

Finding Faith: How Faith Grows
Luke 17:5-6
March 22, 2009
St. John United Methodist Church
Anchorage, Alaska
David Beckett, D.Min.

Last Sunday we began a four-part sermon series called Finding Faith, based on the book by the same title by Brian McLaren. Each sermon builds on the previous one. If you did not get a chance to be here last Sunday I encourage you to listen to it on our web site or pick up a printed copy in the narthex. The main point was this. When people reject their faith what they are often really doing is rejecting bad faith, not good faith.

Today we talk about growing good faith. Do you want more faith than you have now? I do. And so did Jesus' disciples. Jesus inspired them with his teaching and they came to him asking him to increase their faith. What a great request! I, too, want to ask Jesus to increase my faith. What was Jesus' response? "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you." Wow! Not the kind of response one would expect to an honest inquiry about faith. This is a hard one because Jesus often responded not to the actual question but to the perception underlying the question. He knew that what is truly needed is an honest dialogue with our thinking that lies just hidden from our actual words and actions.

When it comes to faith communities many of us have a hidden dialogue with ourselves that rarely gets exposed to the surface. For example, I suspect everyone of us here has at one time in our minds thought that other people in church had their lives together much better than we did. Have you ever thought this? You look at someone maybe reading scripture or singing a solo or sharing a prayer concern and you felt their faith was stronger than yours. Everyone seems so together, so happy, so good. Then you think of your own life, your difficulties, your struggles, your doubts and you feel defeated. Why do others seem to have more faith than me?

This scenario plays itself out in churches across the land and there are at least two issues. One is that we need to examine this attitude that others are doing it better than me. We should not assume that our perceptions are real. We need to test them. This is why it is vitally important that faith communities get to know each other very well. Those who feel faithless will be surprised at the level of doubt in those who appear to have it so together.

Secondly, we need to realize that doubt is a natural part of the human condition. Doubt is an important part of how faith grows. It is doubt that enables us to outgrow one version of faith for a more fitting version. Frederick Buechner once said, "Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don't have any doubts you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving."¹

¹ -- Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, 20

Author Brian McLaren identifies four stages of faith development: Simplicity, Complexity, Perplexity, and Humility. I hope we all will see how doubt plays an important role as our faith grows. You will see a chart on the wall that will help you visualize and compare these stages.

First stage is Simplicity. The focus in this stage is being right. The motive is pleasing authority. The major belief is that all truth is knowable. There are easy answers to every question. Authorities in this stage are seen as God's representatives with divine right. People in this stage like confident people who know the answers. They dislike unsure people who say, "I don't know."

The strategy in this stage is to identify and avoid the "enemy." The strengths are that people are highly committed and willing to sacrifice for the cause. Weaknesses include being judgmental, intolerant, and arrogant. People find their identity primarily in the leader of the group. And God is seen as the ultimate authority.

How do people grow from one stage to another? Doubts. McLaren writes, "As Stage 1 people encounter diversity in their ranks or are disillusioned because of fallen leaders or internal squabbles in the group, they tend to swing from a desire for internal knowledge and certainty to a desire for external accomplishment and success, thus moving on to Stage 2. The world isn't simple anymore, so the task changes to make life work in this complex environment."²

Stage 2 is Complexity. The focus in this stage is being effective. The motive is to achieve goals. The major belief is that almost anything is doable. Different people have different beliefs. The key is to find the best ones. Authorities in this stage are seen as coaches who help people grow. People in this stage like people who give clear instructions and let others know what they expect. They dislike people who are too dogmatic.

The strategy in this stage is to find what people want and give it to them. The strengths are enthusiasm, idealism, and action. Weaknesses include being superficial and naïve. People don't find their identity in the leader of the group, but in a cause. And God is seen as the ultimate guide or coach.

McLaren writes, "Three problems push people out of Stage 2. First is Stage 1 people claiming to have all the answers. Second, the failure of "foolproof" techniques and projects leave them disillusioned. Third, Stage 2 people survive by fragmenting complex and contradictory truth into categories. Eventually a desire for unity and integration cause them to be dissatisfied with their fragmented approach."³

Stage 3 is Perplexity. The focus in this stage is understanding, to see through our illusions to reality. The motive is honesty and authenticity. The major belief is that everything is questionable. Nothing is really certain except uncertainty. Authorities in this stage are seen negatively, as people who try to impose easy answers on complex realities. People in this stage like other questioners, free spirits, and nonconformists. They tend to dislike people in Stage 1 and 2.

The strategy in this stage is to ask hard questions and be ruthlessly honest. The strengths are depth, honesty, and humor. Weaknesses include being cynical, withdrawn, or elitist. People find their identity in solitude or a small circle of similarly

² Finding Faith, Brian McLaren, p. 67.

³ Finding Faith, Brian McLaren, p. 68.

alienated friends. And God is seen as a mythical authority figure I've outgrown, or a mystery I am seeking.

McLaren writes, "One of the key struggles in Perplexity is the battle between arrogance and humility." There is a tendency to look down on people in Stages 1 and 2, believing them to be shallow and primitive.⁴

The fourth stage is Humility. The focus in this stage is fulfilling potential. The motive is to make the best of opportunities. The major belief is that there are a few basic absolute truths and much mystery. There are enough basics to live by. Authorities in this stage are seen as people like us, imperfect, doing their best. People in this stage like others who combine thoughtfulness with accomplishment.

The strategy in this stage is to learn answers (Stage 1 and 2), ask questions (Stage 3), and fulfill your potential, admitting how little you really know. The strengths include those strengths from Stage 1-3, plus wisdom and humility. Weaknesses may still include the weakness from the first three stages. People find their identity in their relationship to the whole, or God. And God is seen as knowable in part, yet mysterious.

McLaren writes, "That this stage is the last stage doesn't suggest that one lives happily ever after! At this stage of integration, one now faces all the weaknesses of the previous stages. (Remember last week when we talked about Mother Teresa's doubts?) Whenever one enters a new context, a new career, a new religion, a new social network, he or she may well recapitulate the stages repeatedly. After all, humility, like maturity, is obviously not a destination, but rather a journey in itself."⁵

The key is to understand what is happening when we find ourselves between stages of faith. When we outgrow Stage 1 faith, it feels like doubt. But if we view the doubt as part of the natural growth of our faith then it is a good thing. A growing faith is a changing faith. When you are in a certain stage you may begin to have doubts. Those doubts may increase and you decide to leave the church. Some people will say that you have lost your faith. They impose a meaning on your experience and place a value judgment on it. Have you heard about Jim? He left the church. It may feel like losing faith, but it's really about growing your faith. Do you see the difference?

I grew up in a conservative, evangelical Christian home and church. Faith for us was simple and clear and absolutely true! I remember feeling a spirit of judgment when one fellow Christian wondered if he would get to heaven. Are you kidding me? You don't know that you're supposed to know this for certain? For us God was the ultimate authority in total charge of the universe and our lives. There was a reason why children died and violence snuffed out the innocent. We didn't know it, but God certainly did.

As I grew those answers started not to make sense anymore. I yearned for a world view that addressed the complexities of life and faith. Seminary was a great place to help me make the shift from simplicity to complexity. It was difficult to deal with feeling like I was abandoning my childhood faith. I didn't want to disrespect my wonderful Sunday School teachers, parents, and youth leaders. But it was an important step in growing my faith.

⁴ Finding Faith, Brian McLaren, p. 69.

⁵ Finding Faith, Brian McLaren, p. 70.

In a real way our move to Alaska in 1991 coincided with my transition to perplexity. I wanted to be in a place where questions were honored and mystery was valued. I wanted our children to experience some of the diversity Alaska has to offer so they could see their faith grow from stage to stage. I'm not sure I've made it to humility yet but I hope to someday. Mostly I'm trying to feel good about being perplexed. With my new job perhaps I'll feel the need for a more simplistic faith.

A story is told of a parade where a little boy was trying to get a good look. But there was a wooden fence that blocked his view. So he found a knothole and peered through it at the parade. But this was not working out the best. He could only see flashes of color and movement through this narrow vision. A man noticed the boy's predicament and offered to lift the boy on his shoulders. Suddenly the boy could see the big picture. He could see the marching band that had already passed. A colorful float was right in front of him. A big fire truck was approaching. The boy's experience of the parade was much better looking at it from this new vantage point.

Moving through the stages of faith is something like changing our view of God and the world. We peer through a narrow field of vision and begin to doubt that this is all there is. There must be more, we think. Then someone gives us permission to question that knothole view and then we are lifted to a new place with a fresh view.

So the questions and doubts may not be a rejection of faith. They may be a door opening us to a new perspective of God who is bigger than any of our knothole views. May each of us realize the strength God has for us as we deal with the doubts and questions that will help us grow our faith.