
Doubt is a superpower
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on John 20:19-31

It must be spring. Because we are witnessing one of the sure signs of spring. No - I'm not thinking of the warmer weather. I mean, of course, that we get the story of the person we call "Doubting Thomas". That story always comes right after Easter. Because the story is about the disciples seeing the risen Christ first without, and then with, Thomas in the room. Nothing says "spring" to me more than our annual romp through this delightful story.

And poor Thomas anyway. We label him "Doubting Thomas" even though he only wants the same proof that his friends had already had. We always imagine that if another disciple - Peter let's say - had missed the first showing of Jesus that Peter would not have doubted. But the Bible doesn't say that. All that we know is that Thomas didn't believe his friends when they told him a story that he could not possibly have believed. Perhaps we feel the need to label Thomas "doubting" because of our own insecurities. But that's a different sermon.

The story always makes it sound like it is bad to have doubts. But I confess that I doubt that myself. For one thing, Jesus does not chastise Thomas for his doubt. Jesus simply understands and then shows his wounds to Thomas. Nothing in Jesus's actions suggests that doubt is bad. For another thing, ... well, get to that later.

But first, I promised you last week that I would continue our conversation into what it means to be a progressive Christian community. We have all been invited to voice our own opinions to our profile committee. And I want to share my perspective too. Last week I said that Progressive Christianity liberates many people from theologies that no longer work for them. And I encouraged us to push that idea further. To realize that not only have we been liberated *from* something, but that we have also been liberated *to* something. In other words, now that we have been liberated, what are we going to do with our freedom?

Perhaps it's a poor analogy, but I like to compare this to insurance. Insurance is

designed to provide a buffer against loss. But “preventing loss” is really a double-negative. And all double-negatives invite us to imagine what the positive might be. One insurance company has done this marketing well, helping us to imagine “Freedom 55”. Instead of thinking about loss, we are invited to imagine positive things, like travel and early retirement. In that language, insurance isn’t about preventing loss, it’s about finding positive paths forward.

Similarly, Progressive Christianity is not only about being liberated from unhelpful theologies. It must also be about finding positive paths forward. How will we use our freedom to engage in new ways within our church community and in Brantford? Or to be more blunt. How would people in Brantford know that we have been liberated? How would people who are not part of our congregation know that we feel liberated? What are the outward manifestations of our freedom? I’m glad you asked?

But first, a question. “Who is responsible for your faith?” For well over 1400 years, the answer to that question - for Christians - was the Church. The Church was responsible for telling you what to believe. The Church was responsible for educating you. The Church was responsible for creating liturgies and rituals that would guide you into right beliefs. The Church was responsible for defining what “salvation” meant, and then creating processes so that you could achieve that salvation yourself. The Church was expected to have all the answers. Some people have tried to extend that omniscience to ministers, but I do my best every week to prove them wrong.

Ever since the very early days of the Christian enterprise, individuals challenged the assumption that the Church was supposed to have all the answers. But these individuals were few in number. But in our post-modern world today, it has become the default assumption - particularly for people who are not in our churches. And there is a more general acceptance of the fact that people are responsible for their own faith. In the post-modern world, people take responsibility for many aspects of their lives that used to be displaced, including responsibility for our feelings, our happiness, our livelihoods, and basically, our lives. Adherence to church doctrine has largely been replaced with personal agency for most people in the post-modern world.

For me the issue of personal agency is the foundation of Progressive Christianity.

The idea that each of us are responsible for our own faith. Which is why we must question and challenge theologies that are not life-giving for us. That do not affirm justice. That do not affirm the inclusion of all people.

And this - for me at least - is the most exciting part of the conversation. In this post-modern age, what is the role of a Progressive Church? If our role is no longer knowing all the answers, what exactly are we called to do? Well, I think the main object has not changed. We are still called to help our community of faith - and our wider community - find their own salvation. But the word "salvation" here is defined - not by Church tradition, but by our community itself. In other words, by all of us. Together.

This requires a certain amount of vulnerability of course. Because we have to be honest with each other about our own deepest needs. And we have to model that to our wider community. Trust me - most people do not know what their deepest longings are. A Progressive Christian community should be a place where people can figure that out. This work is built with relationships. With conversation. With caring. With sharing of ourselves. You can see why some people prefer to have the Church just tell them all the answers. That's way easier. Being a progressive Christian community takes a bit of work. Healing takes work. Relationships take work. And relationships are the core of a Progressive Christian community.

And as we become more honest about our own deepest needs, we will attract other people to this congregation. People who do not connect to traditional religion. Many people these days seek relationship and meaning, and vital community outreach. I'm brave enough to hope that we want those things here at Sydenham-Heritage United Church.

Underlying all of this is realizing the power - or perhaps the superpower - of doubt. Doubt is important because if you think you have all the answers then you stop asking questions. As the bumper sticker says, "only a closed mind is certain." And to be clear, I'm talking about open-minded, questioning doubt. Not doubt as the passive and cynical rejection of everything.

I mean doubt that allows questions like this. "What salvation is Brantford looking for, and how can we help bring that to life?" Open-minded, questioning doubt is a

spiritual gift. Open-minded, questioning doubt is a superpower.

You might think that open-minded doubt is a job for scientists. But in fact open-minded doubt is woven into the fabric of our church. And it is woven in as a spiritual gift. In 1517, Martin Luther dared to ask, “What if the church is wrong about salvation?” which is a great question from a very pious and faithful doubter. Doubt was also woven explicitly into the fabric of the United Church of Canada. As you may know, when the United Church of Canada came into being in 1925, it was created by an Act of the Canadian Government. It was a merger between the Congregational, Methodist, and most of the Presbyterian congregations in Canada. The foundational document is called “The Basis of Union”. This document includes a section called “The Twenty Articles of Doctrine”. This describes in fair detail 20 elements of Christian faith. Each of the 20 articles is a paragraph that states Christian doctrine on a specific topic. The 20 articles are very comprehensive. They discuss God, revelation, divine purpose, creation and providence, sin, grace, Jesus, the holy spirit, regeneration, faith and repentance, justification and membership, sanctification, prayer, the law of God, church, sacraments, the ministry, church order and fellowship, resurrection, and Christian service and the final triumph.

If you read the document today, it reads much as you would expect a 100 year old document to read. It is fairly classic Christianity, written in a way that does not even attempt to challenge the intrinsic sexism, racism, and exclusivism of its day. But it is classic Christianity. For example, Article 1 is labelled “Of God”. It states “We believe in the one only living and true God, a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in His being and perfections; the Lord Almighty, who is love, most just in all His ways, most glorious in holiness, unsearchable in wisdom, plenteous in mercy, full of compassion, and abundant in goodness and truth. We worship Him in the unity of the Godhead and the mystery of the Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, three persons of the same substance, equal in power and glory.”

The articles themselves are fairly clear and do not have much wiggle-room for doubt. However, the spirit is given latitude for doubt in a very interesting way which was completely intentional. The space for doubt is not found within the articles themselves.

The space for doubt is found in the way the document is used. Because from 1925 until sometime after I was ordained, the 20 articles were really only used for 1 purpose. And that purpose was to test candidate ministers to make sure that their faith was consistent with United Church of Canada doctrine before they were allowed to be ordained. Bright, hopeful ministers, prior to their ordination, were asked this question. “Are you in essential agreement with the articles of faith?” The space for open-minded doubt was expressed in the single word, “essential”. But that one word is enough. The point is made. Faith is given space for questions, for doubts, for change, for growth, even for disagreement. In the United Church of Canada, ministers were not expected to agree with the 20 articles, but they are to “essentially agree” with them. And before you ask, there is no official definition of “essential”. But even better, when potential ministers are asked the question, they do not answer with a yes or no. Instead, they answer by stating where they themselves stand in relation to the articles. Faith - in the United Church - is a living faith that leaves room for many things, including doubt and disagreement.

All of this is a long-winded way to say that Thomas would be welcome here. That you are welcome here. That all of us are welcome here. Here, in this place where some ministers are also scientists. Here in this place where some faithful people also doubt. Here in this place where not all of us identify as Christian. Here in this place where it’s ok to bring questions in the door with you. Here in this place where some of us come with wounds, with wounded hands and feet, and we are accepted as we are. Here in this place where you are free to be yourself. Here in this place where we understand that the essence - the essential essence - of Christian faith is simply, love.

We are all in this together. Thanks be to God.

Amen.