

## **Being Disciples: Some Doubted**

A sermon preached by

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### **Matthew 28:16-20**

*<sup>16</sup>Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. <sup>17</sup>When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. <sup>18</sup>And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup>Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup>and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."*

This morning I am beginning a brief three Sunday sermon series on *Being Disciples*. For the remainder of June, we'll be looking at some of the ways Matthew conceived of the spiritual and emotional characteristics of those who follow Jesus. We are also beginning a summer series of reflections, testimonies, or witnesses from lay persons in the church about ways that they have *Grown in Faith*. This morning Helen Damon-Moore will share a reflection with us as a way to kick off this emphasis. We'll also be posting these reflections on the church's Facebook page so that you can follow along, even if you happen to be out of town sometimes this summer.

The philosopher Bertrand Russell famously wrote, "The whole problem with the world, is that the stupid are cocksure while the intelligent are full of doubt." Well, if that is the case we might be the smartest Methodist Church around. I think one of the hallmarks of our congregation is an inquisitive nature that is constantly seeking, from a variety of sources, pathways to the divine. And as everyone from Rob Bell to the Archbishop of Canterbury to Pope Francis has been saying lately, doubt is not the opposite of faith, instead it is an appropriate reaction to the puzzling, mysterious ways of God. Indeed, we live in an ocean of doubts, questions, head scratching realities. And one of the goals of a life of discipleship is not to drain the ocean, but instead it is to learn how to swim in the midst of our doubts and questions.

For years, I have read this morning's Matthew passage and I have wondered, who were the ones who doubted? Why did Matthew insert these words? Are these the ones we should be praying for or are they actually an example of faithful discipleship?

But many recent translations, especially in the New American Bible, translate these words to read, "When they saw him, they worshiped, but they doubted." Read in this way, it's

not an effort to separate the faithful from the faithless, but instead it is a recognition that all of Jesus' disciples will struggle with some form of doubt, questioning, discernment.

The disciples in Matthew are a work in progress. In Matthew, Jesus' pet name for the disciples is "little faith ones." The story of the Mustard Seed is another way Jesus says you don't have to have it all together, this is enough. So, it is consistent with Matthew's Jesus that those with faith and those who doubt come to the same place. Today they are given the same commandment, they are commissioned to the same work. There is room here for those that still question. In fact, discipleship may be another way of saying those who are on a constant quest, and assurance isn't a prerequisite of discipleship.

One of my favorite stories about John and Charles Wesley, the founders of the Methodist movement, is about their struggles as young adults trying to find their way toward a life of discipleship. After graduating from Oxford, they went to what is now St. Simon's Island off the coast of Georgia, but their mission failed. John later wrote, "I went to America to convert the Indians, but oh, who shall convert me?" They returned to London, discouraged and in poor health. During this time, they met Peter Böhler, a young Moravian pastor who mentored them both. Charles fell ill and many thought he would die. But Böhler prayed with him and he recovered.

Böhler's conversations with John Wesley led Wesley to a crisis of faith because he had become convinced that he did not have enough faith to honestly preach the Gospel any more. He wrote to Böhler of his intension to stop preaching and Böhler advised him to "preach faith till you have it, and then because you have it you will preach faith." So that is what John did. In some ways it could be argued that this is what opened him up to his "heart strangely warmed" conversion experience.

I think doubt isn't just something to be tolerated. Instead, I believe that doubt is an essential, God given, part of who I am, part of my faith journey. And it encourages me to practice humility and to acknowledge my own limitations. To doubt is to deal with others in more hospitable, open ways. To doubt is, in my view, a fundamental part of what it means to be a human being. Helen Damon Moore will talk in a couple of minutes about mindfulness, and I think this is another avenue for being in touch with ourselves, our belief and our doubts.

A few years after her death, the diaries of Mother Teresa were published. In her writings was a decades-long conversation with God about her being tormented by a continual gloom and

aching to see or sense God. Early in her ministry she wrote, “Please pray especially for me that I may not spoil God’s (originally she wrote His) work and that Our Lord may be shown to me (again a slight revision for inclusive language purposes) – for there is such terrible darkness within me, as if everything was dead. It has been like this more or less from the time I started ‘the work.’” After these diaries were released there was a tremendous uproar and some even questioned if she should be called a saint by the church.

But I think this kind of honest, open conversation with God is what qualifies you to be a Saint. In this way, serious engagement with the divine is offered and we use our God given explorations as a way to continually explore other parts of the world and our place in it.

If we can’t ask why a child dies, why some of us are subject to discrimination, why much of the world goes to bed hungry, why income disparity is increasing rather than decreasing, then we are destined to a life that accepts the way things are and in effect rejects the new life, the eternally changing life that Jesus proclaims.

And whether we believe with certainty or not at any given time, it should not matter, it must not matter. We belong in this gathering of God’s people who are called to more. We follow the One who, in the powerful promise at the end of Matthew’s Gospel “...is with us always, to the end of the age.” This is the promise of life in Jesus. Amen