

## ***“Personal doubt and the deepening of faith”***

**January 31, 2010**

*Text: Jeremiah 1:4-10, 1 Corinthians 13*

### I.

Year ago, in Honolulu, Hawaii, I spent a year as an intern in the ministry at the first Presbyterian Church of Honolulu. I was in my late twenties, had just finished my first year in seminary at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, CA and, at the time, I had virtually no pastoral experience.

In my second month there, there was a time when the Senior Pastor was out of town for most of the week. In the middle of the week, we get a call at the church that one of our older members was near death and would the pastor please come to the hospital for prayer and to be with the family.

As the pastoral intern, I was the only one available and soon I was on my way to the hospital. I can remember feeling, *Whoa, what am I going to do?* I had no experience or training in any of this. What would I say? What would I do? Talk about having personal doubts about one's abilities; I was horrified.

At the time, I could have really identified with the youthful Jeremiah when, as you heard in the earlier reading, he was called to be **a prophet to the nations**.

Imagine that! He was called to be a prophet, a spokesperson for God; and he was only a boy. Of course, he was overwhelmed. Check it out (this is Jeremiah speaking):

*The Word of the Lord came to me saying, **Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.***

Then I said, *O my God, I don't know how to speak ...I'm only boy.*

In other words, *God, what are you doing? How can I possibly be your spokesperson? I'm just a boy ...with no experience ...limited education ...what am I going to do?*

### II.

No doubt we've all had experiences in life when, no matter how strong our faith, we can't help but have doubts about our ability to respond. Perhaps we really are in over our head or, at least we think we're in over our head. Either way, we're anxious and uneasy ... and what are we going to do?

1. Maybe we're student-teaching for the first time in a room full of third graders or seventh graders. Ouch!
2. Or, imagine being an aid worker in Haiti during the first days after the devastating earthquake ... with chaos and uncertainty and injuries and death everywhere??
3. Or a parent, trying to deal with some health issues or behavior matters that keep recurring with our children.
4. Or, like a minister-in-training, trying to find the right words to offer comfort and reassurance to a family, gathered at the bedside of a dying loved one.

These are human moments. No matter who any of us is, there are times in our lives when doubt rises up in our spirit. Hey, we're human, which is a good thing; but we're not God, and we're not experts in everything.

If you think about it, in many of these instances, we *should* harbor some doubts. At the end of the day, we only know what we know ... and sometimes that's not too much. And on top of that, life is complicated and it's not always that clear what we should do. Much of the time, all we can do is jump in, feel our way along, and hope for the best.

The key, to the best of our ability, is to somehow get beyond ourselves, stay centered in God, and trust in the Spirit. The *trust* part is the big one here. But, of course, even that requires some level of awareness, personal confidence and experience.

### III.

What role do our personal *doubts* play in our faith journey? On some level, don't we all have our doubts about all kinds of things—even if they're just random thoughts that pop into our consciousness now and then? Isn't that part of what it means to be human?

When we try to take doubt out of our faith, aren't we in fact diminishing our faith? To have some element of doubt about God (in whatever way) ... the way God works ... and what it all means, opens the door in our faith journey (1) to a deeper experience of God and (2) to a deeper experience of things spiritual.

As people of faith, who are always trying to grow and evolve, a healthy agnosticism is a good thing. Agnostics don't deny the existence of God; they deny you can actually know God exists in an objective way. And really, how much can any of us ever know about God? And whatever we know, it's our subjective experience. Some of the most dangerous—and even evil—persons on the planet are those with too much certitude about God.

Our doubts, friends, don't diminish our faith; they lead us to a deepening of faith.

#### IV.

Author and poet, **Madeleine L'Engle**, who often writes on things spiritual and religious, was asked one time, *Do you believe in God without any doubts?*

Her response was, *I believe in God with all my doubts.*

I like that. Friends, God can handle our doubts. What troubles God is quite the opposite—namely, our arrogant self-assurance when we think we know things we don't know.

Like when we're too certain about God's will and God's purposes ... (like some of the pious TV evangelists who like to make easy connections between natural disasters and human sin). And when we're too certain about truth and who's right and who's wrong. And when we're too judgmental about one another, too eager to criticize and put one another down.

Jeremiah had it right: *God, what do I know, I'm only a boy?* Translation for the rest of us: God, what do any of us know, we're just one person?

Think about your relationships, and about events and happenings!

Not that some of us aren't wise and learned, but, still, we only know so much. And we never know as much as we sometimes think we know ... about any human being—even those we love most; or about any event or happening, like what took place at a meeting or in some conversation.

That's why we have the legal system we have and trials by jury to help us sort out the truth. And even then, still, sometimes we get it wrong.

If nothing else, our doubts invite us to ask more questions ... to probe more deeply and to be more humble about truth convictions.

#### V.

Interestingly enough, 1 Corinthians 13, Paul's love chapter, has some helpful insight for us in all of this. At the end of the day, with all of our personal doubts and questions ... and with all of our faith affirmations and confidence about what we believe as well, it's all about the LOVE.

In 1 Corinthians 13, the early verses talk about love: what it means ... its depths—with verse eight reminding us that *Love never ends.*

But then, almost abruptly, Paul begins to talk about human knowledge and how it pales in comparison to what God knows. And in humbling tones, he talks about the limits of our

humanity as if love, in some over-arching way, unveils this deeper awareness in our spirit.

For in spite of our prophecies and our speaking in tongues and our knowledge, still, **we only know in part**. In other words—again—we don't know that much. And to realize what we *don't* know is itself a deepening of our faith.

- To be filled with love, in this sense, is to be filled with humility. Because, again, **we know only in part ... and we prophesy in part ... but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end**.
- Going on, Paul says: **When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways**.

In other words, when I became an adult, I realized how much it was that I didn't know. Going on with Paul: **For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then, face to face. Now I know only in part; but then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known**.

In other words, in the larger picture of things, from the point of view of LOVE with a capital "L," as human beings, we only know so much. And no matter how much that is, it is always, as Paul reminds us, a *seeing in a mirror dimly*. There's so much more out there.

In this sense, our personal doubts are a pathway to a deepening of our faith because they open us to more of God, to more of the spirit, to more possibilities for truth and relationship.

## VI.

The thing about *God* ...and about *life* and *faith* and *wisdom* and *love* ... is that there's always more. As 1 Corinthians reminds us about love, **love never ends**. It's never over; again, there's always more.

More truth to learn about one another ... and perhaps mostly about ourselves. God is never done with any of us; no matter anything about us ... our age and where we are along our life's journey. Always—there's room to grow; there's room for more knowledge and insight, more understanding and enlightenment.

The key for us—again—is to open ourselves to more of God and to more of the spirit. And that means to open ourselves to a larger LOVE. Then, it's a matter of simply *giving* ourselves to love's ways and love's purposes ... which always nudge us towards a larger world.

Our personal doubts remind us that our lives, our beliefs, our faith ... are not static. They're always growing, evolving, welcoming more people in; welcoming more ideas, more new ways of seeing and understanding things.

Whatever our doubts, friends, they're not the enemy. Relax, let them settle in and go with them for a while. In time, they will take us to a bigger world and to a deeper experience of God's truth and God's love.

For always, as Paul reminds us, *Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things. Love never ends.*

**All praise be unto God! Amen!**

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