

Augustana College
Chapel of Reconciliation

The Importance of Doubt to Christian Faith

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“Think that you might be wrong,” reads a sign on Murray Haar’s office door. Any student who enters the office must see it, and hopefully think about its implication. Over the course of time, I have come to realize that the admonition is more a reminder to the professor, to any professor, than the student. Is what I’m teaching today intellectually true, honest, and defensible? Might it be wrong? Am I giving students an education of enduring worth. Put another way, “Think that you might be wrong” brings doubt into the educational process. This doubt often requires us to rethink and restructure what we thought we knew, how and what we teach. In education, such re-evaluation is admired. Doubt, or rethinking, has a more dubious relationship when it comes to faith. Many believe doubt, or uncertainty, has no place in our faith life. Even when sanctioned by scripture, many are afraid of doubt.

Think that you might be wrong is, what Jesus and Moses asked God. Questioning, doubting, did not lead either man from God, but closer to him. The readings today give us the freedom necessary to question God, to articulate our doubts. God smote neither man down. I doubt he will smite us down either.

My point today is simple, we need to re-emphasize the importance of doubt; we must reclaim uncertainty and suspense, in both our intellectual and faith lives. We need to know that it is okay, perhaps even righteous to ask questions, to raise doubt. It is okay to be uncertain, for it is only after doubt, suspense, and perhaps fear, that ‘wonder’ can emerge.

On Monday Pastor Paul reminded us that the importance of the Reformation was not Martin Luther, but a return to scripture. This return to scripture came from Luther's uncertainty. Luther made no bones about this.. "I always doubted" he wrote. His conscience, he said, "would not give me certainty." For Luther, doubt led to spiritual growth. It produced a new understanding of how humans might seek a relationship with God.

Luther's wrestling with doubt was neither easy nor fast. It took him years to understand the questions he was seeking answers for. Even when he found the answers to his questions, they did not erase his doubt. Sources suggest that Luther suffered serious pangs of guilt when he contemplated the meaning of his discovery. Was he the right person to overturn 1,000 years of Christian dogma? Who was he, an Augustinian monk, to challenge church orthodoxy? Were his conclusions correct? Could he be wrong? In the end, Luther, like Moses and Jesus, overcame his doubt and continued down the path less trodden. But only after wrestling with doubt. What did Moses ask God, "What if they do not believe me?" What did Jesus ask of God, "if it be your will, take this cup from me." In the end, doubt did not stop any of these people from understanding what God wanted them to do, and in doing what they were unsure of they became closer to God. It is interesting to note, as one continues the story in Luke, that Peter, the most adamant in his righteousness, fails. He disowns the Christ three times. So much for certainty.

Remembering Luther's doubt and the location from which he unleashed his original theses places Lutheran higher education in a unique position. Unlike Catholic Universities, where moves are afoot to make them the center of orthodoxy, Lutheran higher education can claim a mandate to challenge, question, doubt existing orthodoxy. Many on the outside won't like this, but we need to remind them Lutheranism was born of doubt; and it is incumbent that its

colleges continue to struggle with questions that may disorient us, make us uncomfortable, and challenge what we think we know. For a College of the Lutheran Church to abandon dissent, to ignore the importance of doubt to inquiry, is to abandon what makes us unique and distinct. In a world growing increasingly certain in what it knows, we have a duty to doubt. We need to make doubt an essential element of our learning and faith processes. Should this happen, students will be better off, but admittedly not as happy. But in the end, these questions, born of doubt, will give us new insights into the wonder of God.

In Corinthians I:13 the writer says “when I was a child I spoke like a child, thought like a child, reasoned like a child; but when I grew up I finished with childish things.” College is meant to help this transition. College transforms you from childhood into adulthood, in all aspects of our being. The transformation begins not with answers, but with questions, with a sense of knowing there is more, but what? I want to emphasize this transformation is not just for students, but for faculty, administrators, and support staff too. Doubt does not lead to inertia, but to growth, and perhaps wonder.

I am not sure I have done what I set out to do this morning. Reconciling an argument that doubt helps one’s faith might be counter-intuitive (I hope not) or perhaps heretical. Perhaps Hegel might help one understand my contention. Hegel argued that every thesis has an antithesis. The dominant idea, or thesis, has within it, its own challenge, its antithesis. These two ideas contend with each other, ultimately producing some new synthesis. In religion, if faith is the thesis then doubt is its antithesis. Together they produce a new synthesis—a new understanding of what it means to be Christian.. In this sense, the doubt articulated in the readings today, or the writings of Luther produce a new understanding of our relationship with the divine, what many

call faith. Doubt does not preclude action, it brings us closer to understanding God.

“Think that you might be wrong,” doubt what you have been told, seek answers, wrestle with uncertainty Unless you do this, you will find yourself, as Martin Luther did, in the following quandary: “the more I tried to remedy an uncertain, weak and troubled conscience with human traditions, the more I daily found it more uncertain, weaker and more troubled.” If you do not wrestle with the questions and seek answers directly, are you not like Luther, relying on human tradition to tell you what you believe? Think that you might be wrong, even in questions of faith.

HOLY COMMUNION

Wednesday, November 2, 2005

Prelude “The Peace May Be Exchanged” Daniel Locklair

Welcome/Announcements

Invocation

A Litany of the Saints

L: We thank you for the faith of Moses who faced oppression and led your people to freedom.

C: And for all his doubts that you called him.

L: We thank you for the doubt of Rachel, weeping for her children.

C: And for her faith to grieve out loud to you.

L: We thank you for the struggles of Job

C: For his gift of doubting faith and faithful doubt.

L: We thank you for the faith of the father whose child was healed

C: Who said, “I believe, Lord, help my unbelief.

L: We thank you for Mother Teresa, who saw you in dying lepers,

C: And whose journals reveal great consternation and doubt.

L: We thank you for Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who faithfully resisted the Nazis,

C: And who doubted his own faithfulness.

L: We thank you for the doubt of the disciples you call

C: And the faith to follow.

Prayer

Scripture

Exodus 4:1

Luke 22: 39-42

Hymn “For All Your Saints, O Lord” LBW #176, vv 1 and 3

