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## QUESTIONING FAITH by Marci Morey

There are two things you might know about me – 1. I've been in church all my life (except for a bit of a sabbatical a few years ago) and 2. I have this thing about questions – I like them. A lot.

Some people in my life have seen those two facts as mutually exclusive – One is supposed to accept what one is taught about God and church and the Bible, and not be that difficult person in the back row furiously writing down your questions... or the one in the front row, with a perplexed expression on your face, waving your hand.

Obviously, I don't agree with those detractors. If I did, I wouldn't be standing here before you today encouraging you to ask your own questions and keep asking until you get answers. I wouldn't be here recommending that you question your faith.

Jesus talked about having the faith of a child. Most often I've heard this comment explained to mean that children have a simple faith, and believe what they're told, that children are accepting of their circumstances and trust without question.

I wonder if the people that say that ever had teenagers. Or a three year old. I wonder if instead Jesus might have been referring to the brutal honesty of children and that prolonged "Why?" stage.

There have been times when my questions have taken me to a very dark place, or maybe it was my dark place that led to my questions. Either way it was a place where I wondered if everything I had been taught and believed was really true, or if it was all an elaborate façade. How could I say that a loving God exists when the world, and my own life, was such a mess? How could I say I believe what's written in the Bible when parts of it seemed so contradictory or confusing? How could I continue to be involved in church when the people there were such hypocrites? In those periods of intense questioning, I came very, very close to losing my faith.

If you can relate to any of this or have struggled with your own questions, I want to hear an "Amen". Did you hear that? You are not alone.

Now before anyone has a panic attack because I'm asking you to question your faith, the first thing I want to establish is **what I mean by faith**. Very simply, I mean "what is it that each of us, as an individual, believes about God – who is He... or She, how does He relate to us as individuals and to the world in general, and what does it matter what we believe?"

Don't worry; I'm not going to try to answer any of those questions today. What I hope to

do is to encourage you to engage those questions for yourself so that you can better understand **your own faith**.

The second thing I'd like to say is what **faith is NOT**, at least the kind of faith that I'm talking about today. Your faith is not the same as your theology. One definition of theology is: *The systematic study of the existence and nature of the divine and its relationship to and influence upon other beings*. There is a legitimate place for this kind of academic study, but that's not what I'm discussing today.

Your **theology** can be perfect—you can know all the 'right' things—and still, your faith can be hollow. You might be able to explain all the points of Calvinism, expound on different views of Atonement, debate Eschatology, Soteriology, Christology and any additional 'ologies you want to add, and be able to flip to a Scripture to defend every point. And still, you might have no idea who God really is or if any of these points of view matter or is it all just academics?

The second thing that faith is not is Faith is not **certainty**. I have heard many times that having faith is the same as not having doubt. Think about when you walked into church this morning, chose your seat and sat down. How many of you consciously thought about whether or not the pew would collapse underneath you or if you could sit down safely? I know when I sit in our pews, I don't give my safety a second thought.

I don't *believe* that the pew will hold me, I am *confident*, I am *certain*, the pew is not going to collapse. There is not a doubt in my mind. Now, I'm a big person, there are some chairs that I'm not so certain will hold my weight. Those chairs I sit down carefully and I consciously don't move around much. I think about how I shift my weight to get more comfortable. I have *faith* the chair will hold me or I wouldn't risk sitting, but I'm not 100% certain.

If we are absolutely certain about something, if we 'know that we know that we know' and there is no possible question that we might be wrong, then there is no real faith involved.

The third thing that faith is not is that Faith in God is not the same as **faith in church**. This might be obvious, but we need to be careful not to confuse God with Church. Ideally, God is evident here and we can see how He is working in the lives of our friends and neighbors. Ideally, the form of Organized Religion practiced here at Salem United Methodist Church helps us better understand who God is and enables us to then reach out to the world around us. But the Church is made up of people and, as you may have noticed, people can be pretty messed up. People will break your trust. They will disappoint you, make you angry, hurt you, fight with you, gossip about you. People are going to turn their backs on you when you need them, and sometimes act holier-than-thou while they do it. And guess what? Sometimes you are going to do the same things

to them. I hate to admit it, but sometimes I'm going to do some of these things to some of you.

Why does the Church act like that? Why do we hurt and disappoint each other? I know it might be hard for some of you to accept, but you aren't perfect. None of us are. Don't let your faith, or lack of faith, in people and in the Organized Religion that we call Church, get confused with your faith in God. Love the people around you, give them the grace to be imperfect humans, but don't confuse their acts and words as coming from God. Now HOW we do that is a whole 'nother discussion for another day. Loving and accepting people is definitely hard work.

I've told you what I understand faith to be – what we each believe about God, how He relates to us and why that matters. And I've told you a few things that faith is not – it's not our theology, it's not absolute certainty and it's not our faith in people and the Church – and maybe what I said so far made some of you a little uncomfortable. Yes! I've succeeded!

As you go home today, and over the next week, take some time to think about your faith. Maybe you've been in some of those dark places I mentioned earlier. Perhaps you're there now and you have some serious questions for God. Maybe you've resolved those questions, at least for now, and you're wondering what your faith in God means in relation to how you relate to your neighbors, or even how your faith can be expressed in your politics. Don't worry, I'm not going there.

The first step is to start right where you are. Drop any notion of “this is what I SHOULD believe” and instead honestly ask yourself “what is it that I DO believe?” We all have a different starting place. Some of you might even be wondering if God even exists. How can we see all the pain and suffering in our lives and in the world and still believe that a loving God is in control?

I once read about a discussion between Rabbi Irwin Kula and an atheist. Kula asked the Atheist “tell me about this God you don't believe in”. The Atheist spoke of a harsh, remote god who hated groups of people, and who told people to go to war, thereby endorsing murder and genocide. Kula's response was brilliant. He said “We have much more in common that you think. I don't believe in that god either.” Once they were able to agree on who God was NOT, they were able to begin to discuss who God MIGHT BE.

Maybe your starting place is that your faith in God isn't really your own faith. Some of you young people here today, or maybe those of you not so young, might be here because your parent, or your spouse, or someone wants you here, perhaps even forced you to attend today. Maybe you don't identify yourself as a Christian, or at least not a church attending one. If you see yourself in what I'm saying, then please take the time to

consider what you believe. Don't simply go with the flow, but take the time to honestly consider who God is and to develop faith that is your own.

And maybe your faith in God is secure. You've had your struggles, your doubts, and come out the other end knowing that God is there and He is taking care of you. I invite you to ask questions as well – How can I deepen that faith? What difference is it making in my life and how I relate to those around me? Am I listening to those around me and helping them figure out their own faith?

None of us ask our questions in a void. We have places to go for answers, or at least places to go to grapple with the questions because sometimes the answers are a long time in coming.

We read about our first resource earlier – the Spirit of truth. Last week Clarissa spoke about God giving us His Holy Spirit at Pentecost and that He is still here today. He may speak to us through Scripture and prayer, or he may speak to us through circumstances or individuals in our lives. Our responsibility is to be listening.

Another resource is the Bible. I will admit that sometimes I read the Bible because I know I am supposed to read the Bible. And sometimes I go searching for a verse that will prove my point because I want to win an argument (even if it's just one with myself). Other times I read out of habit, although it is a habit that ebbs and flows, like most of my good habits (why is it so difficult to stay faithful to a good habit and so easy to hang on to the bad ones?).

Even if my approach is wrong, God can still speak to me.

December 4, 2003. I know the date because I wrote it in my Bible. My ex-husband was in prison due to his abuse to the family. I had three children still at home and struggled to pay the bills with an income barely above the poverty level. I would come home after work, change directly into my pajamas, and struggle through the evening on autopilot until the kids were in bed. Then, sometimes, I would open my Bible. I knew I was supposed to find comfort there, but some nights it was just words. One night I read Psalm 93 and God gave me something to hold onto:

*The Lord reigns, he is clothed with majesty:  
The Lord has clothed and girded Himself with strength:  
Indeed the world is firmly established, it will not be moved.  
Your throne is established from of old  
You are from everlasting.*

God is. He reigns. He is strength. He will not be moved.

*The floods have lifted up, O Lord  
The floods have lifted up their voice,  
The floods lift up their pounding waves.*

Life is overwhelming. I'm going under for the third time and I don't know if I'm going to make it. I'm being pummeled on all sides and I can't take it much longer.

*More than the sounds of many waters,  
Than the mighty breakers of the sea,  
The Lord on high is mighty.  
Your testimonies are fully confirmed;  
Holiness befits Your house,  
O Lord, forevermore*

God is bigger. He is bigger than my pain, bigger than my problems, bigger than my fears. God is there and He is and always was.

That was the message the Holy Spirit spoke to my heart that night and that I wrote in my Bible with the date so I wouldn't forget:

God is.

Life is overwhelming.

God is bigger.

Understanding and believing that message gave me an anchor for my faith and a reminder to turn to when the questions popped up again.

I have one last thought to share with you today – it is something I learned from Grace Imathiu at Faith Alive a few months ago. She said:

“Doubt is the ants in our pants that keeps us awake and alert spiritually”

I invite you to embrace that doubt and ask those questions. Think about what your faith in God really means. Let your questions and your doubt bring you to a deeper understanding of what you believe. And then, encourage each other by sharing your faith. Let it change your life so that you can reach out and share that faith with those around you.

Amen