



Week 3: Faith and Doubt

Day 1 – The Faith of Mary of Bethany

Luke 10:38-42

38 Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. ³⁹She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. ⁴⁰But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.' ⁴¹But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; ⁴²there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.'

Understanding the Passage:

The invitation is clear: be a Mary in a Martha world.

Martha's world was not so different from ours that we wouldn't recognize it. Be productive, the culture says. Be effective, be efficient, or be left behind. After all, your worth is a function of what you produce. That means hurry is regrettable but necessary, a cross you must shoulder if you want your life to mean anything, and if you spend long enough in hurry, you get used to it. So surrender to hurry or get steamrolled by the Martha's.

Let's be honest, we've all been Martha. Maybe you *are* Martha. We are so hurried and convinced that hurry is the rule of life that the idea of sitting and being in the presence of Jesus feels—what's the theology word?—stupid.

For faith to mean anything, for it to be real at all, you must *do something* with it, right? Get up. Get moving. Volunteer. Go to church. Teach Sunday School. Google the best snacks for youth group, make them perfectly, take a picture of said snacks, post it, and *voila*, that's faith. Faith, like your worth, must be a function of what you produce. You produce your church attendance. You produce your service to God and neighbor. You can see tangible evidence that, yes, you have faith, so you must be "good with God," right?

Martha, Martha...

Luke, the gospel-writer, was a smart cookie. He knew that people would get the wrong idea about the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The Good Samaritan comes immediately before our passage here. A lawyer asks Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" He answers his own question correctly: "Love God and love neighbor as yourself." Then Jesus gives one of the best sermon illustrations of all time in the Good Samaritan, who allows his life to be interrupted by a man who needs compassion. Jesus says, "Go and do likewise." Therefore, faith must be a function of *going* and *doing* good deeds like the Samaritan does. So who can blame Martha? She's just doing what the Samaritan did. She takes Jesus at his word.

But Luke's too brilliant to leave "Love God and love neighbor as yourself" without a complete answer. How do you love God and love neighbor as yourself? You need to be like the Samaritan *and* Mary. It can't be either/or. It must be both/and. Faith equals going and doing *and* sitting and being. It's a life of habits that meet the standard of Christ *and* it's the acceptance that Jesus accepts you unconditionally, so you sit in it and enjoy it, like Mary does.

Jesus goes a bit further. The better part is Mary's part. The sitting and being with Jesus, that's where faith begins. If you start with the Samaritan, all you'll have is religion—works without faith. But if you start with Mary, you'll have the gospel—acceptance without works.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Has the pandemic made you more like Mary or more like Martha?
2. When have you felt hurry consume you? What saved you?
3. How do you sit and be with Jesus?

Day 2 – The Faith of Jairus and an Unnamed Woman

Matthew 9:18-26 (also Mark 5:21-43, Luke 8:40-56)

18 While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader of the synagogue came in and knelt before him, saying, 'My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.' 19 And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples. 20 Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, 21 for she said to herself, 'If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well.' 22 Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, 'Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.' And instantly the woman was made well. 23 When Jesus came to the leader's house and saw the flute-players and the crowd making a commotion, 24 he said, 'Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping.' And they laughed at him. 25 But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. 26 And the report of this spread throughout that district.

Understanding the Passage:

Mark and Luke name the synagogue leader Jairus. "Suddenly" Jairus appeared after his daughter "just" died. Jesus stops preaching and goes immediately to render aid. Imagine someone interrupting the sermon and the preacher leaves the sermon halfway done

because somebody needs a hospital visit *right now*, it can't wait. Depending on the quality of the preaching, maybe that's a good thing.

Then "suddenly" a woman shows up. Luke says this woman has invested her entire life savings in medical bills, but clearly it was a waste. She touches Jesus' cloak even though women weren't supposed to touch a man they're not married to. Jesus rewards her boldness and "instantly" she's made well.

And then, quickest of all, Jesus raises the girl from the dead *before he gets there*. It's not that Jesus enters the house and immediately raises the dead. It's that he raises the dead from a distance. The girl is already alive by the time he arrives at the house. This is quicker than "immediately" or "instantly." This is bending space and time. It's one thing for medicine to work instantly. It's another thing for medicine to work before you ever filled your prescription. Now *that's* fast.

So what do we make of this? That Jesus has supernatural space powers? Well, that's certainly there. But more relatable is the faith of Jairus and the woman. It's a faith that assumes certain expectations of Jesus. They expect Jesus to act *now*. They expect Jesus to waste no time. Of course they can't force Jesus to live up to their expectations, but that doesn't stop them from treating Jesus as if they could. They're like a boss who simply expects prompt customer service from her employees. She doesn't have to say, "Serve the customer quickly. Don't make them wait." It's an unwritten expectation. Jairus and the woman have that expectation of Jesus and, most shocking of all, Jesus rewards them for it. So does that mean we should expect Jesus to heal our mother of dementia immediately? Or our husband of cancer right now? Should we expect Jesus to answer our prayers at light speed?

The answer is, almost. We should expect Jesus to act now, but we may not see the results of our prayers on our schedule. We should expect Jesus to be on the move immediately *and* see the fruits of Jesus' work on God's timeline, not ours. The unnamed woman gets what she wants—her bleeding stops—but it doesn't happen when she touches the cloak. That's the timeline she expected. The healing happened when Jesus said, "Your faith has made you well." Jesus moved *slower* than she thought he would.

Jairus gets what he wants—his daughter lives—but it doesn't happen when Jesus shows up at his house. That's the timeline Jairus expected. Instead, it happens before Jesus even got there. Jesus moved *quicker* than Jairus thought he would.

The point is, Jesus rewards a faith that expects *action* to prayer on our schedule and *answer* to prayer on God's schedule. Yes, Jesus hears prayer and won't ignore it; and no, we won't see results exactly when we want them. Sometimes it's slower, sometimes it's quicker. In the end, Jesus is boss.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. When has Jesus answered your prayer, but it was slower than you wanted?
2. When has Jesus answered your prayer, but it was quicker than you wanted?

3. What is your one fervent prayer today? Surrender it to the Boss.

Day 3 – The Faith of the Criminal on the Cross

Luke 23:39-43

39 One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, ‘Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!’ ⁴⁰But the other rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?’ ⁴¹And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.’ ⁴²Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ ⁴³He replied, ‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.’

Understanding the Passage:

Matthew and Mark say both criminals hanging on either side of Jesus mocked him. But Luke remembers it differently. One criminal does the mocking, the other criminal does the confessing.

The soldiers beat Jesus, crucified Jesus, then taunted Jesus. They said, “If you’re the *King of Jews, save yourself.*” (23:37) and hung a sign that said, “This is the *King of the Jews*” (23:38). The first criminal wants to play along. He invokes the name of the Messiah, the Anointed One, the long-awaited *King of Israel*, and tells Jesus to *save* himself and, while he’s at it, him too! Finally, the second criminal asks Jesus to remember him when Jesus goes home to his *kingdom*.

If you’ve been following the italics, you’ll see that the themes of kingship and salvation keep popping up. There’s some disagreement about what it means for Jesus to be King and Savior, and only one person gets it right.

The soldiers believe a king must be selfish for him to be a true king. If Jesus were a king, he’d hurl himself down from the cross and save his own neck. Their sign (which is more graffiti than sign) is saying, “Really? This is the best king the Jews can come up with? Surely, they can do better. This guy can’t even stay alive, much less lead the people.”

The first criminal believes a king must take the easy way instead of the right way. If Jesus were really the Messiah, the King we’ve all been waiting for, he’d take the path of least resistance. He would save himself and the criminals beside him who, like this failed King, weren’t lucky enough to escape capture. The first criminal is desperate, and desperate people don’t care about right and wrong. They care about survival. Surely this supposed “King” should be the same way. He should be a survivor. He shouldn’t die on his morals. He should live to fight another day.

But the second criminal gets it right. The King, the real King, the King of all Kings, knows he is innocent and shouldn’t have to die, but he’s too good and merciful to harm his executioners. This is a King who knows salvation won’t come through conquest or raising up an army. It comes through sacrifice. So the second criminal acknowledges Jesus as King

of a different kind of Kingdom—a Kingdom where there are no criminals. There are only people whom Jesus has remembered.

So here it is. The soldiers and the first criminal have put their faith in other kings and other ideas of what a king should be. But the second criminal put his faith in another kind of King. Jesus is King of a better Kingdom than the world's kingdoms, and there can't be salvation without that King dying for you. Therein is the door to paradise.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. We pray, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." What values are part of the Kingdom of Heaven? What values are part of the world as it is now?
2. Give three words that describe the second criminal's faith (example: humble).
3. Think of the characters in the crucifixion scene. Where are you?

Day 4 – The Faith of the Centurion

Matthew 8:5-13 (also Luke 7:1-10, John 4:43-54)

5 When he entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, appealing to him ⁶and saying, 'Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible distress.' ⁷And he said to him, 'I will come and cure him.' ⁸The centurion answered, 'Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed. ⁹For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, "Go", and he goes, and to another, "Come", and he comes, and to my slave, "Do this", and the slave does it.' ¹⁰When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, "Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. ¹¹I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, ¹²while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' ¹³And to the centurion Jesus said, 'Go; let it be done for you according to your faith.' And the servant was healed in that hour.

Understanding the Passage:

If the young pastor writing this commentary is lucky, he'll live long enough to hear his grandchildren ask, "What was it like in 2020 with Covid-19?" And he'll say, "It was a time when you couldn't escape the anxiety of catching an unseen evil that was being carried by innocent people who didn't know they were carriers. So you kept physical distance from everyone who didn't live with you, and above all, you didn't touch them or let them come into your house." At least that's how I imagine I'll say it.

It was common belief in Jesus' time that sin was an invisible evil that could be caught and spread like a virus. That's a big problem if you're a Gentile because Gentiles, by virtue of not being descendants of Israel, couldn't cleanse themselves of sin through the appropriate sacrifices of the Old Testament. That exclusion (hang on to that word, we'll come back to it) made Gentiles perpetually unclean. They carried the unseen evil of sin with them. It infected

their homes and everything they touched. Therefore, Jews had no choice but to keep their distance from Gentiles. It wasn't being impolite; it was good hygiene.

So here comes the Centurion, a Gentile, asking Jesus, a Jew, to come to the Centurion's Gentile house and touch a Gentile servant. The Centurion has lost his mind. We should treat verse 7 as a question, as Jesus saying, "You want *me* to come and cure *him*?" I'd feel the same way if a Covid-19 patient asked me to visit them in the hospital. "You want *me* to come to *you*?" Sorry, I love you and I want to come, but I can't. It's not because I'm fearful for me. I'm cautious for the people I live with and the people I serve. I might get *them* sick. Note that Jesus never goes to the Centurion's house. He heals the servant *from a distance*. We practice distance loving in 2020 because we don't want to catch something and give it to people we love. Jesus practiced distanced healing for the exact same reason.

But the Centurion presses Jesus. His logic goes, "I'm a man under authority just like you, Jesus. Somebody commanded me to take charge of these forces, and they obey me. Somebody, God, commanded you, Jesus, to take charge of unseen angels who can heal my servant from a distance. You can make the order right now if you wish it. So do you wish it?" Jesus does wish it. He praises the Centurion's faith, sends the angels ahead of him, and the servant is healed.

So what's so special about the Centurion's faith? It's the faith of an excluded person who demands to receive the benefits of an included person. Only included people, Jews, should be able to receive the benefits of Jesus' healing. But this excluded person demands an exception, and Jesus rewards the persistence. What this means for us is: *There are people whom the included exclude, but Jesus praises the faith of the excluded who demand equal treatment as the included.*

There's so much in that sentence that this commentary doesn't have time for. But for now, here's the lesson—if you're one of the excluded, if you find yourself on the outside looking in, whether that's in matters of church, family, employment, or anything, please know that you're not excluded from the love and attention of Jesus. There are no included and excluded people to Jesus. To Jesus, there are people, people, and more people.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. When have you been excluded and you yearned to be "picked for the team"?
2. What might excluded people know about God that the rest of us don't?
3. Who are the excluded people in your circle of influence that you can learn from?

Day 5 – The Faith of Thomas

John 20:24-29 (also John 11:16 and John 14:5)

24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

26 A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' 27 Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' 28 Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' 29 Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

Understanding the Passage:

There's nobody who wouldn't do what Thomas did. We might *say* we'd believe in resurrection without seeing it (which is exactly what every pastor everywhere asks you to do on Easter), but the situation for Thomas is different. It's one thing to be 2000 years removed from the resurrection and believe it without seeing it. It's an entirely different thing to be one week removed from the resurrection *and all your friends saw it and you didn't* and now you're the guy who missed out because you were out getting Starbucks for your bros (well, maybe). Of course, Thomas wants to see proof, all of his friends got that chance. Every single disciple, had they not been there the first time the resurrected Jesus showed up, would have reacted the same way as Thomas.

Thomas isn't a doubter. He's a learner. He wants to see and touch Jesus *so that* he can learn more about Jesus and about what is possible because of Jesus. He's certainly saying, "Show me the evidence." The guy wants hard facts. But it comes from a faithful intention. He doesn't want facts for the sake of facts. He wants facts for the sake of faith. The difference is subtle but important. It's the difference between an archaeologist proving dinosaurs walked the earth for the sake of proving dinosaurs walked the earth, and an archaeologist proving dinosaurs walked the earth because he loves dinosaurs, is captivated by them, and keeps finding more things he didn't know. Thomas isn't seeking to prove resurrection. He's seeking to know Jesus and learning more about resurrection will be a crucial step on his journey.

We really should call him Learning Thomas instead of Doubting Thomas. In John 11, when Jesus thought he could raise Lazarus from the dead and set out to try, Thomas told the disciples, "Let us go also, that we die with him." Even if resurrecting Lazarus involves Jesus having to die for this crazy idea to work, Thomas wants in. He wants to know. He wants to learn.

In John 14, when Jesus says, "I'm going to the Father" Thomas says, "How can we know the way?" If there's a way to get to God, and Jesus knows it, Thomas wants to learn. He's the student who always has his hand raised first, a little obnoxious at times, total know-it-all, but that's because he wants to learn it all.

One of the great saints of the church, St. Anselm of Canterbury, had a motto. It was *fides quaerens intellectum*. Faith seeking Understanding. That's Thomas. It's a faith that begins with, "I don't have all the answers, but gosh I'm going to try." It begins with confessing what you don't know and dives deeper and deeper into the mystery. It's not a faith that has all the answers. That would be Understanding seeking Faith, and that's not what Jesus is

looking for. Jesus wants us to begin with faith and try our best to understand. Remember, it's a seeking, not a finding.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. If you could ask Jesus one question and get a direct answer, what would it be?
2. What's the difference between Faith seeking Understanding and Understanding seeking Faith?
3. Create your own working definition of faith.

Video Questions:

1. What did you think of the definitions of faith? Was anything missing?
2. Write your own working definition of faith.
3. Why is a Mary kind of faith so hard for us?
4. Do you agree with the quote "some gods deserve atheists"?
5. What false idea of God does the other criminal have (the one who cursed Jesus)?
6. When has doubt led to deeper faith in your life?
7. Prayer requests and other notes.