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Homily: “**Cherish Your Doubts**” by the Rev. Christine Robinson (adapted)

Delivered by Jeff Tate

When it comes to the subject of religious doubts, nobody said it better than Woody Allen: “How can I believe in God when just last week I got my tongue caught in the roller of an electric typewriter? I am plagued by doubts. What if everything is an illusion and nothing exists? In that case, I definitely overpaid for my carpet. If only God would give me some clear sign; like making a large deposit in my name at a Swiss bank.”

We are skeptics, empiricists, and alternate believers, we UUs. We rely primarily on our senses and our reason to give us clues to truth. We believe that the earth is round because we have seen pictures of it turning in space. We believe that electrons spin around neutrons because learned people have reasoned it out and we trust them. If we believe in God, it is because we have come to think that the universe is best explained that way, or because we ourselves have had experiences of divine love, healing, or grace. We do not believe simply because we were taught that way. We do not accept the unacceptable no matter how many of our fellow human beings do. We are, in short, doubting Thomases all.

Thomas was one of the disciples who didn't happen to be around the first time the resurrected Jesus appeared to the others. Naturally enough, to my mind, he was quite skeptical of his friends' story. The second time Jesus appeared, Thomas was there; still skeptical, until Jesus invited him to put his finger in the nail holes of his resurrected body. At that point, Thomas, now having experience of his own, gave up his doubt and became a believer. [Note that Jesus provided Thomas with the concrete evidence he needed.]

**Agnosticism** is a fancy word for doubt. Technically, it refers to a belief that it is impossible to know whether or not God exists. Generally, however, when someone says that they are an agnostic, they mean that *they themselves* don't know whether God exists.

- Agnosticism is a completely different thing from atheism: Atheists believe that it is impossible for there to be such a thing as God, and they can be just as sure of themselves as the most orthodox Christian.
- Agnostics, on the other hand, believe in a universe in which it is not possible to be sure; not possible to know completely.
- Agnostics may lean towards believing or not believing in anything, but their faith is firmly tentative, open to new insights, new experiences, and the possibility that others have some truth, too.

And that kind of agnosticism often trickles down through all the beliefs they hold.

- "Is there a god?" "How would one know?" comes to
- "Is there life after death?" and
- "Is love always good?" and
- "Is it always right to obey an authority?" and
- "Is it ever right to kill?"

The questions go on and on, and they are questions which do not have answers clearly written in the stars. Agnostics see the gray between yes and no, feel the ambiguity of things deeply, and understand the complexity of living and

acting in the world. Even more, they are aware of the limitations of human knowledge and the fallibility of the human mind and heart. They doubt that it is possible to know everything, to understand everything, to be sure of everything.

This larger agnosticism, this general agnosticism has gotten a lot of bad press from various absolutists lately, but it is not necessarily such a bad thing. It is, after all, people who are cock-sure of themselves and what they believe that cause an awful lot of the trouble in the world.

- Wouldn't it be nice if the Oklahoma City bombers had had a little crisis of faith?
- If the people who shoot up abortion clinics were just a little less sure of themselves?
- If the producers of the gay-bashing "Focus on the Family" started to wonder if they really knew God's plan and will for homosexuals?

Their beliefs, which may not be questioned, bind them to error just as surely as those of our forebears who believed that God's plan included slavery. They could use a little doubt.

### **Six Reasons to Doubt:**

First of all, when we doubt, it is because we believe that we can trust our own mind and imagination to seek after truth and to give me good answers. Ironically, to doubt is to have faith in oneself *and* in the know-ability of the universe. If I lack such faith in myself, then I am forced to rely on the witness of others or on supernatural revelation. But I believe that I can think things through, come to logical conclusions and have real, if not complete, knowledge of the world. It is this faith in my abilities and perceptions which leaves me free to doubt. Similarly, I must have faith in the solidity and know-ability of the world to be free to doubt. To be a doubter with integrity I must believe that the truth will not be shaken by my testing and that whatever truth reveals itself will arise from my doubting more secure.

Secondly, I doubt because I care enough to really examine what I believe. If I didn't care, I wouldn't bother to doubt. The world is full of comfortable church folks who, if they had to say so under oath, would say that they don't fully believe what the church tells them to believe, that they are unsure or downright doubtful.

- They remain happy within their church because theology doesn't much matter to them.
- They like the ritual, enjoy singing in the choir, go because it is expected or because their friends are there.
- The discrepancy between what they believe and what they are hearing does not bother them.

Likewise, the world likewise is full of folks who are living in the secular world of entertainment, stimulation, and possessions, who, if they had to say so under oath, would have to say that they believe that there is more to life than secular culture allows. But they don't go looking for more meaning because it just doesn't matter to them that much.

Of course, most of us are here today because, at some time in our lives, we decided that it *did* matter. We went to the trouble of leaving the church or synagogue we were brought up in, or searching for a church for the first time in our lives because we cared about the truth, and it mattered to us to find a community that looked at things as we did. Our doubt can be seen as a measure of our passion about religious matters. It is a good thing.

Thirdly, I doubt because I believe in the upward sweep of truth and knowledge -- that the answers to life's pressing questions can be answered now as well or even better than they were answered in the past. I can build on the knowledge of others, but I do not feel bound to it. It is this particular aspect of our faith that earns us the label, "religious liberals." Conservatism looks primarily to the past for truth. Liberalism looks primarily to the future. We believe that our doubts are "the keys to the door of knowledge," and the "attendants of truth."

Fourthly, we doubt because we feel we have been fooled in the past. If we were told as children that the earth was only 6,000 years old, or that the sun once stood still in the sky, and we discover the impossibility of those things, we are liable to feel betrayed. Worse yet, if we were told that if we prayed, God would hear and answer; or that if we were good, our mother wouldn't get sick and die; or if we masturbated, we would go blind; and then discovered that those fearful burdens were nonsense used to manipulate us, we felt angry. People we trusted led us wrong and used our ignorance for their own ends. It was natural then to reject the rest, to doubt because authorities cannot be trusted. Some people never get over their sense of anger about all this. Those who *do* either return to their church and demand more sophisticated answers to their questions, or they change churches. Whichever route they choose, their new doubting is a part of the healing of old hurts. This doubting is the choice to grow by carefully distinguishing the baby of religion, to keep and develop, from the bath water of religion, which must be discarded. It is a way of religious growth that can be very rewarding.

The fifth reason for doubt is developmental.

- Those who study faith and the way people grow in faith say that there is a time in the life of many people when doubt reigns. You see, little children are caught up in imitating rituals -- saying grace, reciting prayers, going to church, standing up to sing. These children believe that doing these things is good because the people they love are *doing* them.
- Slightly older children begin to internalize the beliefs of their family and church. They believe things are *true* because the people they love *believe* them. This stage goes on through the early teens, and many people never move out of it.
- For those who do, the next stage is a stage of questioning and doubt. Now the young believers want proofs, are offended when what is taught in school is not the same as what is taught in Sunday School, and insist on using their own minds to think about what they have been taught. It is no accident that many children go through confirmation class and then drop out of church. Ironically, the age of confirmation is just the age when doubt begins, and many churches cannot cope with this doubting stage of faith. In mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead's experience, in late childhood and beyond religious education can actually prevent religious growth and drive young people away from the church by its lack of respect for their doubts. If those, of whatever age, who are in the questioning, doubting stage are not made comfortable in church, they leave, as many of us know from our personal experience.

Some people never reach the doubting stage. Some reach it and stay there for a lifetime. Others, generally in their mid- to late-20s, or alternatively, in their mid-60s, move on to a newly-synthesized faith. But the stage of doubting and questioning is a legitimate stage in human faith development. It comes when the mind is well- enough developed to ask questions of faith. This developmental doubt should be honored as the servant of discovery and maturation.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we doubt because we have had no direct experience of the things others believe. God has never spoken in our ear; the Holy Spirit has not descended upon us; we have no way of knowing what lies beyond the grave; we were not present with the disciples when Jesus returned from the dead. So we doubt, while awaiting the experiences which would bring us to believe—as did Thomas. Cherish your doubts, for doubt is the attendant of truth. *But...*here's the rub. It is very true that our doubts come from many very reasonable sources, but in the final analysis, they are not much good to us unless they become attendants of truth, which is to say, unless we find ways to a faith which is authentic for us.

**Stuck with Doubting** Unitarian-Universalists have been known to wallow in our doubts, to be suspicious of or even arrogant toward anyone who believes in things we don't; to allow our children to grow up without a clue to our faith; and to post "To question is the Answer" bumper stickers on our cars. We cherish our doubts because they can lead us to greater truths, but sometimes we don't move on to those greater truths. We just hang out, doubting whatever we used to be taught and enjoying the company. That is not, however, a very *meaningful* way to spend a *life*. We may very well be agnostics about many of the things our neighbors believe -- about a virgin birth or the goodness of God or the Trinity or whatever -- but if we never go on to consider what we do believe, how best to live our lives, and what might be the meaning of our death--what a pity! "To question, " in other words, is not "the answer. " To say *that* is to confuse ends and means. To question is one way to the answer, and a way which yields many benefits. For those of us who have rejected the authorities who would foist on us ready-made answers, to question may be the only way to the answer. But it is not the *answer*.

### **Faith as an Answer**

"The answer" is not the questions that we cherish but the *faith* we live by and act on, even if we hold it tentatively and keep it open for change. For us doubters, this faith, at the very least, includes faith that continued scrutiny will bring better answers, that the world is an understandable place, and that our minds are up to the challenge of life. It probably also includes other, firmly-held beliefs -- in the goodness of life, in the worth of persons, in the interconnectedness of all things, in the rightness of democracy, that death is not to be feared, that force is not a good way of life, and so on. We make some guesses about some of these things and live by these guesses because we will never find the answers written in the stars. You see, it is possible to be an agnostic and to live by faith at the same time. It is possible to be an agnostic about some things and faith-filled about others.

I'm an agnostic about our degree of interior experience after death, for instance, but firm in my faith in the overall movement of the Cosmos toward increasing consciousness and increasing compassion. It is possible to hold even one's firm faith in an agnostic style -- that is, firm in one's own vision of the world and one's determination to act out of that vision but realizing that it's a very big universe out there and that one's vision is necessarily partial and others' visions are likely to contain at least some truth. The infinitude of things is more than any one finite mind can manage.

This is the theology of doubt, and to my mind, it is the underlying theology of Unitarian Universalism. Being, as we are, a non-creedal faith, we don't require anyone's public assent to this theology, but it is the basis of the values we mostly share and the programs we present; it is the foundation of our tolerance and our respect for diversity. It's a theology which keeps us from self-righteousness, but not from action. It's a theology which gives us a platform for our lives but allows that platform to change as our wisdom grows. It's doubt that allows us to question but also allows us the certainty we need to live with larger truth, meaning and integrity.

So let's cherish our doubts. They not only lead to larger truth, but they make us wise, keep us humble, and allow us to live together in love.

### **Discussion**

1. Do you agree with Robinson that "it is possible to be an agnostic and live by faith?"
2. What doubts would you add to Robinson's list of doubts? Are you comfortable with your doubts? Which ones make you nervous?