

THE FLIP SIDE OF FAITH

a sermon preached by the Reverend Dr. Tom Collins

Santee (SC) Presbyterian Church

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Psalm 27 Mark 9:14-29

Text: "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" Mk. 9:24

Three stories:

Mother Teresa died in 1997, just about the same time that Princess Diana died. If ever there was a modern day saint, it was thought to be Mother Teresa, an Albanian who left her homeland to live in India where she established a religious order and where she ministered to, as she would say, "the poorest of the poor." Tiny in stature, she seemed to emanate the power of God. Soon after her death, she was put on the fast track to what Catholicism calls sainthood. But a book came out after her death entitled *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light* in which the author, a devout Roman Catholic, quoted Mother Teresa's frank admissions of her struggles with the darkness of doubt. Mother Teresa! The woman thought to be the great example of a Christian in the twentieth century, and here she was occasionally tortured by doubt.

On Easter Day of this year Rick Warren, Pastor of Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California preached on the hope of resurrection, as I trust all of us preachers did. But Rick preached in 14 services that day to a total of 50,000 worshippers. Warren is the author of the wildly popular book *The Purpose Driven Life* which has sold 36 million copies. Five days after Easter, on April 5, Rick's youngest of three children shot himself to death with a gun he had purchased illegally on the internet. Matthew was 27 and had suffered from depression for 20 years. Rick Warren, the man of faith, had to take a leave of absence from his pulpit for four months, and the mourning process forced him to wrestle with tough questions about his faith. He has returned to his pulpit, but he and his wife Kay are still grieving. They feel both pain and hope; one might say both faith and doubt.

My third story is more personal. You don't know this about me, at least I don't think you do, but at the age of 14 I went through the 8 or 10 week Confirmation Class in my home church, but once I completed it, I chose not

to join the church, possibly the only young person in that church's history ever to do that. Ironically, I became the first person in that church in 140 years to go off to seminary and study for the ministry. I tell people that I was baptized, confirmed, married, and ordained twice in that church, and when I die, my final parting will take place there, but what I don't tell them is that I was confirmed at 22, the year I was graduated from college. At fourteen I thought faith meant that you had to have all the answers, and I didn't. I had doubts. I still do today, but it took me eight years to realize that there's flip side to faith. It is called doubt.

Actually there is a fourth story, one which occurred 2,000 years ago. A man whose son is an epileptic brings him before a healer named Jesus, a healer who has troubled the scribes and Pharisees of ancient Israel and amazed just about everyone else. Perhaps this father brings his son to Jesus as a last-ditch effort. Who knows? Maybe he has tried every new healer in Israel, and there were probably more than a few. Maybe Jesus is just one in a long line of those who have tried, apparently unsuccessfully, to heal his son. Maybe the father wants to believe that Jesus has that which no other man has had, but *wanting* to believe is not believing.

So when Jesus proclaims, "All things can be done for the one who believes," the man is as honest as he can be. He shouts out in response, "Lord, I believe! Help thou mine unbelief." (King James Version) And that's good enough for Jesus, which may be the real miracle of this story. Did you hear that? You don't need the whole package. You don't need all your questions answered. Frankly, in this world you will never have the puzzle completed. Doubt is the flip side of faith, and that's an acceptable view to Jesus.

Most Presbyterian ministers and not a few laypersons love the writings of Frederick Buechner, a retired Presbyterian minister himself who lives in Vermont and is now well into his 80s. In a book called *Wishful Thinking* Buechner wrote, "Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don't have doubts, you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving."1

One of the pillars of the Psalter is Psalm 27. We all have come to love the opening words: “The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?” What a magnificent and moving statement of faith! Unfortunately, most of us leave this psalm too early. When we get to verse 7, the tone of the psalm changes. There we read, “Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud be gracious to me and answer me! ‘Come,’ my heart says, ‘seek his face!’ Your face, Lord, do I seek. Do not hide your face from me.” That’s a more tentative, almost questioning, posture exhibited by the psalmist, and yet there is only one voice, just two moods.

Mature Christians know that faith and doubt are compatible, at least they can be. They can and do live in the same house, perhaps not always peaceably, but there’s no question that doubt informs our faith. And this is difficult to comprehend because most contrasts don’t nurture each other, things like hot and cold, darkness and light, life and death. They appear to be in opposite corners. But doubt can make our faith stronger if we work through our doubts, and if we don’t settle for simple answers.

I suspect that all of you have heard of John Foster Dulles, Secretary of State under Eisenhower in the 1950s. He was one of the chief architects of the Cold War. His father was a Presbyterian minister, and John and his wife had a daughter who became a Presbyterian minister. In 1918 the Dulles’ became parents of a son named Avery who went to the prestigious Choate School, then matriculated at Harvard from which he graduated in 1940. Before Avery arrived at college, he had cast aside his Presbyterian heritage and declared himself an agnostic. But his religious doubts were diminished one day when he stepped out into a rainy day and saw a tree beginning to flower along the Charles River in Cambridge. After that moment, he said, “I never again doubted the existence of an all-good and omnipotent God.” Avery soon after became a Roman Catholic, then was ordained in 1956 as a Jesuit priest. He taught in several seminaries and universities, wrote more than 20 books, all on theology, and was made a Cardinal just a few years before he died at age 90. He said he never again doubted God after that

day in college. That's good but unusual. Most of us still struggle with doubt.

Doubt is a low-tide waiting for the high tide to come in. Sometimes the tide goes out because we experience:

the loss of a loved one, either through death or (I sometimes think worse) through a broken relationship ---

the questions raised by a professor or a book or just an honest friend ---

the suffering of the innocent or the suffering of anyone, for that matter ---

a prolonged illness (Rick Warren's son was medicated and received counseling through most of his brief life) ---

the hurt by betrayal or injustice or a crime committed ---

I'll be honest with you. Christian faith isn't really much of anything if we can't withstand these assaults. But how do we do that? How do we work through our doubts, possibly to come out with an even stronger faith?

First, I would suggest that we always work through our doubts in community. That means the Church. A faithful yet doubting Christian always does better in the midst of other Christians. Don't go it alone!

It's unimaginable how much I have learned from others in the Church over these past 45 years. I've learned how they resolved their doubts, how they handled loss or disappointment or something that shook them to their foundations. Their strength in God became mine.

Had I sat at home alone, even in prayer or Bible reading, I don't think any of this would have happened. So if I said, "Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief," I really have surrendered most of my unbelief to the life of the Church. Brian McLaren, a minister, writes, "Is doubt good or bad?" He always answers

by saying “Yes!” by which he means it could be good or bad, depending on what you do with it. I tend to give my doubt to the church family.

Martin Hahn was the son of a Presbyterian medical missionary. As I recall, he was the last of what I think was seven children. His father was one of my predecessors in a church that had long pastorates. His father, both a medical doctor and minister, retired in 1941 and died in 1959. In the 1990s Martin and his wife of over 50 years were sitting at their breakfast table when Dorothy’s head just went down on the table. There she lay --- dead. It was a Saturday morning. So you know what Martin did 24 hours later? He went to church. He didn’t say there are too many things to do which of course was true. He didn’t say, “I can’t face others,” which was probably equally true. He didn’t claim, “The music will get to me” as it often does to most people experiencing loss. He sat down in the pew and picked up the hymnal.

I often think that the one time we need the embrace of the Christian community is the very same time we stay away from it. Martin Hahn didn’t worship to lean on any understanding of God. He worshipped to lean on God himself.

Lastly, one quick point, and I’m not particularly proud of this, but I must admit that my faith has probably grown more in difficult times than in gracious and blessed moments. That’s another way of saying that doubts can make our faith stronger and more resilient. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if all of us could grow in the grace-filled moments? Some of us do and have, but most of us grow more appreciably in the tough times, in the moments of doubt, knowing that in the end the flip side of doubt is faith.

1 Buechner, Frederick *Wishful Thinking* HarperSanFrancisco: A Division of HarperCollins Publishers, 1993, p. 23