

## SERMON: "Walking the Line Between Certainty and Mystery"

By Mary Whitcomb

There is nothing particularly profound about the statement that life is full of uncertainties. We have many questions.

Of all the questions we ask, perhaps the hardest question is why? Questions of how, when, where, what, etc, are generally questions of problem solving and are addressed through education, observation or experimentation. Our society holds such reverence for the scientific mind, that we need to seek rational responses and explanations and look for quantitative results. It's a matter of facts. If we have the facts, everything will make sense.

But the question of why is a different matter. It is one we have much more trouble with it. I believe it is largely a question of meaning, not of facts.

It is those questions that mark the fine line between certainty and mystery. What can we be certain of? We know that when we put water into ice cube trays and put them in a working freezer compartment that we will have ice cubes. Likewise, other very simply explained activities of our daily lives are ones we can depend on with certainty.

But there are so many areas of our lives that are affected with these questions of meaning. What is the meaning of suffering, pain, personal difficulties, random acts of violence, difficult issues of life transitions, global, societal and environmental disasters? Even stating the questions is an overwhelming activity.

The hardest questions of meaning arise from events that affect those we love. One of the most difficult for us is how to respond to the terminally ill. We want to be hopeful and offer that hope to the person who is facing a long illness and death.

We know miracles happen. We've seen them happen. We've read about it. We've heard stories. It's part of our faith. We wish it for those we love. But we are conflicted.

Are we being unrealistic? Are we in denial? We are afraid and it is so difficult to face that loss. We don't want to appear to have given up. Has everything been tried, been considered? We just don't know how to respond.

There is little certainty. It's a mystery. We don't know the grand plan for any one's life – even our own. We struggle to find clarity.

A question that has always haunted us and probably always will, is why bad things happen to good people? Lives that end prematurely in our minds. People who were vibrant and valuable assets to their community. and whose families depended on them for presence, love, direction, stability, play, and maybe even a good joke. It's such a loss. We just don't understand. We can find no reasons.

Questions of meaning, questions of decisioning. As young people, how do you determine your values, your goals? Which college to attend, what career to focus on? What's right for you? How do you know which indicators to trust? How will you choose your life's partner? Will you have a job? Will you be happy with your choices? How to know, how to be certain? It seems a mystery.

Certainly the pandemic years just put a cap on never-ending march of global events, social and environmental tragedies that leave us speechless. Famines, floods, violence, and on and on. Even if many of these crises don't impact our daily lives, they do disturb us. We are left feeling fearful and helpless. It's so uncertain. Why does it have to be ? It just keeps us saying - what in the world is happening?

The questions follow us into adult life. It's clear that the choices don't become any easier, either in personal relationships, life experiences, career, mid-life and later-life transitions. There are no guarantees, no warranties.

At times in many of our lives, we've had the occasion to ask some intense why's re: difficult experiences The interesting thing is that as time passes, we no longer needed answers to all of those questions. There seem to be new questions much more important. It's was like a new quest that invited the mysteries and promises of looking forward rather than the uncertainties of the past.

Let's not forget, however, that there is that mystery that enriches our lives. The mystery that is manifested in loving relationships, art, natural beauty, and music. I still remember a comment Dick McConnell included in a sermon. He referred to music as the language of heaven. That touched me. Then there is the sparkle in the eye of a child who sees a butterfly for the first time, or the sparkle in the eye of a parent who sees their child for the first time. Or a nest of baby birds, vulnerable, yet strong and able to fly in less than 2 weeks. It's a type of magic

that we don't seem to need answers to or explanations for. We gather it into our lives with joy.

The search for meaning in the face of these mysteries is a most amazing thing! It brings us to the fine line between mystery and certainty. The question of walking this line is a question of how much certainty do we require and how much mystery can we accept?

We have a choice. If we step off that line toward the need for certainty, we may continue to feel frustrated, helpless, even angry, for certainty doesn't come. It's only human – we all feel it. The answers can't be found and we often withdraw with our pain or with our fear.

The other choice – we can embrace the mystery. It's more than a choice; it's a journey. It is when we believe things happen for a reason that meaning eventually comes. It becomes a way of life.

Ann Linnea wrote a book called Deep Water Passage. It is a powerful story of her wilderness journey in a kayak on Lake Superior. It is also a story of a spiritual journey at mid-life. The introduction line to the first chapter reads, "When we deliberately leave the safety of the shore of our lives, we surrender to a mystery beyond our intent."

The shore she speaks of is like that line we walk.

Young's analytical concordance defines mystery as something unknown except by divine revelation. We can throw all the facts at it we wish, but the mystery itself doesn't get clearer by that or by repeating the question, only by embracing the mystery for as long as it takes to reach the ah-ha. The ah-ha is that one trigger, one thing that leaves you saying, "Oh, is that what it is all about!" or "Oh-so that's the lesson for me!"

We then replace the why with "What do I have to learn from this?" It's like letting the mystery have its place in you, a little corner open to new understanding, a place in you heart for God to use, like planting a new seed.

Embracing the uncertainties requires one very important thing – faith. The substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen. Faith holds the promise of meaning. I love the stories in today's scripture. It's a story or metaphor we miss if we take them too literally. The parable of the feeding of the 5 thousand holds meaning far more profound than just a story about feeding a crowd.

It was a lesson about the value of unconditional giving and sharing, about the power of one to make a difference, about hospitality as a form of worship. There was also a lesson for the disciples when they were mystified by Jesus' response to bring the 5 loaves and 2 fish. "How can we feed that many?" It was a mystery. It took them a while to get the ah--ha. The point is - as long as you have a few loaves and fish and know what to do with them; all you have is all you need.

But I equally like the story that follows. The disciples think they see a ghost walking on the sea, but Jesus identifies himself. Peter says, "if it's you, tell me to come to you across the water." Jesus simply says - come! So Peter starts across the water. But he is frightened by the wind. You know the rest of the story. There is so much here, but the meaning of it for today's sermon, I believe, is that Peter needed certainty and it made him sink. He was afraid. He couldn't embrace the mystery that faith required.

I share another portion from Deep Water Passage about a different encounter on the water. Ann has been on the lake 4 days and meets up with her friend Annie.

"Sometimes we keep doing things over until we learn them," she said, stroking the grooves of the glacial scratches with her fingers.

"What do you mean?" I asked

"Well, wilderness trips and hard physical challenge have always been important to you. Something tells me this trip is going to enable you to break through that old model of always pushing through the pain. You are going to find other ways to grasp deeper knowing." She lifted her clear blue eyes to meet my gaze. They were kind, inviting.

Our eyes held steady for a while, then I looked out over the lake. I could not see across it; at this point it had widened into an unknown sea. In that moment I surrendered further to Mystery, forgot the fear and discomfort of the last few days, knew my commitment to transformation was as ancient a calling as the grooves on the rock before me.

If the only action we can consider is that which we are very certain of, we would never risk anything. The trouble is that if we can't risk anything, we risk even more. Living with the mysteries, the question, isn't easy. It's scary. But the faith that is evident in the teachings and life of Jesus is all we need. Without Jesus, God would be a bigger mystery.

Many wise and faithful people have reminded us we will know what we need to know when we need to know it. That's the promise of faith.

As Rev. 10:7 says, “the time of waiting is over – at the time when the 7<sup>th</sup> angel is heard sounding the trumpet, the mystery of God will be fulfilled.”

How much certainty do you require?

How much mystery can you accept?