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The Freedom to Love Him With All of Our Minds

John 21:1-15
Matthew 21:28-32

I would like to start out with a disclaimer. I don't carry a master's degree in theology, I'm not an ordained minister, and I don't normally talk in front of large groups of people for long periods of time. The only time I've recently had my voice recorded for people to hear was in the hilarious "Bible Bootcamp" video that the confirmands and I filmed last weekend, in which I played a drill sergeant who whipped them into shape for Confirmation.

Sometimes in our walks of faith and as we go through life, we make discoveries that point us to the truth and we very much want to, and sometimes find opportunities to, share those discoveries with others. Plus, I think it's good to sometimes do things that challenge and scare us a little bit. Public speaking, especially in a pulpit, is to me, one of those things. (I'm embracing that fear right now)

Do you ever notice how babies are keen explorers of the world? They like to test things out and figure out what they are and how they work, by looking at them, feeling them with their hands, listening to them, and ever putting things in their mouth. According to John Medina, University of Washington brain scientist, "babies are the model of how we learn – not through passive reaction to the environment but by active testing through observation, hypothesis, experiment, and conclusion."¹ Well, if babies, pretty much right after they're born, have this natural urge to explore, is it likely that God built in us an ability to use our minds and reason and put together the pieces about some of the bigger questions in life?

You might have noticed that this sermon is entitled "The Freedom to Love Him with All of Our Minds." Jesus says that the first and greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all of your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. When we think of loving something or someone, we think of using our hearts and at a deeper level, our souls. But what does it mean to love God with all our minds?

Sometimes it seems like we're told or somehow come to feel like, if we have questions or doubts as Christians, or if we go through seasons of unbelief, that we ought to not feel that way. That our faith, or even God, might be threatened by our doubts. But I don't think that's the case. Nor is it supported by the Bible. Let's explore this a little bit. I have a text for you today. It comes from Matthew 21:28-32.

¹ Medina, John. "Exploration/Brain Rules". Pear Press. 05/07/2010
<<http://www.brainrules.net/exploration>>.

Listen to the word of the Lord.

Jesus Tells the Parable of the Two Sons

“What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work today in the vineyard.’

“‘I will not,’ he answered, but later he repented and went.

“Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, ‘I will sir,’ but he did not go.

“Which of the two did what his father wanted?”

“The first,” they answered.

Jesus said to them, “I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.”

I think this parable is really interesting when you realize what Jesus may have had to say through it. In the book “Trusting God” Earl Palmer offers an interpretation and reflection on this parable that I fully appreciate. We try to understand it by first seeing it as a short story. The story works because each son has a fault and there is a resolution for each of their situations.

In the parable, the father asks the first son to work in the vineyard, and the son, without any consideration, says “no, I will not,” opposing his father’s will as if it was bad for him. He comes across to us as independent and defiant. I picture a young man stalking out of the house, determined to do his own thing instead of doing what his father requested. But later on in the day, his father’s will makes sense to him and he repents and goes to work in the vineyard.

The second son does something completely different. When his father tells him to go work in the vineyard, he says “I will sir.” On the surface, it seems as though he is in tune with his father’s will and will go forth and do it. But the fact that he never made it to the vineyard shows that he had simply avoided conflict with his father and said what he thought his dad wanted to hear.

Jesus then followed up the parable by asking the crowd to which he was talking: “Which of the two did the will of his father?”

The crowd then responded, “the first,” then Jesus states sternly to the religious leaders in the crowd: “I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.”

We see why Jesus rebuked the Pharisees and elders. Their staged religiousness was not what God was seeking. They talked the talk but did not actually seek out God in their actions.

For any of us who have struggled with following the will of God and trusting in Him,

what Jesus says in the parable is encouraging. The way that he tells the story, he shows that he understands human personality. I love how Palmer puts it: “Just as agricultural parables of Jesus are agriculturally accurate, so the interpersonal parables are psychologically accurate.”¹ Jesus shows by means of this parable that he fully expects “sharp and even negative reactions to the kingly claims of his Lordship upon our lives.”¹ In other words, he knows that it is not easy for us to have faith, hand over the authority in our lives to him and to follow him. We have it in our human nature to explore, to verify, to feel confident that what or whom we’re placing our trust in, is worthy of our trust, and therefore worthy of our following.

Jesus also shows that he’s also not surprised by the evasive and insincere reply of the second son. And it seems like there’s kind of a tragedy in the story of the second son. Because he had carefully calculated what it would take to avoid conflict with his father, he never goes through the process of meeting his father and getting to know that his will was good. Instead, he missed out on the clarifying opportunity that can be brought upon by an honest conversation, and as a result also missed the important things represented by the vineyard, or God’s kingdom.

The principle of his story has to do with faith. When Jesus asked the listeners, “which of the two did the will of his father?” he imprinted upon them that the one who did the will of the father is the one who trusted the father, even though it took all afternoon for him to do it.

In our lives, it may take years or perhaps huge chunks of time, to trust in the Lord. In any case, through this parable it seems that God wants us to go through the clarifying process of learning about him and trusting in his goodness and his worthiness to be the head of our lives. And that he understands that many of us are going to explore our doubts and questions, in order to later feel confident that Christ is who we want to follow.

Well, Jesus told a number of parables that, like this one, had some profound messages. Let’s also look at the accounts of his actions and words directly among his disciples and followers.

[John 21:1-15]

I’d like to make three reflections on this text.

First of all, did you guys notice how much detail John puts into this account of Jesus and the disciples? He does this throughout the entire gospel, but let’s just notice in this passage how he writes such things as the name of the sea that they were on, the names of most of the disciples that were there on the boat, where they were originally from, even the number of fish that they caught. I think there is a certain intentionality that is there to show readers that he is giving the most accurate of an account as possible, that these are not just anecdotes but eye-witness accounts of Jesus and his interactions with people.

² Palmer, Earl. *Trusting God*. 2006. p. 15

Let's also look at the verses prior to this chapter that read: "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

To me, it's as if John had almost anticipated that readers of this writing (what we now call the gospels) would find some of the things in there a little bit hard to believe, and so he's frank with us – he says these are the events that he has witnessed, and he says that he has shared these events with us because he wants to us to have the kind of relationship with Christ that will give us life, just like it did for him.

Secondly, when I read this passage of Jesus coming to the disciples on the sea, I am moved that after Jesus' resurrection, he repeatedly reached out his disciples and talked with them, performed miracles among them, ate with them and reassured them that he was indeed God and indeed risen. After he appeared to the disciples, including Thomas, who he told to put his hand into his side, Jesus continued to make his presence among the disciples until there was no doubt in their minds that He was really the Lord and that He had overcome death.

In Revelation 3:20, the apostle John states that Jesus says "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me." I believe, just as how Jesus reached out to his disciples and followers to let them know that He was God and that He loved them, God seeks us through His Holy Spirit and wants us to experience the resurrection as well.

A last reflection I want to make on this passage is how much Jesus' followers are affected by their experience with Jesus after the resurrection. I want to focus specifically on Peter. After he sees that Jesus is standing on the shore, Peter jumps into the water and swims towards Him. Later he has a conversation with Him, in which Jesus asks him three times if he loves him, Peter says yes three times, and Jesus tells him to feed his lambs and take care of his sheep. Jesus also indicates the kind of death by which Peter would die to glorify God. Later on all but one of the remaining disciples would be martyred.

A Roman historian by the name of Cornelius Tacitus reported that early Christians were killed for their faith, and were done so by getting covered with the skins of animals, thrown into and tied up in stadiums then getting torn by dogs until they perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were burnt as nightly illumination in courtyards at parties.³

That people who witnessed Jesus or had faith in the witnesses of Jesus were willing to die incredibly painful deaths based on what they discovered about God's love for them, for me personally is one of the most convincing things that lead me to believe that Jesus Christ is who he and others said he was.

³ "Cornelius Tacitus". Like The Master Ministries. 04/25/10
<<http://www.neverthirsty.org/pp/historical-secular-quotes-about-jesus/cornelius-tacitus.html>>.
(Quoted from Tacitus, Annals 15:44.)

Some people say that Jesus was a great moral teacher but not necessarily a God or anyone more than a good a person. I love the quote by C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*, where he says, "A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic -- on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg -- or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God."^{4a}

Early Christians made that choice, even to the point of death.

In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis also states: "Now that I am a Christian I do have moods in which the whole thing looks improbable: but when I was an atheist I had moods in which Christianity looked terribly probable."^{4b}

To me, Christianity seems like the most probable explanation for the biggest questions that I have in life. Yet I do have seasons of questioning and doubting, and it's comforting to hear that other Christians share in that yearning to understand God as well.

I will never forget some of the turning points in my faith journey, when my faith has grown as the result of having first experienced some pretty strong doubts and uncertainties, and then exploring the questions that I have had within community.

I am incredibly grateful for a particular time in college, when my doubts were strong and my questions outnumbered the answers that I had. During a retreat, I went to one of the staff members with the college ministry, Brandon, and told him that my faith had dwindled down to just a number of intellectual and moral questions, with nothing remotely close to answers to them. I told him that I wanted to experience the truth and not feel uncertain that my faith was based on something real. He then responded in a very unexpected way: that I was in a good place, that my honest about my doubts was a positive thing, that it was good that I was asking my questions out loud and talking to other people about it.

It was incredibly encouraging. I felt free to be honest about my thoughts, my questions, and my doubts. Brandon then did the good work of helping pair me up with a mentor who also worked at the church, a woman who would walk beside me in my faith journey for the next couple of years.

God is gracious in our uncertainties. John the Baptist, the man whom Jesus called the greatest prophet, and who made some of the greatest statements of faith about Jesus, also asked one of the most honest and poignant questions of doubt in the Bible, when from prison he sent two disciples to ask Him: "Are you the Messiah, or should we expect someone else?"

^{4a} Lewis, C.S. *Mere Christianity*. 1960. Chapter 8

^{4b} Lewis, C.S. *Mere Christianity*. 1960. Chapter 21

If that isn't an expression of doubt, then I don't know what is. Yet Jesus blessed him and gave him assurance by sending the disciples to report back that He had performed, whereby the blind received sight, the lame walked, the deaf heard, the dead were raised and good news was preached to the poor. He then said "blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me." In John's doubt, Jesus didn't rebuke him or say "tough luck, you've lost your faith." Instead, he sent disciples back to assure him of his goodness and that He was indeed the Son of God.

One time in a confirmation class, when one of the youth was talking about something that a Christian teacher of his said that he wasn't sure about, he said, "is it alright to ask questions?" Upon which my first reaction was to say "Yes, of course!" But the truth is, often times, there are questions that we are afraid to ask in Christian communities, or even to think out loud or in our heads. My hope is that we would continue to encourage one another to have honest conversations about our faith, and to know that God is neither surprised nor offended by these questions.

If you're experiencing doubt, one of the things you can do is become part of a community of believers. Talk to other Christians about these questions.

Gather information. Read through books like *Mere Christianity*, *Trusting God*, *Letters from a Skeptic*, and *the Case for Christ*.

Pray. Ask God to show you his spirit, to give you the experience of his resurrection and of his love.

The thing is, there are no absolutes in our faith in God. We do not have the knowledge or proof that can sweep away all of our questions. I love when Palmer says this: What we have instead is just enough evidence to assure us of the love, the integrity and faithfulness of Jesus Christ.

There is something very intangible and mysterious about faith – that the Holy Spirit affirms and assures in our hearts the experience of believing. And where God really commands my respect and love is that He has made himself known to us by his Son, His Word and the Holy Spirit, but that he reserves for us the *freedom* to follow Him, to trust Him, to love Him with all of our hearts, and with all of our souls and with all of our minds.

May we discover the trust, and may the truth set us free.