

# Is it Un-Christian to Doubt One's Faith?

James 1:2-8; Matthew 28:16-20

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Today marks the beginning of our third annual "Faith Questions" sermon series. We've been doing this for the last three years in between Epiphany and Lent.

This year, I asked not only for your questions but also for any passages or stories from Scripture that you felt may have been neglected over the years.

I got five responses which, as it happens, was exactly the number of Sundays that needed to be filled.

Here's a breakdown of how things will go between today and the beginning of Lent.

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I want to begin with the same caveat that I begin each of these sermon series' with. It's probably obvious but it's worth saying explicitly.

There is a *lot* that I will not be able to cover in a twenty-minute sermon each week. There are some big questions in here and some stories and characters from Scripture that will be impossible to treat adequately in one sermon.

I hope to say a few helpful things each week, but I will only be scratching the surface. I hope they can at least open up some interesting conversations.

So, on to the first question: "Is it un-Christian to Doubt One's Faith?"

My brother texted me on Friday and over the course of conversation I learned that he, too, was preaching this Sunday at a church in Vancouver.

We began to discuss and compare sermon topics. He was preaching on Psalm 46—“Be still and know that I am God”—in the context of a series on technology.

“What about you?” He asked. I said we were starting our Faith Questions series and that the first one was, “Is it un-Christian to doubt one’s faith?”

“Short sermon,” he said in response. “No.”

I laughed because that was actually what I was thinking of saying to begin. The short answer really is, “no.”

No, it’s not un-Christian to have doubts. No, it’s not sinful to have questions or have some trouble with the bible or to have moments where God seems distant or to even wonder if God exists.

The short answer is, “no.” We will now sing a hymn. ☺

I suspect that the person that asked this question was looking for more than a short answer.

There is a heaviness, perhaps even an anxiety behind the question.

I know, because I encounter it often in conversations with people who struggle with faith, who struggle specifically with the vision and version of faith they have inherited in their childhood, who have spent a lifetime trying to make something fit that never quite fits.

To be a pastor is to regularly encounter people who find faith difficult.

(It’s also to regularly encounter people who you suspect might find faith too easy, but that’s another sermon.)

There are all kinds of people in the post-Christian West whose faith hangs by a thread.

It retains a bit of nostalgic affection for Christian ethics, perhaps, and it craves the community offered, however imperfectly, by the church.

It might even have an appreciation for mystery and a dim recognition that this life can’t be all there is.

But it is a faith that often seems like not much more than a kind of half-hearted and undemanding openness to possibility.

It's a long way from deep conviction and bold faith of orthodox Christian faith. All that talk of virgin births and resurrection from the dead and judgment is too much to stomach.

And so, very often faith coasts along on the fumes of memory and longing, coughing and sputtering until it stalls on the side of the road.

Faith is just hard for some people.

And very often, faith has been *made* hard by the church. We must acknowledge this.

For many people, church was never a place where doubt could be honestly expressed. They did not see it modeled in older, wiser Christians. Their questions were hushed up or treated inadequately rather than honoured as an important part of spiritual growth and discovery.

They were just told to "have faith" and given the strong impression that God was displeased with their questions. Strong faith was certain. Weak faith or *no* faith had doubts.

I have heard enough stories over the years to know that this rough outline describes the experience of many.

And it is this experience that is driving many, particularly young people, away from the church. This is, increasingly, what research into the "nones"—those who check off the category of "none" on surveys about religious affiliation—is showing.

Many have walked away from the church because their questions weren't taken seriously, because science was ignored or treated with suspicion, and doubt was seen as faithlessness.

If only for pragmatic reasons, we have to become more comfortable encouraging one another to bring our doubts to church. This is one of the reasons behind a sermon series like this one.

Last week, I was part of a great conversation with Jen and Greg who will be transferring their membership to LMC on January 26.

It's always fascinating to get a window into someone else's spiritual journey.

One of the things that struck me about Jen's story, in particular, was that the church of her youth *did* provide a nurturing space for doubt and for hard questions about faith.

For Jen, this was a gift. It provided some of the building blocks for a life of study and curiosity and spiritual growth that probably wouldn't have been possible if she had just heard, "You just need to have more faith."

Perhaps some of you can resonate with this story, too. I hope so.

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Well, as it happens, I think we have more than pragmatic reasons for bringing our doubts to church. I think we actually have good theological reasons for doing so, too.

The necessity of creating space for doubt is built right into our theological anthropology (which is just a fancy way of saying, "our understanding of human nature").

Doubt is inevitable, even important, for at least four reasons.

- We are finite
  - We can't know everything!
  - We only have so much time on this planet. Each one of us will *at best* ever only a know a tiny fraction of what can be known. In light of this reality, it seems fantastically arrogant to ever say that we have arrived fully and finally at "the truth."
  - Doubt can remind us of this and create a space for further learning and for the idea that truth is something that we live into
- We are fallen
  - Even what we think we know is affected by self-interest
  - However poorly Christians have sometimes understood or articulated "the fall," it expresses an important theological truth.
  - As human beings, we are bent inward. We consistently and persistently choose self over God and neighbour.
  - We seek to be our own little gods
  - In this context, we very often believe what is convenient for us to believe, what it serves us well to believe.
  - Doubt can be a corrective on the ways in which sin corrupts our knowledge and our believing

- We are fragile
  - Human existence is characterized by suffering
  - Sometimes, doubt is the response to pain; perhaps we have been on the wrong end of one too many broken promises, one too many unrealized hopes, one too many unexplained confusions...
  - Sometime faith was presented as a formula—believe the right things and do the right things and life will go well for you... Except it doesn't.
  - Life with God is not a formula; sometimes we are broken open by the sorrows of the world, or the pain we must personally endure.
  - It can be hard to have faith when we're going through hard things
  - This is surely part of what was going on in our reading from Matthew this morning! The disciples had been through so much, had endured so much. They had seen their friend suffer and die; they had been through the bewildering scenes following Jesus' resurrection. And now, even as Jesus is gathering them on the mountain to send them off to be his witnesses, it says, "When they saw him, they worshiped him; **but some doubted**. It's incredible and reassuring to see that even those first disciples found faith hard, even with Jesus standing right there in front of them!
  - Jude 22 says, simply, "Be merciful to those who doubt." And this is surely wise counsel. Very often, our doubts require mercy, not judgment.
- Sometimes, doubt is important and useful— it is one of the gifts God has given the church
  - What would have happened if the first Christians had not been willing to doubt some of their inherited theological categories? God cannot become human! This is blasphemy! The Messiah cannot die! He will be Israel's champion! Except he did.
  - What would have happened if Christians had not had questions about slavery? About the role of women in the church and beyond?
  - And I say this noting the irony of having just yesterday attending an ecumenical service where we celebrated what binds us together *across* denominations... But what would have happened if our Anabaptist ancestors had not asked hard questions about the church and its structures of authority? About war and peace and the nature of baptism? If they hadn't been willing to ask hard questions about who God was and how God works in the world?
  - Doubt and questioning can be and often is part of how God moves the story forward.

Despite what a surface reading of our passage from James might suggest. Doubt itself is actually a good and important thing.

I say, “a surface reading” because we often make this passage about cognitive or intellectual doubt. We imagine that James is criticizing the modern curious seeker who has an armload of abstract theological questions.

We import these assumptions back on to the text because we are children of the Enlightenment and because doubt and certainty and proof and faith as a “set of beliefs about God” are the categories that are prominent for us.

But in fact, James’ words about doubt are located in a passage about God being willing to give wisdom to those who ask. The overall context is that of growing into maturity and even learning how to suffer well.

And wisdom involves knowing what to prioritize, how to live, who to trust, what to risk, and how to live and believe *in light of* human limitation.

When James says that the doubter is unstable and double-minded, he’s talking about the one who doubts that God wants to lead us on these important paths.

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A final word. It’s not un-Christian to have doubts, even about some of the most central aspects of faith.

But I would suggest that there *are* more and less Christian ways of living *with* doubt.

Doubt says something important about what it means to be human. But it doesn’t say *everything*. There are other words that say important things about being human.

Trust. Risk. Fidelity. Perseverance. Sacrifice. Love.

And all of these words is lived out in—even *requires*—the absence of certainty.

The danger, if we just marinate in our doubts, is that we come to believe the lie that we are the sovereign interrogators of the world and of God, and that it is to us that answers are owed.

We will not act, or take a step until we have proof, until our doubts are overcome.

But this will never fully happen until faith becomes sight.

And we must remember that we are not only the ones who are asking questions. Questions are also asked of us.

Questions like, what is a human life for? What do we owe our neighbour? What could account for our deep desire for the good, the true, and the beautiful? Are forgiveness and redemption possible in a world where hurt and are hurt by one another?

How do we come to know anything in the world? Is it just thinking logically? Or does it on some level involve trust in those who have gone before us and trust in the God who is bigger than all of our ideas?

Were we created to know enough true things and get our beliefs just right before we die? Or were we created for love and for relationship?

We are free to ask questions—of God, the church, of reality as a whole. This is a glorious part of the human vocation.

But questions are asked of each one of us, too. This, too, is part of what it means to be human.

Waiting until we have everything sorted out in our heads to our satisfaction isn't really an option.

**Each one of us has to decide how we will live and to what we will give our allegiance in the absence of certainty.**

To stay stuck in doubt can be paralyzing. Each one of us must act, must choose what we will give our lives to. This is true for all of us, from the most committed atheist to the most devout Christian.

**Make doubt your servant, not your master.**

I have a delightful little book on my shelf by Rainer Maria Rilke called Letters to a Young Poet. In one of his letters to a certain "Mr. Kappus," Rilke offers these wise words about the nature and purpose of doubt.:

And your doubt can become a good quality if you train it... Ask it, whenever it wants to spoil something for you... demand proofs from it, test it, and you will find it bewildered and embarrassed, perhaps also protesting. But don't give in, insist on arguments, and act in this way, attentive and persistent, every single time, and the day will come when, instead of being a destroyer, it will become one of your best workers—perhaps the most intelligent of all the ones that are building your life.

In other words, make sure that you include “doubt” in the category of things that you doubt.

And, above all, remember that there are higher goals for a human life than doubt.

It can be useful, yes, even essential in the building and maintaining of a life; but it must be disciplined and trained. It must be reminded frequently of its limits and of its value as one tool among (many) others in the task of becoming a genuinely human being.

Is it un-Christian to doubt one's faith? No, it's not. I think that when put in its proper place, doubt can be a gift, and an important tool on the journey of life and faith.

But it *is* un-Christian to allow our doubts to set ourselves up as the sovereign arbiters of truth and to refuse to act in the absence of certainty.

It is un-Christian to use our doubts as an excuse to stop pursuing truth and to refuse to love along the way.

May God help us to doubt where appropriate, trust in the absence of certainty, and to love always.

Amen.

