

**A Sermon Preached by Rev. Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian on April 11, 2021.**

**MOTHER TERESA: LIVING WITH DOUBT**

***Thomas said, "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my fingers in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe.***

**John 20:25**

As you may recall, during this program year we are focusing on a series presenting people we call Luminaries. Except for the Advent/Christmas season and Lent, we are exploring the lives of Christians who illuminate aspects of the Christian faith. They serve as examples of truth and lived practices that can inspire us to be more faithful in our striving to follow Jesus.

Today we focus on the life of Mother Teresa. She was born to an Albanian family, with a name I will not even begin to try to pronounce, in 1910. The city where she was born is now the capital of North Macedonia but was then part of the Ottoman Empire. She was the youngest child in her family. From a very early age she was fascinated by stories of missionaries.

At the age of eighteen she left home to move to Ireland in order to join the Sisters of Loreto. She wanted to learn English and become a missionary. She arrived in India in 1929 and began her novitiate. She learned Bengali and taught at St. Teresa's School near her convent. Teresa took her first religious vows on May 24, 1931. She chose to be named after Thérèse de Lisieux, the patron saint of missionaries.

Teresa took her final vows on May 14, 1937 while she was a teacher at the Loreto convent school in eastern Calcutta. She served there for nearly twenty years and was appointed its headmistress in 1944.

Although Teresa enjoyed teaching at the school, she was increasingly disturbed by the poverty surrounding her in Calcutta. The Bengal famine of 1943 brought misery and death to the city, and the August 1946 Direct Action Day began a period of Muslim-Hindu violence.

On September 10, 1946, Teresa experienced what she later described as "the call within the call" when she traveled by train from Calcutta to the Loreto convent in Darjeeling for her annual retreat. She tells us **"I was to leave the convent and help the poor while living among them. It was an order. To fail would have been to break the faith."**

She began missionary work with the poor in 1948, replacing her traditional Loreto habit with a simple, white cotton sari with a blue border. Teresa adopted Indian citizenship, spent several months in Patna to receive basic medical training at Holy Family Hospital and ventured into the slums. At the beginning of 1949 Teresa was joined in her effort by a group of young women, and she laid the foundation for a new religious community helping the "poorest among the poor".

In 1950 the Vatican approved the founding of a new order; the Missionaries of Charity and the rest is history. Mother Teresa became the founder, leader, fundraiser, administrator of an organization that serves the poor around the world.

We could focus today on Mother Teresa as the person who incarnates the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 25. She taught us to look for Christ in the poorest of the poor.

Yet today I want us to learn something else from her. She teaches us that doubt is part of the Christian journey. Soon after her death a collection of her letters was published that describe

how she spent many years feeling cut off from God and struggling with doubt. In one letter she wrote:

**I call, I cling, I want — and there is no One to answer — no One on Whom I can cling — no, No One. — Alone ... Where is my Faith — even deep down right in there is nothing, but emptiness & darkness — My God — how painful is this unknown pain — I have no Faith — I dare not utter the words & thoughts that crowd in my heart — & make me suffer untold agony.**

This morning we read the story of Thomas. We read that the Risen Christ came to the disciples on the evening of Easter but Thomas was not with them. When his fellow disciples tell him they have seen Jesus alive, he does not believe them. He was not willing to take their word for it. He doubted.

In our Old Testament lesson for today we find Elijah in the wilderness. Elijah had recently been successful in a contest on Mt. Carmel with the priests of Baal. He knew a great spiritual high as God had shamed the pagan priests. But now only a short time later, Elijah questions what God is doing.

We can go on and on naming characters from Scripture who doubted and questioned God. I believe that most of us have also experienced times of questioning and doubt. We have wondered whether it means we are losing faith. Why do we go through times of questioning when our understanding of the faith may well be challenged? Why do we doubt?

This happens for a number of reasons. One of the primary reasons our faith is challenged is that our ability or mode of thinking changes over time. Over the last hundred years there has been a significant amount of scientific study related to how people think as they mature. The work of Piaget, Eriksson and Kohlberg has focused on the psychological development of children and adults. As we physically develop and age our ability to think changes over time.

A simple example is that at birth objects only exist to a baby when it is in view. Thus if you are playing with a ball and it rolls under a chair a young baby will not look for it because when it is not in sight it does not exist. Then somewhere around two years the brain develops to the point that the object achieves permanence and the toddler will go after the ball.

James Fowler has built on the work of others to produce what he calls stages of faith development. He has reflected on how changes in thinking ability are reflected in faith. Often the changes in our thinking pose a challenge to the faith, as we understood it in our previous stage. Let me share a couple of examples.

Fowler's stage three of religious development is found mostly in school children in the early grades. This is a time of concrete thinking. Children of this age are being taught the stories in the Bible and they will take them all in a literal and concrete way. There will be no differentiation between an historical section of Scripture and parable. These children have a strong belief in the justice and reciprocity of the universe and God is almost always understood in anthropomorphic ways – God may be pictured as the man in the white beard.

Thus when someone reaches adolescence and their mind begins to think in abstract terms it can begin to challenge the faith of their younger years. They think logically about propositions and test hypotheses. This change in thinking can cause many to question and doubt the seemingly naive faith of their elementary school years.

I remember a young man in the first Church I served who was in ninth grade. He came home from school one day and announced to his mother he no longer believed in God. She asked him why. He replied that in his biology class he had learned how human beings were created thus he no longer needed to believe in God. In his earlier concrete mythical faith he had been taught the stories of Genesis and had received them as just so stories. He needed to wrestle with the deeper meanings and teachings of the creation stories.

Most young people going through this stage of development will question God, for most have developed an anthropomorphic understanding of God. When you begin to be able to think abstractly the image of God as a judge with a beard sitting on a throne just does not make sense.

Fowler calls this new stage the "Synthetic-conventional" faith. In this stage youth are able to think abstractly – they begin to use reason to understand and organize the world. They can begin to grasp more complex theological ideas. As in all aspects of adolescent culture, there is a tendency toward conformity.

Fowler's next stage of development takes place in young adulthood. In this stage a person moves beyond conformity to take personal responsibility for their beliefs and feelings. New understandings and concepts can threaten one's faith.

One of the great courses that I took in college was called "Jesus in Christian Thought." This course traced the church's understanding of Jesus from his birth through the Council of Chalcedon in the sixth century. In this course we read all kinds of primary texts from Greek philosophers and the early Church leaders.

The course taught us how the early church struggled over understanding who Jesus was. The first part of the semester focused on the development of the Trinity. We learned how the church mothers and fathers fought over whether the Son was fully divine or was the Son subordinate to the Father. This controversy was finally settled at Nicea in the fourth century.

The second half of the course centered on how the divine and human met in Jesus. There were all kinds of theories of how God comes to us in Jesus. Was Jesus merely human? Did Jesus only appear to have a human body? Was Jesus half human and half divine? These were questions that divided the Christian Church until the sixth century.

I could not wait to get to class each day of the semester. It made me think that Christianity is a serious faith. It was inspiring for me to read of people who gave their lives and intellect seeking to deepen their understanding of truth. It inspired and deepened my faith.

But the very same course had the opposite affect on a friend of mine. She seemed to have believed that all the core teachings of Christianity had dropped out of heaven fully formed in the first century. The fact that human beings had to wrestle to understand God's revelation in Christ seemed to undermine her faith for a long time. She found it difficult to claim the faith as her own.

Doubt helps to play a function in moving us towards deeper levels of faith. As Fred Buchner tells us "**Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.**"

How do we survive these different times of testing? How do we work through the wilderness times of doubt, questioning and confusion?

I believe that there are three ways that help us get through these challenges.

First, we accept doubt is part of our faith journey. Barbara Brown Taylor is a prominent preacher who also lived with times of profound doubt. She tells us:

**For many years I thought my questions and my doubt, and my sense of God's absence were all signs of my lack of faith, but now I know this is the way the life of the spirit goes.**

Remember doubt is normal.

The second is by holding fast to core practices of the faith. All through the years of her spiritual dryness, Mother Teresa continued to worship, pray and live in the community and serve the poor.

Even when you are full of doubt,  
even when worship seems dry  
even when your prayers seem to be trapped by your ceiling  
keep participating.

Worship and prayer can help form us even when we feel we are getting nothing out of it. In fact, as our thinking changes, we begin to hear the words of worship in new ways. This can help nurture our growth.

Continue the core practice of church fellowship and caring for others. Acting out the love God has for us and being part of a supportive community gives us courage to hang in there even when the faith makes no sense to us at a certain point in time.

Thirdly and most importantly – when you begin to doubt, and your thinking becomes confused and you do not know what to believe – focus on Jesus. Read the Gospels and focus on the life and teachings of Jesus. Be overwhelmed by his love for us. Let his promises of hope and life inspires you. In your prayers talk to Jesus and ask him to guide you and lead you to new understandings. When we read of his death on the cross how can we refuse such a love.

Thomas refused to believe that Jesus was alive merely based on the reports of his fellow disciples. He may have believed it was just misidentification or wish fulfillment. But he did not abandon his brothers. So he continued to eat and pray with them. So later the Risen Christ came to him and he believed.

The followers of Jesus experienced doubt. So even when we do not understand it all, even when we have grave doubts, even when we cannot accept every teaching of the church – we can continue to pray, take part in the fellowship of the church and serve and love Jesus and our neighbors.

In a letter to a soul friend Teresa wrote **“Jesus has a very special love for you. [But] as for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great, that I look and do not see – listen and do not hear – the tongue moves [in prayer] but does not speak. ... I want you to pray for me – that I let Him have [a] free hand.”**

Even when she could not sense his presence, Mother Teresa trusted Jesus to work through her. So, may we in our times of doubt, trust in Jesus to work through us.