblical and modern days, and how they struggled with their share of doubt. Many great people, people committed to God's mission in the world, have had hard times where they experienced this dark night of the soul, getting caught in uncertainty, doubt, and desperation. We can look at our Biblical forefathers and mothers and see that just like us, they too wrestled with doubt. They had situations and moments when they suffered and despaired, questioned, and felt abandoned by God—Abraham and Sarah, Moses, Jacob, Job, Hannah, David, Jeremiah, Elijah, Zechariah and Elizabeth, the apostle Paul, John the Baptist, even the disciples, just to name a few.

Then you can take a look at the men and women of faith who we see today—pastors, Biblical scholars, writers, crazy, awesome Jesus-followers. We hear from them that in the midst of their faith, they experience uncertainty and even spiritual darkness—John Calvin, Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, C. S. Lewis, Madeleine L'Engle, Maya Angelou, Rob Bell, John Ortberg, Mother Teresa, Greg Boyd, Rachel Held Evans. The list goes on and on and we can add our names to those lists. We are people of faith and we struggle with the presence of evil in the world. We struggle with our brokenness and what sometimes seems like the silence of God. We share some of the same questions and some of the same doubts, and this fact should encourage us all. We are human beings and sinners and followers of God who struggle, but like those before us and those who stand with us now, in the midst of faith, we have doubt.

I realize two things. One is that we are not alone in our doubt. We are in very good company. And two, God continues to do His work in the world despite messy, broken doubters. I think John the Baptist exemplifies this well for us. If you look at the Book of Luke, you get a good picture of the faithful doubter. Early in the Book of Luke, we see Jesus' cousin, John, preaching

and baptizing and drawing huge crowds to his ministry in the desert around the Jordan River. John preaches the coming arrival of God's salvation just as Isaiah had promised. Most of the ancient Jews of that time would have known John as the one sent by God to prepare the way for the Messiah. Jesus Himself was baptized by John. Then we see John beginning his own ministry, but unfortunately for John, after telling King Herod that it was unlawful for him to marry his brother's wife, he is thrown into prison. While in prison, he shares stories of this Jesus and what He is doing with his disciples and sends two of them to check it out. That is where we pick up the story. Luke 7:20-28,

20 John's two disciples found Jesus and said to him, "John the Baptist sent us to ask, 'Are you the Messiah we've been expecting, or should we keep looking for someone else?'" **21** At that very time, he cured many people of their various diseases, and he cast out evil spirits and restored sight to the blind. **22** Then he told John's disciples, "Go back to John and tell him what you have seen and heard -- the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, and the Good News is being preached to the poor. **23** And tell him, 'God blesses those who are not offended by me.' "**24** After they left, Jesus talked to the crowd about John. "Who is this man in the wilderness that you went out to see? Did you find him weak as a reed, moved by every breath of wind? **25** Or were you expecting to see a man dressed in expensive clothes? No, people who wear beautiful clothes and live in luxury are found in palaces, not in the wilderness. **26** Were you looking for a prophet? Yes, and he is more than a prophet. **27** John is the man to whom the Scriptures refer when they say, 'Look, I am sending my messenger before you, and he will prepare your way before you.' **28** I tell you, of all who have ever lived, none is greater than John. Yet even the most insignificant person in the Kingdom of God is greater than he is!"

While in prison, he sends two of his disciples to Jesus and he's got a couple questions for Him. On the surface at least, wouldn't it seem like kind of an unnerving question to ask the Son of God, "Are You truly the Messiah because if You're not, we might as well follow the rabbi down the road?" John's question indicates his doubt as to whether Jesus was the mightier one coming, the Savior he himself had predicted earlier in Luke, because Jesus just didn't seem to be the kind of Messiah John had been expecting. Perhaps it was because it didn't appear that Jesus was about to overthrow the Roman Empire or perhaps it was because Jesus was not immediately bringing judgment upon evil doers. Who knows, maybe being in prison for the last six to eight months aggravated John's uncertainty. The news that John received back was incomplete. It was unexpected and perhaps that is where his doubt came from. But it's not just the question itself that is so important, it's who asked it that we need to really take a look at because if it had come from someone else in the crowd, Luke's audience would have dismissed it as lack of faith. What turns it into such a big deal is that it was John the Baptist who asked the question, God's chosen forerunner of Jesus.

I, too, doubt and we are in good company. But was John's questioning and doubting a reflection of a faltering faith? Jesus' immediate response reassures us that this isn't the case. John's doubts were natural and Jesus didn't rebuke him for them. He didn't tell John to shape up or ship out. He didn't say, "Hey, live up to your reputation." He didn't quote Scripture or remind him of his chosen position as the one sent by God to prepare the way. Instead Jesus responded in a way that John understood. He explained who He was through actions. In front of John's messengers, Jesus cured a number of suffering people, the precise miracles that had been

prophesized in Isaiah, miracles that were to be done when the Messiah came. Then Jesus told them, “Go tell John what you have seen and heard.”

I would imagine that that would be pretty convincing, but there is more to the story. Notice the next development. As the two visitors left, Jesus addressed the crowd concerning John. He asked them if when they went out into the wilderness to see John, they had expected to see someone who was easily shaken by the wind or a weakling in soft comfortable clothing. Then Jesus told His listeners that John was not only a prophet, but He proclaimed that no greater man had ever been born! What makes this even more incredible is that John hadn't even received Jesus' message yet. He had never witnessed Jesus' ministry. So here we have Jesus holding John up, complimenting him, while John is doubting. I think we can take that as encouragement. “Hang in there.” “Don't give up.” “You're not alone.” John the Baptist shows us what it means to be people of faith. We can be all in, living passionately for Christ and be like our brothers and sisters, fellow doubters, because what's important for us is that we are centered in Christ. What is essential is our relationship with Jesus.

In talking about people with a Christ-centered faith, Greg Boyd says this in his book, *Benefit of the Doubt*. “We allow space for people to disagree, to doubt, to be in process and it can be in those kinds of people, in this kind of community, that we can know that we are not alone.” For me, this conversation isn't complete without the understanding that God continues to work through us and in us and despite us faithful doubters and He does that through the work of His Holy Spirit. Through His Spirit, ultimately, we are never alone. Matthew 28:16-20 says this.

¹⁶ Then the eleven disciples left for Galilee, going to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him—but some of them doubted! ¹⁸ Jesus came and told his disciples, “I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹ Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. ²⁰ Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

Right before Jesus is about to ascend into heaven, He gathered His disciples around Him, the guys who had followed Him around the countryside for 3½ years, watching him preach and teach and do miracles and heal people. They had seen Him crucified and resurrected and yet we are told that “some of them doubted!” Yet knowing that there were doubters among them, Jesus called them to go out into the world and make disciples of all nations. In his book *Know Doubt*, John Ortberg says, “Then Jesus gives the disciples what is called The Great Commission. He sends them out to be His agents in the world. Jesus looks at these worshipping doubters and says, “You go! You doubters go! You risk your lives for Me! You change your world for Me and you will find as you go, that it is your own doubts that are healed. You doubters are included, too.”

So we are not alone. Just like John the Baptist, just like the disciples, just like so many of the other heroes of the faith, both ancient Biblical and modern, we hold together both faith and doubt. I think the most amazing part of all of this is that God continues to do His work in the world anyway. The promise that Jesus made to those doubting disciples, He makes to you and me today, and we can lean into that truth. No matter how hard the times of spiritual darkness and doubt in our lives might be, we are not alone. Like Ortberg says, “As followers of Jesus, we

doubt and worship, doubt and serve, doubt and help each other with our doubts. We doubt in practicing faithfulness. We doubt and wait for our doubt one day to be turned to knowing.”

When I think of the faithful who have really wrestled with doubt, I think about Mother Teresa. In the fall of 2007, a collection of her private letters was published, revealing that this woman of faith, this world-renowned servant of the poorest of the poor, suffered most of her life from intense spiritual darkness. Take a look.

[Video shown.]

She is the best known sort of contemporary saint. People called her a living saint even when she was alive. But I think there is a very unusual part of Mother Teresa’s life that is not very well known and that is, after the train ride to Darjeeling when she felt very close to God, she had this great spiritual darkness that lasted some say for the rest of her life. To her spiritual director she wrote: “In my soul I feel the terrible pain of loss, of God not wanting me, of God not being God, of God not existing.”

In time she started to understand with the help of her spiritual director that these feelings of abandonment were one way of identifying with the figure of Christ on the cross and the abandoned poor, so she transformed that darkness into a way of serving others. And isn’t that the way it is in our lives a lot? We have this very intense experience of God, this very intense spiritual experience that sometimes leaves us, and it’s the part of faith that we really have to live out. It is not as if we are always feeling close to God. Mother Teresa wasn’t feeling close to God every day either. I think her life was a lot more like our lives than we think it was.

Some of the work that the Missionaries of Charity do that I was helping with was bathing old men and clipping their toenails. This can be very physically difficult to do and I found it difficult. But it was wonderful for me to see the way that they approached each person, not as just another sick person but as someone who is beautiful, someone who deserves the dignity that God gives us all. Mother Teresa had this wonderful expression where she said, “It’s important to meet Christ in His most distressing disguise.” So not just Christ in a beautiful cathedral when the priest holds up the Eucharist and the organ is playing and everybody is singing. It is easy to find Christ there or when you’re holding a newborn baby or when you’re looking at a sunset but when you’re looking at a poor, dirty, smelly street person who is dying of throat cancer like one man I took care of and be able to see Christ in that person, this can be very beautiful. I think in that way, Mother Teresa gives us all a gift because she reminds us that it’s not just finding God in the beautiful but it’s also finding God in His distressing disguise.

Mother Teresa says to us, “It’s okay to doubt. It’s okay to feel separated from God.” But she also shows us that part of faith is continuing on with the Christian call and continuing on with our work, no matter how difficult or how separated from God we might feel. It’s a hard message but I think it’s ultimately a very inspiring one from Mother Teresa.

[Video ends.]

I think what’s encouraging in Mother Teresa’s story for us is that even through incredible spiritual darkness, God continues to do His work in the world and despite her doubt, she

continued to follow Jesus, loving God and loving others. We are not alone. God promises that He is with us always. We're in good company, the company of those faithful who have come before us and who stand with us now and we have each other, this community of people.

I was reminded of that in a powerful way last Sunday night at The Table. Carrie Gleason gave her message on wrestling with God and during the Communion and the music, people were invited to come up and write on two big chalk boards that we had on the stage. On the boards they wrote their doubts, their questions, their wrestling. As I looked at those words and heard parts of their stories, I heard the cries of their hearts. "God where are You?" "I feel so alone." "I feel worthless." "I don't belong." "I need forgiveness." "I'm lost." "I'm lonely." When I prayed over those boards, I was overwhelmed by a God who loves us so much that He designed us to do this together. What is certain for us is that in matters of faith and doubt, we are never alone. Let's pray.

Holy God, we just thank You, Lord, that You are a God who loves us so much that You give us space to doubt. We can be faithful followers and at the same time struggle with questions, darkness, uncertainty and You love us anyway. We thank You, God, for who You are and how You call us to live out that love in this world. We are reminded over and over again, God, of Your promise that we are never alone. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.