

Sermon Between Doubt and Prayer

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Glenview Community Church

For those of you who read the UCC Daily Devotions online, you may have noticed the title this past Thursday, by writer, Pastor Richard Floyd. The title was: "No Doubts? I Doubt It!" Rev. Floyd says, "For me, and I am guessing for most of us, our faith exists in the midst of doubt. I take comfort in the belief that my relationship with God is founded on God's initiative and not on my shaky faith. This keeps me from preoccupation with my various states of mind, and the regular taking of my spiritual temperature."

I read a "confession" earlier this week in a religious magazine. Listen, and see if you could have written these words:

"A few years ago, I felt like prayer had stopped working. In fact, I began to doubt whether it had ever worked at all. I was just talking to myself in an empty room. Quieting myself to "hear" God really didn't work either. In fact, that just made things worse. The longer I waited with nothing happening, the more my anxiety kicked into gear, worrying that God really wasn't going to respond. I know that some Christians go through a season of doubt like this and can't survive. They can't find God and just give up. In my own case, I held on."

So, how is your spiritual temperature these days? Had any doubts lately? Have you wondered about prayer? And do you go back and forth between believing and questioning? Between being angry at God and praising God?

Listen again to parts of Psalm 77 in a different translation, The Message:

*I yell out to my God, I yell with all my might, at the top of my lungs. God listens. I found myself in trouble and went looking for my Lord; my life was an open wound that wouldn't heal. When friends said, Everything will turn out all right, I didn't believe a word they said. I bow my head – then wring my hands. I'm awake all night. I can't even say what's bothering me. I wonder how to get my life together. Will God walk off and leave us for good? Just my luck, the High Almighty goes out of business just the moment I need my God...*

Between Doubt...and now Prayer – remembering, recalling God's love:

*Once again, I'll go over what God has done, I'll ponder all the things God has accomplished, and give a long loving look at God's deeds.*

*O God, your way is holy, no one is like you. You're the God who makes things happen...*

We live this life between prayer and doubt, over and over again. We say we have faith, but sometimes, it's just a bit shaky. Theologian, Frederick Buechner says this from his book Secrets in the Dark: "Faith is a way of waiting – never quite knowing – never quite hearing or seeing, because in the darkness we are all but a little lost. There is doubt hard on the heels of every belief, fear hard on the heels of every hope, and many holy things lie in ruins because the world has ruined them, and we have ruined them. But faith waits even so, delivered at least from that final despair which gives up waiting altogether because it sees nothing left worth waiting for."

Between doubt and prayer, I am reminded that I am loved.

Between doubt and prayer, I find I need a closer connection to God. If I'm backing away, it probably means I need to walk closer and sit...sit in that empty room or sanctuary or by the waters, whatever it takes, to fill my spirit once again.

Sometimes, I need to change my worldview, to update my way of living – how I see things and how I live. The passage of James reminds us again to care for others – but especially the orphans and the widows and...to keep oneself unstained by the world." Author, Eugene Peterson, has said that "Wisdom is about being able to live well the truth that we believe and the faith that we embrace." That means taking action – between doubt and prayer.

Is it easy work? No. Sometimes, I think our faith is like the Lotus Flower.

The lotus flower is a beautiful flower that can be found all over the world. But the start of it is not as lovely as one might imagine. And it's unlike other flowers. When the lotus first begins to sprout, it is under water, making its home in lakes and ponds in areas where the water stays fairly still and quiet on the surface. But underneath that surface, this lotus is surrounded by mud and muck and by fish, insects, and simply dirty, rough conditions.

Despite these conditions, the lotus flower keeps its strength and pushes aside each of these dirty obstacles as it makes its way to clearer surfaces. It's just a little stem with a few leaves and a small flower pod. But in time, it will grow and keep pushing through all the muck until it rises to the surface and opens its beautiful petals. Ironically, this same dirty water is the water that cleans the flower as it comes to the top. And when the flower opens, there's not a stain of mud on it. It's pure and bright and beautiful.

Between doubt and prayer – as we remain below the surface, not showing our face, not showing our faith and wondering if God is real or if we can believe anything, anything at all! When we're struggling through the muck and through the doubt and difficult days, we don't give up. We keep pushing through, knowing that beauty and calmness and peace, are on the other side. God is waiting with us, always loving us.

I close with a story that happened to me once when I was making my way through the muck and the mud, having some questions about my own faith between doubt and prayer. Into my week stepped a 7 ½ year old girl, who was in town visiting her grandparents. I met the family and we walked to the sanctuary. The little girl said she had some questions to ask me. I said, "Great!"

A few minutes later, the same girl came up to me, with her notebook and pencil in hand. Uh-oh. This is not a good sign. She is serious. I'd better give her my full attention. She said, "Pastor Pam, I have five questions for you:" These were her questions:

1. What is that cross up there? What does it mean?
2. What is the difference between us and Catholics?
3. I have a friend who is Jewish? What do we believe about God?
4. There's a girl in my class from Palestine. How are we the same in what we believe?
5. What makes water holy?

Well now. I was excited for a moment to think – wouldn't it be great to have her in confirmation class!! But what pushed me quickly was this: here was a young child who was waiting for my answers – not out of a book – but what I actually believed. How could I give her brief, but real answers – even when I was somewhere between doubt and a prayer? I had to be real. But in order to be authentic, I had to be centered in God's love.

But it's not just me; we all do. That's what we're called to do, to be.

And so, I gave her the best I could, reassuring her own faith – that of a child, but oh so very wise and wondering. I guess it went well, because she asked if she could have my email address – just in case she had more questions in the future.

So here is my invitation for you to consider this week: Consider that the distance between doubt and prayer doesn't have to be as far apart. What if we could start to PRAY WHILE we are still in doubt.

That action in itself might bring us back to a place where we can know of God's love, even when we aren't sure about anything else. When we're in doubt, we can turn to God, we can pray, even if we're not sure what to do or say. Just be. Let it be.

My prayer for each of you is this: May God give you the strength and the courage, to rise out of that muck, to rise above the waves and the storm, to simply trust...between that doubt and a prayer as you hold on to that love, given to you. Amen.

