

“Room for Doubt”

Matthew 11:1-19

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • July 21, 2013

There is a movement in western civilization that has been called the “New Atheism.” I’m sure most of you are familiar with the term “atheist.” It refers to someone who believes God doesn’t exist. But the so-called “New Atheists” are a little different. These New Atheists have two beliefs: there is no God and I hate him. The New Atheist believes that science has tested the hypothesis and proven that God does not and cannot exist. So in their mind, faith is irrational.

But they don’t stop there. One of the characteristics of this new movement that sets it apart from people who simply don’t believe is that they are outright hostile to any kind of religion. Christopher Hitchens, one of the key leaders in the new atheism movement before his death a couple of years ago, wrote a book titled, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. I think the title pretty well sums up his views.

One of the fundamental beliefs of the New Atheism is that faith in a supernatural God is the most dangerous force on earth today and that it must be stopped, so they are out to end any form of religion. It’s sort of a reverse evangelism.

While the number of these radical new atheists is still fairly small, they have had an impact on lots of people. Their arguments are not necessarily valid but they have planted seeds of doubt in the minds of many people. And I think that might be a good thing. John Ortberg, an author and Presbyterian pastor in California, says, “When people of faith are not willing to sit quietly sometimes and let doubt make its case, bad things can happen.” We need to be honest about our doubts.

The truth is that every one of us, at one time or another, has doubts about our faith. It’s an important part of making the faith our

own. It is God’s nature that he doesn’t hit us in the face with his existence. It’s much more subtle. There’s room for doubt. Bad things happen in our world. Dostoyevsky once wrote, “the death of a single infant calls into question the existence of God.” There are things that happen that cause us to wonder if God is really there.

We find the same thing in our passage this morning. Jesus has just sent his disciples off on their first mission trip and now he’s about to go out teaching and preaching when John the Baptist sends a couple of his disciples to see Jesus. John has been put in prison by King Herod for speaking out about the king’s lifestyle choices. John wants to know, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” In other words, are you really the Messiah, the Christ?

This seems like an odd question coming from John. Remember that John was the first one to identify Jesus as the Messiah. While John was baptizing people in the Jordan River he would tell them about the one who was coming after him that would baptize them with the Holy Spirit. Then one day Jesus came by and John says, “This is the guy I was telling you about. This is the Messiah.”

John, like most of the Jewish people in Israel, had expected the Messiah to come in by force and overthrow the Roman government. In his ministry, John had warned the people to repent because when the Messiah arrived he would bring judgment. But Jesus seemed to bring only grace. Now John is sitting in prison and beginning to have doubts. I’m sure he was thinking, “if Jesus is the Messiah, why isn’t he getting me out of here?”

That’s probably one of the major factors in our own doubts. When you and I face difficult situations we want God to fix it. We pray. Sometimes we pray a lot. And yet

sometimes it seems like there's no answer to our prayer. We begin to wonder. We begin to doubt. Just like John.

Jesus answers by telling John's disciples to go back and tell John what they hear and see: "the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them." Jesus is referring to the prophecies about him in the book of Isaiah. We read some of those a few minutes ago. Those passages, written hundreds of years before Jesus was born, describe what the Messiah will do when he comes. Jesus is telling John, "Go read your Bible. This is what you should be expecting!"

As John's disciples leave, Jesus begins to talk to the crowd about John the Baptist. John was the first prophet of God in 400 years and he created quite a stir. So Jesus asks the crowd, "What did you go out into the wilderness to see?" He is trying to get them to think about who John really is. He asks them three times, "what did you go out to see? A reed shaken by the wind?" In other words, you must have had a reason for going out into the desert. Was it to watch the leaves blowing? Probably not. Was it to see someone dressed in fancy clothes? John didn't fit that. He wore camel's hair and ate bugs.

Jesus then asks, "What did you go out to see? A prophet?" The answer this time is yes, in fact Jesus says he's "more than a prophet." He goes on to point out that John is the one spoken of in Malachi 3:1. Malachi was the last prophecy for 400 years until John. In some way all of the Old Testament prophets point to Christ. But John is "more than a prophet" because he not only points to the Christ, he prepares the way. Jesus points the people to the last prophetic words of the Old Testament: "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes." John fulfills this prophecy by filling the role of Elijah, calling the people

back to the old covenant in order to prepare them for the new one.

Then Jesus says something surprising. He says that John is the greatest person who has ever lived. But then he says that "the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater" than John. Does that mean John is not included in the kingdom? That wouldn't seem fair. Well that's not what it means. We tend to think of great in terms of being the best. Muhammad Ali used to say he was the greatest, meaning he was the best boxer. That's not what Jesus means. Here greater means something like "more blessed." We live on this side of the resurrection. We get to see how the story of Jesus turns out. We get to live with the assurance of salvation because of the cross and the empty tomb. John didn't have that.

So John had doubts. If we're honest with ourselves, we have doubts. So I think the most important thing for us to see today is not the doubt, it's what John did with his doubt. He brought it to Jesus. He had a choice. He could have done like the Pharisees and simply decided that Jesus was *not* the Messiah. He could have let his doubt turn into skepticism and then into unbelief. Lots of people, like the new atheists, do that every day. Instead, John came to Jesus with his question and Jesus responded.

So what we find is that doubt is not the opposite of faith. Actually, doubt is essential to faith. Doubt is what drives us to search for the truth while faith is what provides us hope. When you and I have doubts we have to make a choice. Each of us must choose how we will live our lives. In real life it's impossible to be an agnostic. We bet our lives that God exists or that He doesn't. There is no other option. As Ortberg says, "My life is the ballot I cast – for God or against him."

So make room for doubt. Don't fall for the trap that having some doubts is a lack of faith. Sit quietly and let doubt make its case. Spend time using your brain to study the

Scriptures for answers. Bring your doubts directly to Jesus in prayer. Let him answer them as he did with John the Baptist. Let your doubts lead you to a stronger faith. In the meantime you have to choose how to live your life. I suggest that you choose to love the

Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself.

Amen