

“On Questions, Doubt, & Trust...”
Lent 2015: I'm Not Okay
Sermon on John 3:1-21 (2/21 & 2/22/15)
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One of my favorite things about being a pastor is teaching Confirmation. And, while many people do not understand this about me, middle school and early high school is my favorite age to teach. Sure, middle schoolers and early high schoolers can be pretty squirrely. Their attention spans occasionally leave something to be desired. But I love them so much because they are often just waking up to faith.

Their brains have developed to the point that they begin to be curious about all sorts of ideas. They notice inconsistencies and they want to ask about them. The world is no longer as black-and-white as it used to be and they need teachers and mentors who are willing to explore the grey with them.

Over the years I have heard so many stories of people my age – give or take 10-15 years – who quit church and who quit Christianity because, when they started to have questions about faith as a teenager, no one was willing to walk with them *out* of the black-and-white and *into* the grey.

Years ago when I was serving as a pastor elsewhere in the Dakotas, a Confirmation family made an appointment to speak with me. Throughout the Confirmation process, I always tell students that, while their parents can make them *go* to Confirmation class, they *cannot* make them get confirmed.

The choice to be confirmed is a choice that has to be made by the student and no one else.

Confirmation is a public proclamation of faith in Jesus Christ and in one's commitment to live out their faith through the church. To decide to be confirmed is a decision to be made by the student and never by their parents.

When this particular family made an appointment to see me years ago it was because their daughter had decided she wasn't ready to be confirmed. She was experiencing some critical doubt and had some serious questions about Christian faith. She could not, with integrity, stand with her class, in front of the congregation, and claim faith in Christ. So she didn't.

I'm sure it was very painful for her parents to let her make that decision, and it was a bit sad for me as a pastor...but I hope both the student and her parents discovered welcome and grace in the midst of that pain and in the midst of her questions and doubt. We did not turn her away. We did not turn our backs on her because she was struggling to believe.

We continued to welcome her. And I hope that mattered.¹

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In today's Scripture reading from John chapter three, Nicodemus went to Jesus at night with questions, with doubt...and Jesus engaged him. Jesus didn't turn his back on Nicodemus and he didn't walk away from him in the midst of their conversation.

That's why, when I was thinking about today's topic within our Lenten sermon series, I couldn't help but think about this story – the story of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus.

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If you were here for worship on Ash Wednesday a few evenings ago, you are aware of the sermon and worship series we're experiencing during Lent here at McCabe.

The series is called "I'm Not Okay" and the title and concept is something we got from Embrace Church, which is one of our sister United Methodist congregations in Sioux Falls...and it seems quite appropriate for Lent.

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The season of Lent is a 40-day journey toward the cross of Good Friday and the empty tomb of Easter. Lent is a time when we intentionally seek forgiveness for the sin that nailed Jesus to the cross. It's also a time when we prayerfully seek God's guidance and presence in the midst of our own brokenness.

We humans are fragile. Life on earth is messy and complex, filled with joy and sorrow, excitement and extreme disappointment. When people ask us how we are, so often we instinctively reply with a simple, "I'm okay. Everything is fine." Yet we are *not* always okay and everything is *not* always fine.

I talked about this in my sermon on Ash Wednesday and, as people left the sanctuary after the service, I naturally asked many people how they were...and several responded with, "I'm okay. And I really mean that!"

When folks responded to me in that way, it made me realize how quickly I ask people, "How are you?" - even when I don't have the time to *really* hear their answer. I hope, through this series, we all become more aware of how we ask and how we *answer* this question.

If we don't want to know the *real* answer when we ask someone, "How are you?" we perhaps should not actually ask it. And, unless it's someone we don't quite trust with our heart, if someone asks us how we are, we should perhaps allow ourselves to be open to the possibility of answering honestly...even if, in fact, we are *not* "okay" and everything in our lives is *not*, in fact, just "fine."

¹ Some details have been changed to keep this story anonymous.

Lent is a perfect time for us to prayerfully and intentionally reflect on the ways in which we are *not* okay. Because we worship a God who is with us in our brokenness...we follow a Savior who took our brokenness upon himself on the cross...and, by our Savior's resurrection from the dead, God declares to us that there is *hope* in all things. And that, even when we are not okay – we *will* be...eventually.

On Wednesday, we spent a little time thinking about temptation. Today we're exploring questions, doubt, and what it means to trust God in the midst of questions and doubt.

In future weeks of this series, we'll talk about sickness...we'll talk about worry and fear over the future...we'll talk about how we so easily judge ourselves and others...we'll talk about loss and grief...and, finally, on Palm Sunday, we'll talk about how it feels when things seem to spiral out of control in our life and world.

There are so many ways in which we are *not* okay. And if you discover anything throughout this series, I hope it's that, when you are *not* okay, you are welcome here.

The church is not meant to be a place we can only come when all is well and things are great. Quite the opposite, in fact. If you don't feel like you can come to church when you are at your worst, we have failed as a congregation.

In addition to teaching Confirmation class, one of my greatest privileges as a pastor is when I get invited to sit with people who are struggling – to listen to the messiness of their lives and to attempt to offer good news of God's presence and redemption in the midst of their mess.

Despite the fact that our building is beautiful clean, human ugliness and mess should always be welcome here. Because that's what Jesus came to redeem...he came to bring hope and victory to our mess and our ugliness. If we fail to bring our ugliness and our mess to him, he can't do anything to redeem it.

It's right there in John chapter three, in those most famous words of verses 16 and 17: "God loved the people of this world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who has faith in him will have eternal life and never really die. God did not send his Son into the world to condemn its people. He sent him to save them!"

To redeem our ugliness and our mess.

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Now. There are two things I want you to keep in mind as I continue this message. They are actually things that are generally important to keep in mind, but they struck me as connecting well to today's Scripture. Listen carefully:

There is nothing you can do to make God love you *more*.

This is a bit of a challenge for anyone with a good, North Dakota work ethic. We're taught that we need to *earn* anything we want in this life – and that's not a bad way to live. Work is an important as a way of providing for yourself and for your family. If we want to make a living for ourselves, we should understand that we need to do some work – and that we should do that work well.

The danger for us is that, when we have this work ethic – this ethic that we need to *earn* everything we want – it can also unfortunately translate into our faith...and we can begin to believe that we also need to earn God's love...that there is always more we can do to impress God and to make God love us even more than God already does. But that's false.

So. Remember that: there is nothing you can do to make God love you *more*. The other thing I want you to remember is equally important...and that is that *there is nothing you can do to make God love you less*.

Some of you may have heard these two phrases before. If you have, that's great. But, if you're like me, even if you've heard these phrases, you might struggle to remember them when you most need to remember them.

See...*God* is not fickle with love in the way *people* can be fickle with love.

So often love is transactional for us human beings: if you want me to love you, you have to do certain things in order to prove yourself worthy of my love and attention. You give something to me and I will give you something in return.

Like I said, it's transactional...like buying something at a store. There's an equal exchange. And our relationships are so often like this because we humans are fragile.

We know all too well that there are things we can do to either help or harm our human relationships. But when we fail to give as much to God as God gives to us, God does not suddenly *love us less*.

God's capacity for love is infinite. There is no scarcity of divine love and affection...so, when it comes to God's love, there is no need to be transactional. In fact, God doesn't even *need* our love and attention.

If we are giving God our love and our attention, hopefully it's because we find blessing in the giving. Hopefully it's because we understand that, in order to find fullness in any relationship – whether it's a relationship with people or with God – we should be inspired to give back for all we receive.

Anyway...so, there is nothing we can do to make God love us *more* and there is nothing we can do to make God love us *less*.

The reason I think these points are so important today in particular is because, when it comes to questions and doubt – when we suddenly feel off-balance in our beliefs and in our relationship with God – it can feel like God loves us less. And how could it not?

So often *our* capacity for love is limited. So often our ability to love fully is dependent upon the love we're getting back from others. That's just how it is. When we get hurt, we bleed. Our hearts break. But God is infinitely able to handle our hurt and our mess. Likewise, God is infinitely able to handle our questions and our doubts.
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Nicodemus came to Jesus at night with questions about who Jesus was and where he came from. "We know that *God* has sent you to teach us," Nicodemus said to Jesus. "You could not work [the miracles you work] unless God were with you."

Jesus then tried to teach Nicodemus about being "born from above," but Nicodemus didn't understand. "How can a grown man ever be born a second time?" he asked.

So Jesus offered words about how *human* birth is one thing...but that being born from the *Spirit* is another. By the Spirit's presence in our hearts and minds, we become alive to the fullness of God's presence in the world – and the miracles Jesus performs throughout John's Gospel are meant to be signs of God's fullness:

he turns water into abundant wine...he welcomes outsiders...he offers healing to the sick...he feeds 5,000 people with five small loaves of bread and two fish...he calms a storm and walks on water...he offers forgiveness to those shamed by sin...and, in today's story, Jesus invites a man with questions into conversation with him.

Sometimes when we have questions and we have doubts it can be grace upon grace to know that we are still welcome...that our questions and our doubts are okay...that God receives them...that God can handle them... and that God doesn't love us any less when we have them.

Jesus told Nicodemus, "God loved the people of this world so much that he gave his only Son..." That "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn its people. He sent him to *save* them!" It just takes *faith* to experience the fullness of God's salvation...which can be hard to hear if you happen to find yourself full of questions and doubts – right?

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About a year-and-a-half ago I heard an understanding of "faith" that I have clung to ever since because I love it so much.

This understanding comes from a Catholic theologian and writer named James Allison. He said that “faith” is a kind of *relaxing*. More specifically, that having faith is like relaxing in the way you can relax when you are with someone you are certain is fond of you.² Let me say that again.

Having faith is like relaxing in the way you can relax when you are with someone you are certain is fond of you.

And I would argue that, in many ways, any time we say the word “faith,” we could substitute it for the word “trust.”

Both faith and trust are intangible. They represent a state of being and thinking and living that allows us to go on with the clear sense that we are in good hands – regardless of our current circumstances. When we have faith, when we *trust*, we can relax.

Faith – trust – is relaxing in the way you can relax when you are with someone you are certain is fond of you.

When you are with someone you are certain is fond of you – be they a romantic partner, a friend, or a family member – when you're with someone you are certain is fond of you, you aren't worried you'll say something that will cause them to reject you. Who you are is okay with them – your good stuff and your not-so-good stuff. You know they will stick around. You just get to *be*, so you can relax with them.

Faith – trust – is relaxing in the way you can relax when you are with someone you are certain is fond of you.

Friends, this is how it is with God. God receives our questions and our doubts – our anger, our frustration – and remains continually fond of us. There is nothing we can do to make God love us *more* and, conversely, there is nothing we can do to make God love us *less*.

Questions and doubt are not signs of a lack of faith...they are our side of a two-way conversation with God when things feel “off” in life. God will not love us less or be less fond of us if we ask questions and if we go through seasons of doubt – even if the questions are tough and even if the season of doubt goes on indefinitely.

In the same way Jesus welcomed Nicodemus and his questions, Jesus welcomes us. And our questions and doubts are welcomed in a spirit of love, not condemnation. For God sent his Son out of love... to *save* us, not to condemn.

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² I heard Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber say this James Allison quote when she was interviewed by Krista Tippett on *On Being*.

By the end of chapter 3 in John, we don't really know where things stand between Jesus and Nicodemus. Their conversation just sort of ends with no sense of resolution.

But, by the end of John's Gospel, Nicodemus has appeared two more times: once in John 7 when Nicodemus comes to Jesus' defense when other pharisees are looking to condemn Jesus...and, finally, in chapter 19 when Nicodemus helps bury Jesus after he is crucified.

Questions and doubts can be transformed into strengthened faith and commitment. When we have questions and when we doubt, it feels like we are not okay. But God welcomes us still...and promises that it *will* be okay...eventually. Thanks be to God.