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The spiritual gift of doubt  
Chapel in the Park United Church  
April 7, 2024  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Acts 4:32-35 and John 20:19-31

Happy Anniversary. Wow - we just keep celebrating here. Last week it was Happy Easter. Today is Happy Anniversary. Clearly I came to the right church because we celebrate all the time here.

Today is sort of a double celebration actually. Because yes, it is our anniversary. Our 2nd Anniversary as Chapel in the Park United Church. But I cannot ignore the fact that today - the week after Easter Sunday - is our annual opportunity to grapple with the story we call "Doubting Thomas". And for reasons that will soon be obvious, I cannot let that event pass without comment.

Starting with the fact that I do not like the label "Doubting Thomas". We just read the story together. What do you think?

In the story, Jesus appears to all the disciples except Thomas. Jesus shows the disciples his hands and his side - presumably so that they could see the wounds from the crucifixion. Then later, Thomas - who was not there that day - says that he also wants to see Jesus's wounds before he believes it was Jesus. Thomas only requested the same evidence that the other disciples had already seen. And for that, he is labelled for all eternity "Doubting Thomas".

The underlying meaning behind that label is that we should not question, or doubt. That we should just believe. And so this is the perfect week to honour a sermon request I've received, which is to talk about science and religion, and how they relate.

It has been said that religion and science are incompatible - because science is about having questions that might not have answers, while religion is about having answers that you are not allowed to question. And while I love the play on words of that idea, I do not agree with it.

I realize that for some people - perhaps including some of you - faith means believing things that you cannot prove. That is a popular and traditional view of faith.

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The idea is that while science answers many questions, there are still things we do not understand. And we rely on God and/or the Bible to explain those things. 2000 years ago, God and the Bible provided answers to questions on many subjects including cosmology, astronomy, fertility, agriculture, medicine, morality, etc. This way of understanding God has been called “the God of the gaps” because God and the Bible are used to fill in any gaps in our knowledge. Of course science has expanded over the centuries while the Bible has remained essentially the same. And the God of the gaps has been forced to shrink. We simply do not have as many gaps in our knowledge as we used to have. The Church has not always appreciated advances in science because it was sometimes seen as a way to reduce the importance of God.

For example, in 1633 the scientist Galileo was condemned by the Catholic Church because he believed that the Sun was the centre of the universe. Not the Earth as the Church believed at the time. Using a new invention called a telescope it turned out that Galileo could only make sense of the phases of Venus if the Sun was assumed to be the centre of the universe. The phases of Venus make no sense if the Earth is the centre of the universe.

To me it's an interesting story, because the belief that the Earth was the centre of the Universe is not biblical. Moreover, the location of the centre of the universe doesn't really affect anybody on a day-to-day basis. And yet, Galileo was condemned by the Church. I suspect the real issue was that Galileo had simply closed off a gap that had previously been reserved for God. Or perhaps the Church saw Galileo as the thin edge of the wedge and wanted to discourage other thinkers. Looking back, it is sort of humorous anyway. Neither the Sun nor the Earth are the centre of the universe. They were both wrong.

Also in the 1600's, Rene Descartes, the french philosopher, realized the great value of doubt. He reasoned that while many things we think are real might be imaginary, “the very act of doubting one's existence served - at a minimum - as proof of the reality of one's own mind”.

This led to the famous expression, “dubito, ergo cogito, ergo sum”, which translates as, “I doubt, therefore I think, therefore I am”, which is usually shortened to

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simply, “I think, therefore I am”. And it is too bad that we usually shorten it, because we remove the importance of doubt from the process. Descartes would not have got anywhere if he had not been honest about his own doubts first.

And long before Descartes, the Roman statesman Cicero (106-43 BC) famously said, “Ubi dubium, ibi libertas”, which means “where doubt exists, there is freedom”. Jesus said that the truth will set us free, but so will doubt. Who knew? It’s almost as if doubt can lead to truth! To be clear, I am speaking about positive doubt which we will unpack shortly.

Science finds great value in doubt. I personally believe that religion can find value in doubt too. But traditionally, religion has not been a big fan of doubt, because doubt and faith have been seen as opposites.

Doubt has been connected with having questions. And faith has been connected with having answers. But to me science, and theology both do better when reality and doubt are both part of the conversation.

You know me as a minister. But you also know that I’m still also a scientist. People sometimes ask me how that works, and I say that it works very well. For me at least. Although I have a certain amount of sympathy my congregation. Because I do actually recognize how my own approach to faith might differ from your own. This isn’t bad of course, it’s an opportunity for both you and me to learn from each other. Over the years, I have reflected on what faith means to me - and to others. For me - I love questions. Perhaps more than I love answers. And I do realize this throws some people off because they associate questions with doubt and doubt with lack of faith.

For me, faith is not about believing things I cannot prove. Faith for me is fully embracing the idea that we are not alone. That we are connected to each other and to something beyond ourselves. That we are called to love each other. That we are called to care for each other. Those seem to be the most valuable lessons we learn from Christianity anyway. And doubt is not bad. I hope we all noticed in our reading from John that Jesus did not criticize Thomas for having doubt. Jesus didn’t seem to have any problem with doubt. Jesus simply accepted Thomas for who he was and then showed Thomas what Thomas wanted to see.

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The opposite of faith is not doubt. The opposite of faith is unbelief. To misquote Sproul - there is a huge difference between unbelief that is closed-minded certainty and the open-minded uncertainty of doubt. When doubt is open-minded and uncertain, when doubt is in the form of a question rather than an answer, then doubt is usually a positive thing. Open-minded doubt springs from the realization that life can be understood, and perhaps made better.

We should applaud doubters. Let's applaud the doubters who said, "What if the earth is not flat?". Let's praise the doubters who said, "Here's an idea - let's let women vote" Or in more religious terms, let's celebrate the doubters who said, "Hang on a minute - if we are all children of God, do we really have to kill each other?"

Doubt of the status quo can help us evolve and mature, as individuals and as a society. Doubt can help us evolve as a church. Doubt can even be a catalyst to strengthen our faith. The doubt that is helpful, the doubt that is liberating, the doubt that gives life is open-minded and curious. Unbelief is the rejection of faith. Doubt - liberating doubt - actually calls us to deepen our faith because it forces us to grapple with our faith. That type of doubt is truly a spiritual gift.

Here is a fun fact. If it were not for doubt, we would not know each other. It was not my faith that drove me into ministry, it was my doubt. Well, it was both really, because for me faith and doubt are the same thing. But it was my questions about Christianity that drove me into the seminary. That and my love for the church. I had a lot of questions, and decided I needed to find some answers.

I still remember walking into Emmanuel College my first day with the idea that I would take every question I had about Christianity into that building because it was probably the best shot I would have to find answers to questions of faith. I only later realized I was living into the motto, "I doubt, therefore I think, therefore I am".

In any case, I state boldly that doubt - positive, open-minded, curious, hopeful doubt - is a spiritual gift. Scientists have made that observation many times, getting their knuckles wrapped for discovering things that Church authorities did not like.

I'm reminded of the story of the German physicist, mathematician, and theologian, Johannes Kepler born in 1571. Kepler's study of astronomy was driven

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largely by his belief “that God created the cosmos in an orderly fashion which caused [Kepler] to attempt to determine and comprehend the laws that govern the natural world, most profoundly in astronomy. Kepler is credited with saying, ‘I am merely thinking God's thoughts after Him’. In spite of his piety, Kepler was excommunicated in 1613 because he believed that the moon was a solid body. Lutheran theologians at the time had decided that the moon could not be a solid body because in Genesis the moon is described as a “lesser light to rule the night”, and since the moon was a “light”, it could not be solid.

Open-minded doubters that ask interesting questions have frequently come afoul of church leaders who prefer simplistic answers. In Kepler’s case, he wanted to see the mind of God by observing the heavens using astronomy. In Thomas’s case, he wanted to see Christ by looking at Jesus’s wounds. Thomas was labeled a doubter and Kepler, a heretic. It’s sort of funny that Thomas wanted to use his sight to confirm the presence of Jesus. Kepler used almost the same method. Kepler used his sight and his insight to look for the creator of the heavens in the heavens themselves. His observations led to a number of theories, as well as to the conclusion that the moon must in fact be solid. And for using his God-given sight, and insight, Kepler was ejected from the Church.

This is a very long-winded way of saying that the main difference - traditionally - between science and religion is that in science, you are allowed to ask questions and you are allowed to have theories that change over time. But I think the church has made positive strides. Because these days, in church, we are allowed to ask questions. Certainly in any church that I am in you are allowed to ask questions. And our own theology has evolved along the way. For example, 40 years ago, non-Christians were considered heathens destined for Hell. Today, non-Christians are considered as friends, neighbours, spouses, and partners in ministry. And here at Chapel in the Park, you even put up with a minister who is a scientist. Thanks be to God for that! The barrier between religion and science is perhaps shrinking - in our own lifetime. And in the process perhaps we have found a God that we need more than the God of the gaps.

And if you yourself ever feel like Thomas, know that you are welcome here. Questions, concerns, doubts, hesitations are all welcome here. Besides, Thomas didn’t

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really doubt. Thomas just needed a bit of support from his friends, like we all do.

Which brings us to our reading from Acts. And our anniversary. What did you think when you heard our reading from Acts. Those words describe one way for a Christian community to behave. And what did they do? They sold their possessions and shared what they had. Their resources were held in common. And because of that sharing, none of them were in need. What do you think of that type of community?

I myself have two reactions to those words. My knee-jerk reaction is to say that the complete sharing by the disciples is laudable but impractical. And I am reminded that the early Christian community expected Jesus to return very soon. Like - it's not worth feeding the cat - soon. And if those church members really expected Jesus to return very very soon then letting go of their possessions is easier to understand.

But my second reaction to the text is this. It reminds me - in important ways - of Chapel in the Park United Church. Because Chapel in the Park was created by the amalgamation of Don Mills United Church and Thorncliffe Park United Church. When your two former congregations came together you did share everything in common. On a congregational level, Chapel in the Park has been living out that vision found in Acts. I have also witnessed a good amount of individual sharing here. I have seen people time and again give their time, talents, even love to each other. Opening our hearts to one another. Being community with and for each other.

Anniversaries are times to look back on our past. But also, to look to our future. What is your image for the Chapel? Do you imagine this as a place where we share things in common? Not all our possessions because that is impractical. But what are we willing to share here? Our time, our caring, our compassion. The sharing of our very selves.

Jesus once asked "Simon son of John, do you love me? If so, then feed my sheep". As we begin our third year as Chapel in the Park, we will continue to flesh out what it means to "feed my sheep". Right here. Right now.

Thomas just needed a bit of support from his friends, like we all do. Chapel in the Park can be that place where we come together to support each other. And our wider community. I look forward to the year ahead together.

*Amen.*