

Skeptical

Text: 1 Corinthians 13:8-12

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on April 11, 2021

This morning we're launching into a new sermon series. From now until I run out of them, I'll be preaching on the topics and questions that you want to hear discussed. I've gotten a good crop so far, but the door on this is not closed and never will be closed. Part of today's sermon will explain why that is, but for now, just know that you can still send me questions for this series.

As an add-on to that, starting tonight at 7 pm on Zoom I'll be hosting a sermon talkback time. The Zoom link is on the website and was in Friday's Messenger. I'll replay the sermon pulled from this morning's livestream, and then we'll talk about it afterwards so you can ask questions, give feedback, or whatever, and I can say, "Oh my gosh, I never meant to imply THAT!" The Sunday evening sessions are open to anyone anywhere—just like church. So these sermons will be less inspiration and more conversation. I'll give you my thoughts in the morning and whoever wants to can hop on Zoom in the evening and talk about it.

I've gotten about six or seven responses so far, some with multiple questions, but I wanted to start this series with an off-hand statement that someone asking several questions made in their email. I'll be getting to the person's actual questions in other sermons, but after asking those, this person, sounding almost ashamed of asking them, said, "There, my secret's out: I'm a skeptical, questioning Christian."

When I read that line, I wanted to shout, "Hallelujah! Can I have a church full of such people, please?" God save us all from churches full of parrots and robots. I don't care how brilliant the pastor is; I don't care if you can recite the entire Bible from memory; I don't care if you have twelve earned doctorates in theology. None of that is helpful if those listening just swallow it whole without chewing. You'll end up with a cult, not a church. Christian faith is incarnational—that is, it's meant to be lived out in the flesh. Its ideas, doctrines, and teachings are proven or disproven in the fires of each person's lived experience. I can't tell you how much I've learned because someone said to me after a sermon, "I'm having a real problem with what you just said," and then they go on to tell me about how it landed in their particular situation, which I had never considered before, because I had never lived in their shoes.

Example: A member of one of the congregations I served in Florida once burst into a rant that took me totally by surprise over the phrase, "There, but for the grace of God, go I." It had always sounded to me like a humble form of acknowledging that I could just as easily been in whatever unfortunate or tragic circumstance I was seeing.

But, as she pointed out, the phrase doesn't just say, "Wow, that could have so easily been me." The phrase brings God into it and states that the reason the tragedy happened to someone else and not me was that I had God's grace, which of course implies that the other person didn't. That, in turn, leads to prosperity gospel theology, which teaches that you can tell the people that God loves by how materially fortunate they are—an idea that Jesus refutes on almost every page of the Gospels. I had just absorbed and swallowed the phrase without ever really chewing on it and I would still be doing it to this day if she hadn't raised the issue with me. And why did that phrase trigger her? Because she was a widow whose husband had died suddenly and very young. When the phrase hit her lived experience, it landed as a condemnation—a claim that couples who grew old together had God's grace while her husband's tragic death proved that she did not. She was not going to take that condemnation lying down, and I'm so grateful she didn't.

I don't encourage questions and skepticism because it will give me an opportunity to set someone straight on the truth. I encourage questions and skepticism because it helps keep me humble and provides a forum for all of us to learn and grow together. Teaching and preaching is terrifying for me, not because I'm afraid of public speaking—that has never been the case—and not because I'm afraid of criticism—I would have jumped

professions long ago if that were true. You have to have thick skin for this job or you'll be eaten alive. But I'm terrified because someone may interpret what I say in a way I don't intend and either harm others with it or be harmed themselves.

Every single week as I prepare a sermon, I question all kinds of things. Are there other ways to interpret this Bible verse that might result in a very different outcome? What are the practical implications of someone listening to what I have to say and trying to live it out? Does the topic matter? Will it make anybody's life better? Could it be misused? If so, does that mean I've misunderstood something? Am I spouting bad theology? Am I just parroting what some scholar in a commentary has said or have I thought this through for myself? Without a congregation full of skeptical, questioning Christians, I'm left hanging out to dry on all of that. I don't know if I'm helping or hurting or providing spiritual Twinkies instead of whole grains.

Without your questions, my ability to help anyone to grow spiritually is limited, because I don't know what's getting in the way. At this stage of my career, I have some well-founded guesses, but that's only because of the questions and concerns raised by those I've encountered in years past, both inside and outside the church.

The idea of questioning our faith is so important that it's baked right into the traditions of the church itself. For those of us who baptize infants, the vows and professions of faith are first taken by those who are going to raise the child, including the local congregation. They all promise to bring up the child in the gathered community and share the responsibility to help teach the child about God, the Bible, and Christian faith. That happens in formal ways like Sunday School and other Christian education programs and in informal ways by loving and accepting the child and generally being a good role model for what a mature Christian is supposed to look like.

But then, when the child's brain has matured enough to be able to think abstractly—typically in early adolescence—we invite children into a period of intense questioning so that they can look at the faith that was handed to them by others and decide whether or not they want to continue on that road. That process is called Confirmation because those who go through those months of study and wrestling with the teachings of the faith, decide at the end if they want to confirm for themselves the faith promises made for them at their baptism. I'll be starting a Confirmation class this fall.

But even when someone has gone through a Confirmation class and has decided, yes, I want to do this Jesus thing. I want to identify as a Christian and follow that path, that is still only the very beginning of a lifetime of questioning, which is crucial to developing past spiritual adolescence. Questions and a healthy dose of skepticism is how we learn and grow in every part of our lives, including our faith, and churches that shut down and dismiss sincere questions, in my view, are doing spiritual harm.

But perhaps the hardest thing for many people to deal with is the fact that for many, if not most, questions related to God and faith, there simply are no definitive answers—at least not any that we are capable of knowing as human beings in this life. The reading earlier from 1 Corinthians 13 makes that plain. We know now—here, on earth, as humans—only in part. What we can see, we see through a dark glass—a clouded lens—it's not clear. Which means that even our highest-held convictions about what is or isn't true about God, faith, and all the rest may be at least partly, if not entirely, wrong.

We need a good dose of humility when approaching these topics—me, you, the larger church—all of us. We can, and should, state our opinions and interpretations and beliefs and say why we hold them. But we also have to recognize that we might be wrong—very sincerely wrong, maybe, but wrong nonetheless. I've often imagined that when I finally pass from this life and meet God face to face, I'll be met with something like, "Anne, I'd like to talk with you about this sermon you preached in 2003..."

Often I meet with people, both inside and outside the church who tell me what they don't believe. Maybe it's a part of a creed, maybe it's a particular doctrine in the church or a religious practice or whatever. Sometimes

people tell me that as a way of throwing down the gauntlet—a prelude to telling me, that my faith makes me an anti-science, blithering idiot. Others tell me almost in a whisper, with seeming apprehension that I might call on God to hit the “smite” button for their heresy.

So, the first thing I want you to know is that, on one level, I don’t really care what you don’t believe. My goal is to help you figure out what you **do** believe about the nature of God, humanity, the universe, and how it all might fit together. Way too many people never have thought through the positive content of their beliefs. It’s been all “nope, don’t believe that; nope, don’t believe that either; hoo-boy, I really think that’s a boatload of you-know-what.” Well, fine. But why? What about that thing you just heard is in conflict with something you **do** believe? If we talk about that, we might end up in a very different place.

Example. As many of you know, I grew up an American Baptist in Rhode Island. Most Baptists of any kind don’t use the ancient creeds of the church a lot, if ever. But every now and again we would end up in another denomination somewhere and I’d end up reciting the Apostles’ Creed. When we did that, I would always remain silent for the line that says, “I believe in the holy catholic church.” Nope, I thought. I’m a Baptist. I don’t believe that. Not going to say it. Going around telling people I didn’t believe that part of the Apostles’ Creed got me nowhere, until someone said, “Why not?” and I gave my ridiculous, “Because I’m a Baptist” answer.

Then the person explained to me that the word “catholic,” with a small c, meant “universal” and that the line in the creed was proclaiming that, under the hood, we’re all part of God’s church, no matter what denomination we belonged to—that “church” is a concept that transcends the artificial boundaries and lines we have drawn around ourselves. Oh. Well, yeah, I believed that. With that new understanding, I could say that line of the creed in good conscience. That particular mistake is so common that if you look at the Apostles’ Creed in our own hymnals, there’s an asterisk after the word “catholic” to explain that very thing.

There are times like that when questions do have actual answers that can help us get more comfortable with a Bible verse, a practice of the church, or some other aspect of faith and religious life. But the real growth comes from wrestling with the questions that don’t have answers—at least not answers that are knowable in any objective form. In those cases, a key goal for me as a pastor and teacher is not to provide answers, but to help people upgrade their questions and become more comfortable sitting with things that are ultimately unknowable.

A few years ago, I was out doing a Bible workshop and a gentleman in the group had a question. “There are lots of Bibles out there,” he said. “Which one is the right one?” I spent a fair bit of time explaining that the answer depended on a lot of things that were different from person to person and church to church. When I finished, he said, “Yes, but which one is RIGHT?” Were he a member of Crawford, I would hope over time to help him upgrade his question and move from “Which one is right?” to “Which one is right *for me*?”

I see that as a question upgrade because, in order for him to answer which one is right for him, he’s got to think more intentionally about why he wants to read the Bible in the first place, what he hopes to get from it, whether he wants a Bible with study helps or devotional aids, and all kinds of other questions that would help him focus on his own spiritual growth and development instead of just accepting a blanket answer from some lady who ran a Bible Society.

Questions are how we learn, and one good question ideally leads to ten deeper questions that help us better understand ourselves, our faith, and the world we live in.

Woe be unto those who shut down another person’s honest question! Especially in the church where we wrestle with the deepest and most personal issues of life and death, truth and meaning. Of all the places in society, church should be the safest place to express doubts, fears, and questions. Of all the places in society, church should be the place that recognizes how very little we really know about the vast mystery we call God.

For now, while on this earth, we know only in part—we see through a glass, darkly. In the metaphor of the Hebrew Scriptures, we are only allowed to see the backside of God. So, yes, give me a church filled to overflowing with skeptical, questioning Christians. There is no shame in that. It's a sign that we are alive. Amen.