

I Am an Agnostic Christian

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I came across a blog post a few months ago which gave me occasion to reflect. The author said that if we take the notion of faith seriously as “trust in relationship,” then there will always be an element of doubt in our faith. He says, “Faith is never a certainty. Rather, it is a deep trust that something is true.”

The author calls this “being an agnostic Christian.” We all have questions, he says. We all wonder about some of the things we claim to believe. We all harbour doubts at times about the way we view reality. That’s true for all of us, whether we are Christian or not.

The problem is that many Christians have grown up with the notion that we are not allowed to ask questions or have doubts. “Just believe,” their pastors say, “whether it makes sense to you or not. It tests the strength of your faith.”

I’m not that kind of Christian. Indeed, I believe that by asking questions, we delve more deeply into God’s presence in our lives. For me, asking questions is a holy practice; it leads us more closely to truth.

Honestly, there are lots of things in life about which we ought to be asking questions:

Why is there so much suffering and pain in the world?

What can we really know about what we are called to do in the world, and about why we are here?

Can we really know what God expects of us?

Does God really interact with the world? If so, how does it happen?

Why do bad people seem to come out on top so often? And why do good people seem to end up suffering?

What is wrong with our world when there is so much prejudice and hatred and angry rhetoric?

What really happens after we die?

The list goes on and on.

I agree that these kinds of questions are a necessary part of what it means to be human. We can’t help but wonder sometimes about how all that goes on in the world squares with our faith. If you don’t sometimes have doubts, then you are either in denial and pushing them down so deeply that you have lost touch with them, or you have rationalized the conflict in some way for yourself.

It reminds me of that wonderful story about the person we call “doubting Thomas.” The story is found in the Gospel of John. After Jesus was crucified, he comes back to visit the disciples. But Thomas isn’t there. When he returns, his friends can’t wait to tell him what happened.

Now if you were Thomas and had watched Jesus die that agonizing death, could you believe that he somehow had come back to life? I would have a tough time swallowing that story. I would think it much more likely that my other friends had lost their marbles. Jesus was dead! End of story. There’s no way he could come back to life.

Which is exactly what Thomas says to the other disciples. “Unless I see him with my own eyes, unless I touch him with my own hands, unless I can hear and smell him, I can’t believe it. It’s not possible!”

A week later, says the story, Jesus comes back. He approaches Thomas and says, “Go ahead, Thomas. Touch me. Don’t remain in doubt.” Notice that Jesus is not angry at Thomas. I like to

imagine Jesus' face wreathed in a small smile, his voice gentle and loving as he reaches out to Thomas who needs this reassurance.

To be clear, I don't think this story is the report of an actual historical incident. I treat it as a parable, a story which tells a deeper truth, namely that "Blessed are all those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." It's a story about learning to rest in trust.

This is the point the blog was making. The way we see the world has to do with what or whom we trust. In the Bible, "to believe" means to trust.

For me personally, I trust a God who renews life in the midst of death, who provides hope in the midst of distress, who invites us to be light in the shadow places of the world so that we shine with the reflected light of God's compassion.

That kind of trust gives my life meaning and purpose. Being Christian doesn't mean I believe a certain set of doctrines. It's about finding life in a relationship with God. Like any other relationship, it ebbs and flows.

So even as I believe that God is the God of life, sometimes amid all the death in this world, I wonder. I sometimes doubt, wondering if we will ever see the light of life in all the darkness. Even as I believe that God calls us to reach out to other people in grace and compassion, I wonder sometimes if it really makes a difference.

I cherish those doubts because they keep my faith alive and active. Frederick Buechner once wrote, "Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith; they keep it awake and moving."

So I cherish my doubts, for doubt is the welcome attendant of truth. If we may not question a belief, it will bind us to error, for every belief is incomplete and imperfect. Do not fear to doubt and seek for a deeper truth; doubt will never consume the truth.

I suspect that those who want to silence doubt are, in fact, filled with fear. They build their truths on shaky ground. But those who do not fear doubt or questioning have built their lives on more sturdy rock.

So do not fear doubt. Rather, rejoice in the help our doubts give us. They help us keep questioning, learning, discovering, and growing.

Cherish your doubts, for doubt is the attendant of truth.