



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

2 Poland Manor
Poland, Ohio 44514
330-757-1547

April 3, 2016

A Sermon by Brent J. Eelman

Confronting Your Doubts

John 1: 43-51

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.' ⁴⁴*Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter.* ⁴⁵*Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.'* ⁴⁶*Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.'* ⁴⁷*When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!'* ⁴⁸*Nathanael asked him, 'Where did you come to know me?' Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.'* ⁴⁹*Nathanael replied, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!'* ⁵⁰*Jesus answered, 'Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.'* ⁵¹*And he said to him, 'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'*

I remember sitting in Sunday School, during my Junior High years, and making some smart aleck remark, expressing my doubts about the lesson that we were studying. "Don't be a doubting Thomas!" the teacher admonished me. Lesson learned: Doubt is bad. Don't bring it up in Sunday School again. But is doubt really a bad thing?

Seven years ago, when the price of gasoline was running over four dollars a gallon, a number of "gas saving devises" appeared on the market. They ranged from magnets that were installed on the line that ran between your gas tank and engine, to fuel additives that you could add to your gasoline that would increase miles per gallon. The pitch was often same. "This is the product that the oil companies don't want you to know about." There were often testimonies from people witnessing to astounding results, increasing their mileage by 10, 15, even 25%. They sounded too good to be true. There is a maxim that says: "if it sounds too good to be true... it probably is." This is the very nature of doubt. Most of us would agree from this perspective that doubt is a very healthy and useful thing. Our doubts and skepticism protect us from fakirs and those who would deceive us. It is from this perspective that we might see the initial response of Nathanael to Jesus. Nathanael's doubt was an honest response to Philip's claim.

Philip, following his encounter with Jesus, found Nathanael and told him, "We have found him! We have found the one who is to fulfill the Law of Moses and the proclamation of the prophets!" In other words, "We have found the Messiah!" I love Nathanael's response... "Really? From Nazareth? Not Jerusalem? What has ever come from Nazareth?"

How would you respond if someone told you they met the Messiah? Probably with a great deal of doubt. There is a bit of Nathanael in each one of us. We have our doubts... and when we are honest with ourselves, we have our doubts regarding some of the claims of faith. Today, I want to examine the reality of doubt for the modern disciple. **First**, the challenge of doubt. **Second**, the challenge of faith. And **finally** the blessing of doubt.

I

We are all **challenged by our doubts**. One of the results of this explosion of knowledge is that it has led to an intense questioning of long held beliefs. The by-product of our post-modern age is doubt and skepticism about things that were always accepted. Perhaps nowhere is this doubt more powerfully experienced than in the realm of our faith.

Brilliant and articulate scientists, like Richard Dawkins have thrown the gauntlet down, challenging not only the articles of faith and belief, but the very existence of God. Following the events of 9-11 and the growing religious conflicts throughout the world, they have even declared that religions pose a threat to the future of humankind.

But most of us are not scientists. The doubt which really gnaws at most of us does not arise from study or the academy. It usually comes from our own experience. For some it might be unexplained suffering or the misfortune experienced by a loved one. It might be the disappointment that occurred from misplaced faith or hope. It might be a tragic event, or the pain of an unanswered prayer. Each of us is familiar with his or her doubts, and many of our doubts have to do with the faith we declare; the faith we want to believe. This is the challenge of doubt and we each and all live with it to some degree. Ironically, at the root of much of our doubt is not faithlessness... it is integrity. Integrity is the struggle to be genuine, to be honest about the truth, the world around us, and ultimately ourselves.

Christian doubters are not alone: The great American preacher, Harry Emerson Fosdick preached a sermon entitled, "Doubting your Doubts." In that well known homily he told the stories of the great Christians, people of towering faith, who struggled with doubt. Why? Because they wanted to practice Christian faith with integrity.

A while ago, a book of letters from Mother Teresa was published. Those letters revealed the inner turmoil and doubt that haunted this modern day saint.... What amazed me was the integrity of her doubts and how they led not to cynicism and nihilism, but to acts of compassion, healing and hope... Ultimately acts of faith. Her doubts intensified her search for Christ, and she followed the admonition of Matthew to find the face of Christ in the "least of these",Each of us lives with the challenge of doubt, even the saints.

II

But there is also **the challenge of faith**. Faith challenges us to acknowledge and confront our doubts, to examine our doubts, to study our doubts and to wrestle with our doubts.

Consider, again, the story of Nathanael. He expressed his doubts to Philip, "What good can come from Nazareth?" How did Philip respond? He didn't argue. He didn't take the bait. He didn't start with a list of great people from Nazareth. He didn't try and prove him wrong. No! He responded: "Come and see for yourself."

This is the **challenge of faith**: "Come and see." The faith of Philip was not afraid of doubt... it did not try and suppress it, argue with it, or fight it. Rather it invited it. "Come and see." Mature faith, by its very nature invites doubt, it does not fear it. "Come and see."

The temptation for most of us who have our doubts, is to just sit there and be content with them. The temptation is to give in to our doubts and not struggle with them. That, ultimately, is the pathway to cynicism and despair. Philip invited Nathanael to confront his doubts... and that confrontation with doubt lead him to faith in Jesus.

III

Doubt is a blessing. Jesus' response to Nathanael was ultimately a blessing. He saw Nathanael coming toward him and he declared, "*Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!*" The first thing that Jesus did was to affirm the integrity of Nathanael. He did not say, "Here is truly a person of very little faith." He did not say, "If you have doubts, you cannot be my disciple." No. He saw in Nathanael's struggles and doubts a quest for truth and integrity. What does that tell us about God, Christ, faith and our doubts?

1. It tells us that God can handle our doubts. God created us with reason and the ability to think and question. Reason and doubt are among the tools that lead to truth, and ultimately all that is true points to God.
2. It declares that God affirms the struggle that arises from our doubts. Nathanael's doubt placed him on road that led to Christ. I believe that the honest struggle with doubt and questions of faith need not lead us away from the object of our faith, but rather may draw us closer.
3. God knows us intimately... God knows the doubt within us and accepts us. Jesus knew Nathanael, before Nathanael met Jesus. It is an interesting conversation.... "how do you know me?" Jesus knew and understood him.. and most of all, welcomed him. And here is the good news.. God knows us... understands us.. and welcomes us...
4. Jesus made a promise to Nathanael. *You will see greater things than these.* Nathanael's faith journey began with doubt.... That was what set him down the road of discipleship... and this journey, Jesus promised, would literally open the heavens to him. "You will see greater things!"

We, too, have our struggles with truth and doubt.... The challenge of faith is to confront those doubts... it is an invitation to "come and see." And for those with the moral courage to confront and struggle with their doubts, they will find an accepting and affirming God, and the truth will be revealed. Indeed, they will see greater things! This is the good news. Amen.