

The Benefit of Your Doubt

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Psalm 42; Mark 9:14-29

But What If We're Wrong? is the title of a book recently published by Chuck Klosterman. It is a book I have not read, therefore it is not a book I am recommending. I have no idea how good or bad it is. But I am intrigued by the premise of the book which wonders about our present state of knowledge. I heard Mr. Klosterman being interviewed about this book and he wonders over the possibility that some of our deepest held beliefs and assumptions, our most tightly held premises, our supposed iron clad scientific proofs – that maybe someday they will be proven to be incorrect. *But What If We're Wrong?* is a reasonable question to ask because we know that history is full of such discoveries. Discoveries that challenged the commonly held belief. When Copernicus suggested that the sun did not rotate around the earth, but rather the opposite – that the earth rotated around the sun – it seemed absurd and later when Galileo endorsed the theory they threw the poor scientist in jail. When Columbus sailed to the new world he challenged the commonly held assumption that the world was flat. When William Wilberforce stood before the English Parliament and suggested that no person should ever be considered the property of another person and that the slave trade of England be abolished, he was maligned by a great portion of his countrymen for proposing something so preposterous. Today is June 19 – Juneteenth - the day that commemorates the end of slavery in the United States. And that took 4 years of Civil War and over 600,000 casualties to change. Vincent Van Gogh died a rather obscure and marginal artist but fifty years later was considered one of the great post-impressionists and most recognizable artists. Emily Dickinson died without a poem of hers published and now she shares the shelves of the great American bards. *But what if we're wrong?* Klosterman asks. What if we're wrong about the treatment of disease? What if we're wrong about the merits of democracy? What

if we're wrong about our understanding of gravity? Our theories of the universe? What if we're wrong about capitalism? What if I'm wrong about Michigan football? (Not a chance.)

What if we're wrong? is not an easy question to ask. Especially of yourself.

Who wants to be wrong? Who wants to think they are wrong? Maybe because I am a preacher raised in a preacher family I very much like to debate and argue. It was a skill honed early in the family rooms of my youth. You can't be a McConnell and not be prepared to defend your position. And to defend your position means you have to be certain. And to be certain means you cannot entertain the possibility that you might be wrong. Doubting just doesn't work.

But what if I'm wrong? What if you're wrong? It's not often a question you hear in church. Church is where we come to be certain. As well we should. Church is where we come to recite our creed and read from our book and give praise to our God with every desire to find within these practices the timeless truths of reality. We want to know what is fixed, what is unchanging, what we can hold onto. But sometimes we can forget that this is only half of what church is. Right? For while we gather in this great effort to tether ourselves to the fixed anchor of reality – the truth is we bring with us not only our yearnings for certainty but our struggle with doubt. Church is the community of faith and doubt. You can't be human unless you have a little bit of faith and a little bit of doubt.

It is, I suppose, what we see on this Father's Day when we see what Jesus confronted when he came upon the father and his son – both of whom were at wit's end. The boy with some condition that convulsed him and rendered him a danger at least to himself – and the father with a heart breaking just about every day with less and less hope that anything could be done about it. And the rabbi from Nazareth whose reputation of healing has perhaps preceded him – comes upon this scene where nobody seems to know what to do with this father and son. Nothing seems to be working. Par for the course. Nothing ever seems to be working when it comes to this boy. But why not one more try, says the father. Why not see if the Rabbi can do something. If you're able, he says to Jesus. If I'm

able? Jesus says. All things can be done for those who believe – and then comes perhaps the most honest thing said in the Bible, “Lord, I believe, but help my unbelief.” Lord I believe, but then again I don't believe. Lord, I'm certain, but then again I have a few doubts. Lord I want to be a person of faith, but I got to be honest with you, I've got some questions. Some big questions.

This father wouldn't last long in the McConnell family. But there is something in this honest father that leaves room in each of our souls for a little bit of doubt. Maybe even for a lot of doubt. We hear it in the lines of the psalmist –

I say to God, my rock,
‘Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I walk about mournfully
Because the enemy oppresses me?
As with a deadly wound in my body,
My adversaries taunt me,
While they say to me continually, ‘Where is your God?’
Why are you cast down, O my soul?
And why are you disquieted within me?

“The more in touch I am with my doubt – the more grace I will leave for your doubt. The less sold I am on my certainty – the more chance I'll give myself to listen to your certainty.”

Life is filled, isn't it with those circumstances that would make us wonder – how much of what I believe is really true? How much can I count on God? What if I'm wrong about my long held cherished beliefs?

C.S. Lewis after losing the love of his life wrote a small book called, *A Grief Observed*, in which he chronicles his own descent into grief and all the questions that followed behind. All the doubts that dogged him. This great apologist of the faith - and now the

circumstances of life had done a number on him. And so with that same raw honesty of the father and the psalmist, Lewis writes, “Where is God? This is one of the most disquieting symptoms (of grief). When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing him, so happy that you are tempted to feel His claims upon you as an interruption, if you remember yourself and turn to him with gratitude and praise, you will be – or so it feels – welcomed with open arms. But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is in vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become. There are no lights in the windows. It might be an empty house. Was it ever inhabited? It seemed so once. And that seeming was as strong as this. What can this mean? Why is He so present a commander in our time of prosperity and so very absent a help in time of trouble?”

Good questions. And questions that every human being has somewhere in their souls. Every church

has somewhere within its walls. And these seasons and places of doubt are not much fun because they shake our sense of certainty – and Lord knows we all want to be certain – and even more so they point us to something none of us wants pointed out and that is our insecurity. Any chance you have some insecurity? Nothing like doubt to make us feel even more insecure. And yet if there's anything we have in common – it's our insecurity.

If there is anything that connects us as human beings it's the chance that in one matter or another we might be wrong. If there is anything that joins us as a community of faith – is that we are community of faith, not indisputable proof. And we are on this journey to what is ultimate and real – and with that come all sorts of questions and wonderments and propositions and second thoughts and debate and argument – but that what we all hold in common is our insecurity, our lack for all the answers and our query over the ways of God. And that while we recite our creed and read from our book and praise our God – that leaves still all sorts of room for us to wonder together, to ask together, to doubt together, to lament together. The more in touch I am with my doubt – the more grace I will leave for your doubt. The less sold I am on my certainty – the more chance I'll give myself to listen to your certainty.

If I remember back to the debates of my growing up – or the debate I had last week -- I can remember very little of what was said to me because I was too busy thinking of what next thing I was going to fire back at my “opponent”.

Lord I believe – but the truth is there's a lot I'm not sure about. And isn't it this “not sure” part of my life – the grief, the questions, the uncertainty, the fear, the insecurity – where I will be most open to the life and thoughts and words of another?

Miroslav Volf tells the story about a Franciscan monk from Bosnia, Ivo Markovic, whose family was caught up in the tragic events of the Balkan wars between the Croats, the Bosnians and the Serbs. In the priest's home village, Susanj, Muslim Bosnians swept through the town killing just about everyone in their sight – including nine of Father Markovic's Catholic/Christian family. Later as the war quieted Father Markovic returned to his village and to his childhood home where some of his family was slaughtered. It was now occupied by a fierce Muslim woman who was armed and dangerous. The Father was warned not to go. But he did. As he approached the house there on the stoop was the old woman with a cigarette in her mouth and brandishing a rifle. “Go away, or I'll shoot you.” She cocked the rifle. The priest, with a gentle, but firm voice responded, “No, you won't shoot me,

instead you will make for me a cup of coffee.” And with that he took one step. She stared at him for a while, then slowly put down the rifle and went to the kitchen. She took the last bit of coffee she had and mixed it with a few grounds to make just enough for the two to have coffee. The two mortal enemies sat down at table and sipping the nectar of the gods they began to talk. And out came the insecurity. The old woman spoke of her loneliness, of the home she lost, of the son who never returned from the wars. The priest spoke of almost all the same things. When Father Markovic returned a month later she told him: “I rejoice at seeing you as much as if my son had returned.”

Don't you think that when Jesus said, “Judge not that you be not judged,” that the thing he was pointing out to you and me was our insecurity? Judgment comes from our insecurity. If I judge the other, then I don't have to judge myself. And if I don't judge myself, then I don't have to understand myself and on top of it I can delude myself into thinking that I can understand someone else's story. How can you remove the splinter in your neighbor's eye while you have a two by four in your own? Good question. The best doubt you might ever have is of yourself.

What if I'm wrong? The possibility of it might be a good thing – not just for you, but even more so for your neighbor.

This came crashing down on me a few years ago when I was up in New Jersey preaching at a summer chapel where I preach every summer. It's a beautiful little chapel and we stay in a house right next door. And the house has this little narrow driveway into which a regular car barely fits. A few years ago the people next door had visitors and the visitors parked out on the street as was their right. But there wasn't a lot of room out on the street and they had a few cars and invariably one of the cars would always park a foot or two feet over into the entrance of the driveway making it very difficult to pull in or pull out. Not impossible, just difficult. This happened for several days. And each day I got a little angrier and angrier. What right do they have to park blocking my driveway?!!! Of course, it wasn't my driveway ... it was the driveway of this beautiful house I was given the privilege of

staying in – but that's a whole other point. I never spotted the trespassers, but I couldn't wait to bump into them and give them a little piece of my mind. A little piece of the certainty of my judgment.

So Sunday rolls around and I conduct worship in the little chapel. And after worship as I'm greeting people a gentleman comes out the door and introduces himself as a visitor to the home next to mine. “Ah hah,” I think to myself ... “here's my chance to give him a piece of my mind.” But before I can get out any words the man says to me, “I was wondering if you could pray for my daughter? That's who we are visiting next door to your home. Would you pray for her? She's forty-two years old and she's been given a couple more months to live. And we are all here gathered to encourage her.” My heart fell. My eyes filled. And now for some reason the two feet of driveway didn't matter anymore. My Lord, they could have the whole driveway. It was this certainty of judgment that kept me from seeing the whole story.

There's a lot of certainty, I suppose, behind the barrel of an MCX rifle. Certainly not much room to consider the stories of the 49 to whom it is pointed.

There's a lot of certainty, I suppose, in the self-righteous condemnation of this group and that group. Certainly not much room to consider the stories of those who fall under this category or that.

There's a lot of certainty, I suppose, in the personal attacks of a campaign. Certainly not much room to consider the stories of those whose hopes and dreams are represented by the other side.

There's a lot of certainty behind my judgment of this person or that person's behavior or lifestyle. Certainly not much room to consider what story there might be behind it.

What if we are wrong? I suppose it would mean we had joined the human race. And not just joined it – but embraced it.



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Church of the Palms

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