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What Is Doubt?
(Matthew 14:22-33)

Out of the Boat

The book of Proverbs tells us that even fools are thought wise when they keep silent. (Proverbs 17:28).

No, it is not the best choice of quotes to use at the start of any kind of public speaking, but it fits the Gospel story so well, I felt compelled to use it.

You see, Jesus really lays into Peter for the moment of doubt that causes him to fall into the water and it seems a bit unjust. After all, does it mean that had Peter stayed in the boat he would have looked as faithful as the disciples who never dared to leave it in the first place?

This is Peter, the disciple who came up with the best answer when Jesus asked “Who do people say that I am?” Peter said “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” Why then when Peter has a moment of doubt, in the midst of a great show of faith, I might add, does he get criticized so plainly?

What is doubt?

Is it bad to doubt? Don't we all have doubts whether they are limited to certain substantive doctrinal issues or what feels like a total lack of faith? How many of us have faith even that is bigger than the day to day issues life brings? In fact, isn't the worry that dogs many of us, a low grade form of doubt, a disbelief that God exists and that all things work together for those who believe?

Thomas a Kempis in *The Imitation of Christ* imagines a conversation between Christ and a follower; it could be you or me. In it, Christ is urging to the follower to stop looking at the waves that come at us in daily life, the worries, the troubles, the distractions, and to focus instead on him, knowing that all we need comes from God.

But who are these people who are able to lie awake nights *not* worrying? Who are the people who can sit through a movie or a play distracted by thoughts of how well things

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are going? Who are the people whose planners are filled with lists of things they *don't* need to do?

Certainty...

The closest I have been to someone who lived with such certainty and trust was my Grandma Eide.

Grandma knew Jesus. I know people use that phrase in different religious traditions and it means different things, but I mean it as it sounds: Grandma knew Jesus and that's that. She talk with him and when she talked about him, you too had no doubt that he was near.

When I took the bar exam in 1991, I had her pray to her Jesus for me. Did I pass the bar exam? Boy, did I. I fell asleep during the bar exam and still passed it the first time. I'm telling you: Grandma knew Jesus.

Near the end of her life Grandma was very hard of hearing and I think there were times when she would just tune us out, enjoying our company, but off someone else on her own. One night I remember both Grandma and I were over at my parent's house for dinner and we were talking about how I had become a Sunday school teacher. At this point in my life it was kind of funny that I was a Sunday school teacher. Grandma as usual was there, but maybe off somewhere as well. Just smiling. I got up to go home and as I walked by her, she grabbed my hand and said "Tell the children that Jesus was a real person."

"Alright, Grandma. See you later."

Days later, she laid down for a nap and passed away. Those were her last words to me. A woman of certainty and trust.

But you know what? This was the same Grandma who used to come out of her house as we were driving away, to make sure our seatbelts were on and that our car doors were locked.

The same Grandma who knew the flight schedules of anyone who was traveling and knew if they were late. If she was away from her foul tempered, diabetic dog for too long a period, say a couple of hours, she would get noticeably worried about the dog.

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Even being as close to Jesus as she was, I think there were times when Grandma saw the waves and wondered how she was going to stay afloat. Would Jesus have scolded her? Would she be accused of not having enough faith because from time to time she doubted things would be alright?

I doubt it.

A Prayer

Another story about doubt: In Mark's Gospel there is a man whose son has what would probably be diagnosed today as epilepsy, but at that time was seen as some sort of evil spirit that needed to be driven out of the boy. The father is understandable worried: some of the seizures the boy has had have thrown him into fires and into water. The man is literally worried for the life of his son.

When Jesus' disciples came around they were unable to heal the boy. So a great debate has broken out whether this Jesus is really the Messiah they have waited for all these years or just another of the many pretenders. When Jesus arrives he asks what the commotion is about and the man tells him about his son and the disciples inability to heal him.

"All things can be done for the person who believes," say Jesus. What is running through the man's mind at this point? "I believed once and was let down" perhaps? Maybe "the life of my son is precious enough to me that I will try again and again and again, even if I keep coming out the fool."

The man replies "I do believe. Help my unbelief." It is his way of saying, I can get out of the boat, Lord, but waves are lapping at my feet. Without criticism or admonishment, Jesus heals the boy.

I think this is Jesus' tacit approval of a great prayer from the Bible. We know the prayer Jesus taught us, but here is another: I believe. Help my unbelief.

So What is Doubt?

What is doubt? I think it is a characteristic found in all of us. But as long as we have doubt, doesn't it mean we have some shred of faith?

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Is it possible that doubt is the place where we meet God?

Is it possible that doubt is the place where a hand grabs ours just as we disappear into the waves and pulls us out of the water, because we finally acknowledge we cannot do thing on our own, even believe?

We pray for so many things, so many miraculous things, why not for faith? Perhaps a fool in order to appear wise stays silent. But in matters of God, the wisest people are those willing to say "I believe, it may be a lot or it may be so little that I come to church just for the coffee, but I have doubt. Lord I do believe, but when the water is rising, help my unbelief."