

Good and Bad Faith  
John 2:13-22  
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St. John United Methodist Church  
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David Beckett, D.Min.

Do you have questions and doubts about God? I do. My favorite prayer is from the famous Catholic monk, Thomas Merton, who wrote this opening line: O Lord, my God, I have no idea where I am going.” Sometimes a wave of doubt just washes over us, the kind that filters down to the deep places of our souls. And we wonder at times if God is real. We sing a hymn in church or hear the scriptures read or listen to a sermon and we ask ourselves, “Do I really believe this?”

I have often thought that we should be known as St. John United Methodist Church, where it’s okay to ask questions. Not all fleeting thoughts and doubts should be given our energy and attention. But the nagging ones should be asked and explored and talked about in a safe and trusted environment of Christian community. I have witnessed peoples’ questions take them away from God and the church. I still believe that the church can be a safe place where questions are honored and faith is explored.

Do you know what prominent Christian leader said these words? “In my soul I feel just that terrible pain of loss, of God not wanting me — of God not being God — of God not existing.” Would it surprise you to learn that these words were spoken by Mother Teresa? Mother Teresa knew, of course, how much people the world over admired her for what she was doing, picking up the sick and dying from the streets of Calcutta and caring for them in their last days. She knew she had plenty of admirers who, as soon as she herself died, would propose her for sainthood. “If I ever become a saint,” she wrote, in her later years, “I will surely be one of ‘darkness.’”<sup>1</sup>

When Jesus was in Jerusalem celebrating the Passover with thousands of other Jews he knew that people were believing in him simply because of the signs and miracles he was doing. He knew that faith that rested merely on signs and not on God to whom the signs point is shallow and unstable. Where is your faith centered? Some people believe that sincerity matters. If I am sincere about what I believe then it must be true.

Brian McLaren, author of “Finding Faith,” uses the analogy of thin ice to drive home this point. “If you’re walking on a lake that’s covered with one inch of ice, no matter how sincere you are in believing you can do it, you’re in for a cold soaking at best, drowning at worst. If you’re walking on a lake that’s covered with twelve inches of solid ice, even if you are plagued by doubts at every step, you’ll still be upheld. So the issue is less the sincerity or intensity of your faith than it is the trustworthiness of the object of your faith.”<sup>2</sup>

This is the goal of this four-part sermon series: to increase the trustworthiness of God as the object of our faith. It’s not about how sincere we are. It’s not about leaning

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<sup>1</sup> —Cited by David Van Biema, “Mother Teresa’s crisis of faith,” *TIME*, Thursday, August 23, 2007; and, James Martin, “A Saint’s Dark Night,” *The New York Times*, August 29, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Finding Faith, Brian McLaren, p. 30.

on signs. It's about asking the hard questions and staying with them. It's about keeping an open mind and open heart to find ourselves on solid ice.

McLaren cites the story of the little boy in Sunday School who defined faith as "believing what you know ain't true." He offers this definition. "*Faith is a state of relative certainty about matters of ultimate concern sufficient to promote action.*"<sup>3</sup> This is good faith. McLaren believes that when people reject faith what they really are doing is rejecting bad faith. When they "lose" their faith are they "losing" their faith or are they really discarding their version of faith. Here's what he means by bad faith.

1. Bad faith is based solely on unquestioned authority. "In bad faith I believe simply because an authority figure or structure tells me to. I don't think for myself. I don't question. I comply; thoughtlessly believing what I am told to believe."<sup>4</sup>

2. Bad faith is based on pressure or coercion. There are many religious groups or cults who create cultures of pressure in order to keep their religion alive. This happens in fundamentalist religions whether they are Christian, Mormon, or Muslim.

3. Bad faith is often the result of a psychological need for belonging. Some people are drawn into faith because it meets a deep need to belong to a group. We see young people abandoning their childhood values in order to join a gang. It's not about the gang. It's about their need to belong.

4. Bad faith appeals to self-interest and base motives. When Emperor Constantine declared Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire in the 4<sup>th</sup> century there were senators who flocked to this new religion. They brought their wealth to impress the emperor with elaborate church buildings.

5. Bad faith is arrogant and unteachable. McLaren writes, "When faith puts us in a high and mighty posture to look down in judgment on others, it's hard to feel that we're dealing with good faith."<sup>5</sup>

6. Bad faith is dishonest. When faith tells us that the earth is 6000 years old when there is indisputable evidence that this is not true isn't there an integrity issue here?

7. Bad faith is apathetic. Real faith inspires action. If my faith does not motivate me to act, then is it not bad faith?

8. Bad faith is a step backward. McLaren's writes, "Good faith ought to produce good fruit; I ought to become a better person for holding it. A faith that makes me less loving, mature, wise, alive, or responsible sounds to me like bad faith."<sup>6</sup>

So, is your faith bad? Any of these descriptors resonate with you? Why do you have faith? Do you really know? What are the conditions that need to exist in order for you to have faith in God?

We all know the science of our earth where certain conditions have to be present in order for life to exist as we know it. Scientists have found that there are over 60 criteria that are necessary for life on Earth. Do you know which ones are true? Let's go through a partial list and see if you know which ones don't belong. Life could not exist if earth's rotation was slower, or faster. Life could not exist if we were 2 percent closer to the sun. Life could not exist if Taco Bell closed at 3 p.m. Life could not exist if the

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<sup>3</sup> Finding Faith, Brian McLaren, p. 31.

<sup>4</sup> Finding Faith, Brian McLaren, p. 34.

<sup>5</sup> Finding Faith, Brian McLaren, p. 36.

<sup>6</sup> Finding Faith, Brian McLaren, p. 37.

moon was smaller or larger. Life could not exist if we had more than one moon. Life could not exist if Pizza Hut only served thin crust.

What about good faith? Here are McLaren's good faith descriptions.

1. Good faith is humble, teachable, and inquisitive. Good faith does not look down on others who have less faith. Good faith understands that we can learn something about God from every person we meet.

2. Good faith is grateful. Gratitude is one of the foundations of faith. Whatever insight we may gain about God and the world being thankful is a mark of good faith.

3. Good faith is honest. Good faith seeks a level of honesty about our own weaknesses and shortcomings. Being pretentious or dishonest never helps people find faith.

4. Good faith is communal. Faith grows when shared with others. Just ask any of our members who have taken Disciple Bible Study. They will eagerly tell you how they have grown as a result of studying the Bible together.

5. Good faith is active. If what we have relative certainty about God this will motivate us to act on God's behalf in the world. This is one of the hallmarks of St. John church. We believe faith goes hand in hand with good works. As the Bible says, "Faith without works is dead."

6. Good faith is tough. McLaren writes, "How much is an easy, untested faith worth? If faith brings all benefits and no costs, how can we be sure our belief is an honest pursuit of truth and goodness, as opposed to a pursuit of benefits?"<sup>7</sup> I have often wondered how my faith would cope with a tragic illness or accident or financial ruin? Do you know if your faith would survive?

7. Good faith is relational. Good faith is not simply head knowledge. It is not knowledge about God. If good faith realizes there is a personal God who is ultimate truth then it makes sense to have a relationship with this God.

Brian McLaren tells the story of a young man who came to him with many questions. How can evil exist if there is a good and powerful God? Why are there so many religions? Who is to say that some things are morally wrong? Halfway through the discussion the young man blurted out, "This isn't what I need at all. I am quite certain that you will have a logical answer for every question. I don't want to talk about faith from the outside anymore. I want to move to the inside and see the answers from the inside."<sup>8</sup>

Where we are will influence our search for faith. It's like being inside of a fenced yard. It's okay to step outside the boundaries of the fence now and then to explore the meaning of faith. But it's important to continue the search from the inside as well. Being inside does not mean we don't have questions and doubts. And being outside does not mean we abandon our faith. Bad faith and good faith exists inside and outside the fence. The important thing is to remember is to move towards a whole faith, a growing faith, a good faith.

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<sup>7</sup> Finding Faith, Brian McLaren, p. 40.

<sup>8</sup> Finding Faith, Brian McLaren, p. 42.