

“Why I...doubt”

Today we're continuing in this series of messages called "Why I." We've looked at why I live, and why I laugh. This is all about big questions. Today, why I doubt.

Two weeks ago I was at a meeting with a bunch of other pastors. After dinner another pastor and I sat down and just visited. We hadn't seen each other in quite a while, so it was good to catch up, visit, share from our hearts. We were talking about everything. Our families, our hopes and dreams, what's happening in our congregations. At one point my friend turned to me and asked, "Aaron, do you ever have doubts." I said, "About what?" He said, "About everything, the Christian faith, God, the church, your calling to ministry." That's a pretty heavy question, isn't it?

Before I tell you my response, how would you answer? Would you jump at the chance to say, "No! I don't have any doubts. I'm a follower of Christ and I have been for several years now. I'm committed. I'm faithful. I'm solid."

Or would you say, "No, no doubts for me." But in your mind you're thinking, "Yeah, I've got some doubts, but I don't want anybody to judge me and say that I'm not a Christian because I have a few doubts about things once in awhile, so I better just say, 'No. No doubts here.'"

Or would you say, "Yes, honestly, I have my doubts once in a while." Or would you say, "Man, I feel like I'm being dogged by doubt. I'm questioning everything about my faith. I'm not sure about Jesus. How about Islam or Buddhism? Is religion just the opiate of the people?"

What would you say to my friend's question? Do you ever have doubts about God, Christianity, the meaning of life? Here's what I told my friend. I told him, "Yes. Sometimes I doubt. It seems like doubt is on a cycle in my life. About every 4 or 5 years, something stirs in me that makes me wonder. Is God real? What if we've all just deluded ourselves into thinking there is a God to make us feel better, to make us feel like we're significant, that our lives have purpose. Maybe we just made God up so we would feel less alone and less afraid of death." "Or if there is a God, is he as loving as we say he is? Does he really care about our ordinary, daily lives, our struggles, our times of suffering?"

Every so many years question like that come bubbling to the surface for me and I have to honestly address them. Maybe they've bubbled up for you a time or two. If they haven't yet, they probably will at some point. So what I want to share with you today is my inner journey when the doubts bubble up. How I deal with doubt.

Now, some of you right now are saying, "Wait a minute! You're a pastor. You're a man of the cloth. And you're admitting—in God's house, the church, that you deal with doubt?" Well, the answer is, "Yes! I have times of doubt." And I think that if we're honest, we all have, or will have those times.

Number one, I doubt because I've got to be honest with myself. I'm not going to live a lie. I've got to be true to myself. And a church that is true to itself welcomes doubt—at least it should. At Saint Paul's we say, "Doubters are welcome. Come on in. Doubt in community. Ask the hard questions." How are we able to do that? Because we believe that God is bigger than our doubt. Just because I have doubt does not mean that the equilibrium of the universe is going to be changed! I doubt because I've got to be true to myself.

I love to ask questions, and always have. As a kid I would drive my parents crazy at times asking questions. "Mom and Dad, why are there mosquitoes? I learned this word on the school bus, what does it mean? Did Adam and Eve have belly buttons if they weren't born? Speaking of being born, where do babies come from? Could I have a baby? Why can't boys have babies? Daddy has a big belly. Is he going to have a baby?" Sometimes my parents would just have tell me to be quiet, to stop asking questions. I **really** hated it when they said, "We'll tell you when you're older." They never did! I still don't know where babies come from! In school I'd get on a role with my teachers asking them questions.

Throughout my life, I've had people to say, "You ask too many questions." This question-asking desire, must be genetic because my daughter is really coming into her own of as a questioner. At breakfast, during dinner, watching TV, reading the Bible, during bedtime prayers, after bedtime prayers. Sometimes we have to just get up and walk out of the room because there are more questions than time to answer them.

Sometimes I want to impose a question quota, for sanity reasons. But I'm glad my heavenly Father does not impose a question quota on me. I'm glad that God doesn't say, "Oh, you can't ask that, Aaron. You've used up your question quota." God doesn't do that.

I've got to be honest with myself. I've got to question. I've got to probe. I've got to have room to doubt. And it makes me sad that a lot of people, a lot of sincere believers, think that they have this dirty little secret rolling around on the rotisserie grill of their consciousness. We dare not share it, because if we told someone that we doubt, that we struggle on an issue, then they would say, "Oh, you're not a true Christian! You mean you're a pastor? You mean you lead a small group? You mean you lead worship? And you doubt? Whoa!" And we place this guilt and this shame with our doubt. And many of us have been living like that for a long time. But listen, we've got to be real. God does not want me to be in some pseudo-relationship with him. So I doubt because I've got to be true to myself, and God wants me to be authentic with him.

The second reason I doubt is because doubt is not what I thought it. Let me ask you this: What is the opposite of love? Some of you are going to say, "Oh, I know what that is! Hate." But you'd be wrong. I used to think the opposite of love was hate. But the opposite of love is apathy.

So what's the opposite of faith? You think, "Oh, I know what that is! Doubt." You'd be wrong. The opposite of faith is unbelief. The word "believe" means to be in one mind about something or someone we accept. To disbelieve is to be of one mind about something or someone we reject.

The word "doubt" comes from the Latin term "dubitare," which means "two". The definition of doubt is, **"To be uncertain respecting the truth or fact; to be undetermined...To question or hold questionable; to withhold assent from; to hesitate to believe"** (The Lexicon Webster Dictionary). Ed Young puts it this way: Picture a suspension bridge between the solid ground of belief and disbelief. The wobbly suspension bridge between the two is doubt. When I doubt, I'm between the two. I'm in two minds.

For a long time in my life I thought that if I had doubt, that it meant that I didn't believe. But that is bogus. Faith and doubt exist together and doubt can lead us to solid belief. So doubt is not what I thought it was. Doubt is not unbelief. Doubt is a place to ask questions, find answers and get to solid ground. Doubt is a part of the journey to faith. So whenever I've been on that wobbly suspension bridge of doubt; whenever I've been hammered and dogged with doubt, I do what I need to do to move in one direction or another. I believe that Jesus welcomes our doubts and our concerns.

Here's the third reason why I doubt. It puts me in great company. With people like John the Baptist. He paved the way for Jesus. Baptized Jesus. Saw the miracles. Then John the Baptizer found himself in prison. He was preparing to get beheaded, and right before he lost his life for Christ's sake, he told his people to go to Jesus and ask Jesus if Jesus really was the Messiah. John the Baptist was being dogged by doubt. Here a man was in prison ready to give his life for Jesus, yet doubt began to ambush him. And his people went to Jesus and they asked Jesus, "Jesus, are you the one?" And then Jesus said, "You tell John, the blind see, the lame walk."

Look at Luke 7:28. Right after Jesus talked about John's doubt he said, **"I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John"** (Luke 7:28, NIV). This is a huge verse, because Jesus is not only applauding John the Baptist's faith, he's also applauding his faith in the midst of doubt.

Flip over to John 20. Do you remember Thomas? Doubting Thomas was a guy that left everything to follow Jesus. He saw his friend, his master, his Rabbi nailed to a Roman cross. And Thomas, like the other disciples, bolted. They didn't want to sign up for the same thing. A couple of days later, Thomas's friends were like, "Jesus has risen! He lives. He's conquered death."

Thomas said, "Are you kidding me? I don't believe that. I'll have to see it. I'll have to see him. I'll have to touch where the nails went in. I'll have to see where the spear jabbed him in the side." And Jesus appeared to him and many others. And look what Jesus said to him in John 20:29, **"Then Jesus told him, 'Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed'"** (John 20:29).

Elijah, over in the Old Testament, doubted. He had this incredible victory and he doubted the power of God. Jonah doubted that God would give him the stuff he needed to preach to the Ninevites. David, in Psalm 22, doubted, **"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer; by night, but find no rest"** (Ps 22:1-2, NRSV). He's crying out, "God, where you? Are you even there? Do you even care?" That's also what Job said.

The disciples doubted. And I doubt seriously the disciples ever stopped seriously doubting. Jesus himself even doubted. In the garden, what did he say? "God, if it's your will, may this cup pass from me. God, if it's your will, may this cup pass from me. God, if it's your will, may this cup pass from me." Then, when He was dying on the cross for your junk and my junk, what did Jesus say? "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" He was quoting Psalm 22 that David wrote.

When we doubt we're in the company of great people. And that brings me to the fourth reason why I doubt.

Number four, doubt leads me to a deeper level of faith. It sounds kind of strange, doesn't it? Doubt leads me. But listen, doubt is a launching pad that can give me a greater trajectory, a deeper walk, as I sync up with the Savior. Times of doubt are times to go deep, to answer questions, to struggle and study, and be in community with others. And when you do, you come out the other side stronger, energized, closer to God than ever.

So let's look at another question. **What do you do with your doubts?** "Well, I just read The DaVinci Code." "Well, I just saw this special on the History Channel." "I just saw this documentary on the gospel of Judas, or Thomas, or some other secret writings." "Well, is Jesus the only way?" "I believe there is a God, but I doubt if he could love me."

Here are some things to do when you're dogged by doubt. First, pinpoint the source. Don't let it hang out there in vague-land, on the floppy suspension bridge. Don't be vague. Get specific. Write them down. Pinpoint them. This allows you to think them through. And then turn to and begin to look at God's Word. Read books. Talk to people. When I do this, most of my questions are answered. Most of the big questions, the big intellectual issues out there, can be answered. But it takes some work! For a lot of people their doubts about God come from a painful experience in life. Name that; pinpoint it, and work through it.

Some of you are going, "Well, I just can't have faith. I can't believe until everything is answered, until there is absolute certainty." Well, if that was the case, there would be no faith. That's not faith. Most of the questions can be answered, then God will bring us to a point where we step over the line. Get specific when you doubt. God is allowing that and using that to take you to a deeper level with him. And yes, this takes work, but we can't be afraid of that. The work of facing our doubts is hard work, but it's important and it takes us deep, really, really deep.

Have you ever been flying somewhere and everything goes smoothly. Your flight leaves on time, it's a smooth ride, and then you get to your destination airport and the pilot comes on the PA and says, "Sorry ladies and gentlemen but there's a lot of air traffic, and we're going to be in a holding pattern for a while." If you're dogged with doubt, here's a warning. Don't hide behind it. Don't get stuck in a holding pattern. It's so hip these days to be in a holding pattern of doubt. "I'll just doubt. I'm just not sure about Buddha. I'm not really sure about Jesus or the reliability of Scripture. I'm not really sure. I'll just live in a perpetual state of doubt. I'm just a skeptic."

Do something about those doubts, don't get stuck in a holding pattern because you're going to run out of gas one day. You have got to land the plane, baby. You have got to land it on belief or unbelief. Don't just circle just to circle. Find the runway and land. What am I talking about? Do research, do study, do some scholarship. The answers are there. God is using that doubt to deepen our faith. So pinpoint those doubts.

So often I'll talk to people who have intellectual concerns about God, Christ and the Bible. That's real for a lot of people but it's also awfully easy to have sin issues and mask them with intellectual issues. Sometimes we'd rather live in sin and hide behind doubts and stay in that perpetual holding pattern, as opposed to landing the plane and stepping out and saying, "God, I need You. I need help. I'm a sinner in need of a savior. I realize you have a claim on my life and I'm ready to follow your lead."

One doubt I've had regularly bubble up in my life is not about whether or not God exists, or if Jesus was who he says he was. Every once in a while I'll wonder if I really am a Christian. Especially if I'm struggling with something, or feeling worn out, or simply facing exhaustion. I'll wonder if maybe Christ isn't really in me. Maybe you struggle with that doubt occasionally. You're not alone.

About a month ago in September was the 10 year anniversary of the death of Mother Teresa. About that time some of her private letters were published and got some serious press. A lot of people were shocked

at the doubts she expressed. She wrote in one of her letters, "I am told God lives in me -- and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul."

In another letter, Mother Teresa wrote, "Where I try to raise my thoughts to heaven, there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives and hurt my very soul. Love -- the word -- it brings nothing,"

Knowing that Mother Teresa struggled with this doesn't make me think less of her. It makes me think more. Through her work, in the midst of her doubt, 610 missions were created, all revolving around the poorest of the poor—lepers, orphans, the sick and dying. Each year over 500,000 people are fed, 90,000 lepers are treated, over 2,000 children are educated, and that's just in the city of Calcutta.

John tells us in 1 John how to know if Christ is in us or not. It's really a simple test. It's love. If we feel love for our fellow human beings welling up in our hearts, and we act on that love by moving toward others with help and kindness and compassion, we can be sure that the heart of Christ is in us. That love in us is the evidence of Christ in us. Mother Teresa, amidst her doubts, had that love. She had Christ in her even when she struggled with doubt. And so do you if you've invited him in.

Chris Rice wrote a song called *Clumsy* that speaks to me when I have this doubt. Listen to the words...

Jesus understands us when we have questions and doubts, because he faced a few himself. Our job is simply to take our doubts to him, not run from him. Our job is to do the hard work of facing our doubts, not hide in a holding pattern, even though we feel so clumsy, he's there.

As I've matured in my faith I've begun to be able to differentiate between my doubts and things I simply don't understand. This has been an important element in my spiritual growth. There are some things that I have a hard time understanding. The concept of the Trinity--one plus one plus one equals one. What is God's understanding of time? When Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, who was he talking to? How does prayer really work? Why does it seem like sometimes my prayers are answered and sometimes not, even though I pray in them in the same way? These things don't make me doubt, but I just don't understand. Part of my faith journey is to work on understanding them while I'm on the journey.

I don't wait to understand everything until I do something. I don't sit on my hands because there are a few things I can't get my brain around, and might never be able to get my brain around. No! I know that I'm to be in action. I know that faith without works is dead. I know that I'm to love God with my head, heart and hands. The Christian faith is a faith that's put into action. And along the way I begin to understand better. It's in doing that understanding comes.

In Mark 9, a man had a son who was demon-possessed. He came to Jesus, and he, of course, wanted healing. Jesus said, "If you believe, all things are possible." And I love the honesty of this man. Mark 9:24 says, **"Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, 'I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!'" (Mark 9:24).** Wow! When you're dogged with doubt, that's a great place to start. Yes, I believe, and God, help my unbelief. Yes, I have doubts, and God, guide me in facing those doubts in a healthy, timely, efficient way.

I deeply respect those of you who are a part of Saint Paul's and you're here, and you're in worship, and you're studying, and in a small group, but you haven't chosen to take the next step of faith yet. Maybe it's time to let doubt and faith live together in you. You don't understand in order to believe, you believe in order to understand. It's in taking the steps of faith that many doubts are addressed, and many of the things we don't understand are understood. Maybe today is the day to say, "I believe, help my unbelief. I believe in you Jesus, help me now to begin to get my brain around the things that I don't yet understand, the doubts that dog me."

Doubt is not the opposite of faith. I believe doubt is a bridge that we journey across from time to time that leads me, leads us, into deeper and deeper levels of faith. That's why I doubt. And for today that is the good news. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I thank Rev. Ed Young, Senior Pastor of Fellowship Church, for his insights and resources for this message.