

BELIEVING AND DOUBTING

Scriptures: Mark 9:14-28; James 1:5-8

In the movie *A Beautiful Mind*, which won the Academy award for Best Picture in 2001, Russell Crowe plays John Nash a brilliant but socially inept math professor. Nash meets and falls in love with a girl named Alicia. After going together for some time, Nash struggles with how to discuss with her the subject of marriage. They go out to dinner and Nash says to Alicia, “Does our relationship warrant a long term commitment? I need some kind of proof, verifiable empirical data?” Alicia says, “Give me a moment to redefine my girlish notions of romance.” Then she says “Proof. Verifiable data. Okay. How big is the universe?” Nash says, “Infinite. Alicia says, “How do you know? Nash says, “Because empirical data points to it.” “Can you prove it?” “No.” “Then how do you know for sure?” Nash replies, “I don’t. I just believe it.” Alicia says, “It’s the same way with love, I guess.”

Over the summer when I invited you to submit questions of faith, one person wrote, “How do you achieve unquestionable faith?” Another person cited James 1:5-6, which says, “If any of you lack wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. But ask in faith, never doubting.” The person wrote, “I struggle with the doubting part.”

Both of these questions assume that faith and doubt are mutually exclusive, that in order to have faith you can’t have doubt, and if you have doubt you can’t have faith. But I question whether that is true. In our second scripture reading from Mark 9, a desperate father comes to Jesus begging him to heal his son. He says to Jesus, “If you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.” Jesus replies, “If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes.” Immediately the father cries out, “I believe; help my unbelief.”

Like most of us this father is a mixture of faith and doubt. He believes and hopes that Jesus can give new life to his son, but as John Nash would say, he has no proof—no verifiable empirical data.

This is especially important when you look at what happens next. Jesus casts a demon out of the boy. (By the way, this is not going to be a sermon about demons; you will have to submit that as a separate question of faith.) But after Jesus casts out the demon, the boy cries out and convulses and finally collapses so that most people think he is dead. Imagine the anguish of the father at this moment. He has asked Jesus to heal his son, and now it appears his son is dead. All his hopes are shattered. It is over. His son is gone.

One of the other questions of faith submitted this summer asked, “How do you follow God’s word and believe when it does not feel that God is on your side?” I suspect the father felt that way at the moment his son lay limp on the ground. How do you believe in God when it feels like God is not on your side?

The answer is that you wait. Sometimes you wait. Because the story is not over. Verse 27 says, “But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up.” In Greek it says literally that Jesus

“raised him up” using a Greek word frequently found in the New Testament for God raising Jesus from the dead. The verse goes on to say, “And he was able to stand.” The Greek word translated “able to stand” is a word often used in the New Testament to describe someone who arose from the dead. The boy may have been dead or just unconscious. We don’t know. But it does not matter. Jesus raised him to new life as a whole new person.

I think this story is a reminder that sometimes the healing Jesus gives to us in this life is incomplete. The final healing will come at the resurrection. Sometimes, despite how hard we pray, Jesus does not heal our children, at least not in this life. That’s why in this life we are stuck between faith and doubt. In this life we never have proof, we never have verifiable data. It takes all the faith we can muster to say with the father, “I believe; help my unbelief.”

But according to Jesus, that is enough. If you have enough faith to seek out Jesus, enough faith to ask Jesus into your life even if you aren’t sure about him, if you are willing to come to him and say, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief,” that is all you need. Jesus can work with that and do more than you ever imagined.

Later the disciples ask Jesus, “Why could we not cast it out?” Jesus replies, “This kind can come out only through prayer.” Apparently the disciples were working so hard to cure this boy, they forgot to pray. Jesus did not demand that they have great faith. The father did not have great faith, but at least he sought out Jesus and asked for help. Faith is not about how much confidence or assurance or certainty you feel; it is about a decision to turn your life over to God because you know you are not managing things by yourself.

When it comes to faith, the tragedy is not to be troubled by doubt but to be paralyzed by indecision. In a wonderful novel called *Life of Pi*, Yann Martel writes,

It is not atheists who get stuck in my craw but agnostics. (Comment: An atheist is someone who believes there is no God; an agnostic is someone who can’t decide.) Doubt is useful for a while. We must all pass through the garden of Gethsemane. If Christ played with doubt, so must we. If Christ spent an anguished night in prayer, if he burst out from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” then surely we are also permitted doubt. But we must move on. To choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation (p. 28).

“Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.” In the very act of saying that, the father at least was praying, which apparently is more than the disciples were doing. Going back to John Nash, faith is less like a mathematical proof and more like a commitment to get married. It is less a matter of indisputable evidence and more a decision you make—a decision about the fundamental assumptions and commitments on which you will base your life.

In the movie *A Beautiful Mind*, John and Alicia get married, but John is stricken with paranoid schizophrenia, a devastating mental illness. His disease gives him delusions that he is working undercover for the Department of Defense to intercept plans for a terrorist attack against the United States buried in code within magazines and newspapers. John thinks he has been hired to break this code by analyzing thousands of articles looking for repeating patterns in the

letters and words. But it is all in his imagination. He does not know what is real and what isn't, and as we watch the movie we aren't sure either. But at a key point in the movie when he is nearing a total breakdown, his wife Alicia kneels down in front of him and says, "You want to know what is real? This is real," and she puts her hand on his face. "This is real," and she puts his hand on her heart. Then she says, "Maybe the part that knows the real from the delusion isn't here," and she touches his forehead, "but here," and she puts her hand on his heart.

At the end of the movie John Nash receives the 1994 Nobel Prize for economics. In his acceptance speech he says, "I have always believed in numbers, in equations and logic that lead to reason. After a lifetime of such pursuits I have been led to ask: What is logic? Who decides reason? And I have made the most important discovery of my career, of my life: it is only in the mysterious equations of love that any logical reasons can be found."

Faith is less like solving an equation, and more like deciding to get married. It is less a matter of certainty based on evidence and more a matter of commitment based on love. Do you know what is real? This is real. God's love for you is real and strong and can give you new life even after you die." You do not need total assurance or complete confidence to receive that gift, only enough faith to ask for it.

- Ken Onstot