Sunday, May 30, 1993
CAN ONE BE A CHRISTIAN AND A SKEPTIC?
Matthew 11:2-6

How can I be absolutely sure I'm really in love and that the person I plan to marry is the right one for me? Is there any way I can be completely certain and without a doubt that I have chosen the right vocation? Did I choose the right college or university for my education? How can I be absolutely sure that God exists? How can I know without a doubt what God's will is for me? Is the Christian tradition the only one with the truth about God? Is there anything in the world that I can truly and always count on?

Such questions are being asked all the time. We all have a desire for certitude. It comes from good motivations. We want to base our lives on solid foundations. We want to be sure that what we believe is accurate. But doubts still creep into our thinking. Is absolute certainty possible? Can one be a Christian and a skeptic at the same time?

When John the Baptist was in prison, he began to have serious doubts as to whether or not Jesus was God's chosen one. John had been his advance agent. Now he was having second thoughts. "Have I been mistaken? Have I put my faith in the wrong person?" The longer he languished in prison and the more he heard about what Jesus was doing and teaching, the more doubtful he became. In an attempt to overcome his skepticism, he sent some of his followers to ask Jesus one more time, "Are you God's chosen one, or shall we look for another?" It was an appropriate and honest question.

Had not Jesus himself taught in the Sermon on the Mount to "beware of false prophets who come to us in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits." And in another place, Jesus told his disciples to be "wise as serpents and innocent as doves." According to Jesus, it's not only okay but necessary to be skeptical.

Personally, I'm always skeptical of any self-anointed leader who says that he or she is going to lead us on a moral crusade to root out all evil and moral decay and build a perfect society. In the same way, I'm skeptical of those political leaders who promise everything and hold themselves up as the only truly righteous persons or as the only ones with the answers to our country's problems. I'm especially skeptical of those people who always claim to know God's will in every situation and who claim that their modest victories, including their wealth and success, are all proof that God is on their side. I'm equally skeptical of those people who see every bad thing that happens to them or someone else as proof that God is punishing them.

Reinhold Niebuhr, a parish minister and later a professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, often told a story of two of his older parishioners who were members of the congregation he served in Detroit. One, a millionaire, was utterly convinced that his wealth had come about because of his righteousness. It was God's reward. This man had always tithed by giving at least 10% of his income for the work of the church. Another member, also in his 70s, who had given interest-free loans and credit to industrial workers who had lost their jobs in the depression, died a broken and bankrupt man. Why was one person so successful and the other seemingly a failure? Was God punishing one and rewarding the other? Niebuhr was always skeptical of such assumptions. After all, didn't Jesus say that "God makes the sun to shine on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust."

One of the temptations of religious faith is that it can turn into a lust for certitude and a loss of skepticism. It's a corrupting temptation because it can lead to idolatry. In the Old Testament story of Moses, there came a time when Moses was away from the people of Israel for many days while he sought to discover God's will. While he was gone, the people began to complain. They didn't like the uncertainty his absence produced. Not only was Moses absent, but God seemed distant or non-existent as well. They wanted something they could count on, something that would always be the same — a God they could see and touch. Thus they convinced Aaron to make for them a golden calf which they could worship and make the center of their faith. Here was an object that would never change and which they could see and touch.

In the same way, our lust for certitude can get us into trouble. Sometimes it can cause us to misuse the Bible. In the desire for certainty and because of an unwillingness to tolerate any ambiguity, some try to make the Bible into an inerrant, visible, external authority; an answer book for every question. In so doing, they make it into something it was never meant to be, and worse still, it can distort the message of the Bible as well.

To give a crude example: the attempt to reconcile the creation stories in the Book of Genesis with some of the modern scientific theories of creation by interpreting the six days as six geological periods exchanges the religious meaning of the Biblical narratives for a pottage of pseudo facts. If one asks the Bible the wrong questions, one receives the wrong answers. The Bible was never meant to be a book of scientific facts or answers. It's a collection of writings where the most important question we can ask is not, "How did it happen?" but rather, "What does it mean?"

Yet the continuing controversies about the truth of the Bible show how widespread among religious people is the lust for certitude. The belief in Biblical inerrancy reveals a refusal to live with any uncertainty or ambiguity. To take the Bible seriously, while at the same time recognizing that it does not have all the answers to all of our questions, is not to discount its importance as the foundational document on which the church stands, but it does remove the idolatrous authority with which its words are sometimes stamped.

Here's an image that has been helpful to me. Think of the Bible as a lamp rather than a mirror. A mirror reflects reality as it is, and that kind of assertion underscores Biblical inerrancy. In contrast, a lamp gives light; it is directional; it illuminates as well as causes shadows. What we see and how we see it depends on where the lamp is located. And different people point the light in different directions. Thus the Biblical writers were expressing reality illuminated by their own interests and disposition and in terms of the culture in which they lived.

The Apostle Paul used another metaphor. He said, "We have this treasure in earthen vessels." The lust for certitude tends to make the treasure and the vessel one and the same. Remember always that there's a difference between the lust for certitude and the search for truth.

It is the lust for certitude, for example, that causes some people to join religious cults, which promise to take away all uncertainty because the leader has and will provide all the right answers. Cults like the Branch Davidians near Waco, Texas, recently so much in the news, are an extreme example of what the lust for certitude can do. Throughout history, it has been a fact that we human beings have difficulty handling freedom and the uncertainty that goes with freedom. There are those among us who will quickly and even gladly give up their freedom for security of body and mind and for certainty about what to believe and will follow blindly the orders of the leader. Religious cults promise a way of life that does away with all uncertainty and freedom.

So it is that people generally join cults to attempt to satisfy their longing for absolute truth. Then they can put all their doubts aside. They no longer have to make any decisions on their own. Those who join cults are also searching for a community without discord and where everything is planned and taken care of. They give away all their freedom to one leader. Thus their longings can be satisfied for a time, at least within a religious compound, which seems secure from the dangers and temptations of the outside world.

Religious cults are particularly appealing as an answer to the lust for certitude because a cult always has a charismatic leader who says he or she has been given new, exclusive revelations about God. Here is total certainty. Anyone who does not believe and follow the leader's teachings is not only wrong but on the side of Satan.

The answer to the lust for certitude and the cult mentality is to realize that one can be a Christian and a skeptic at the same time. Indeed, Jesus encouraged a healthy skepticism among his followers. Here are some of the reasons he did.

First, Jesus knew that uncertainty is built into all of life. It's part of life's adventure. Without uncertainty, which forms the basis for curiosity, we would never experience the joy of making new discoveries. As far as our Christian faith is concerned, the lack of certitude about the nature of God may actually represent a healthy respect for the danger of substituting human forms for the Holy One. God can never be totally described or experienced. There is always more to God than we can see or know at any one time.

Second, having a healthy skepticism keeps us open to new knowledge and experience. As followers of the "Reformed tradition" of the Christian faith, we believe that God's truth is continually breaking forth. There is always more to learn. If we believe we already know all there is to know, we will be blind to new knowledge.

I've mentioned before in previous sermons that when Galileo showed his telescope to the leading sages of his day, the response generally fell into three categories. Some people were properly struck by what they saw and were not afraid to begin to see and understand the universe in a new way. A second group examined the other end of the telescope after they had looked through it because they were convinced that Galileo had pasted something on the lens. They were convinced that their present knowledge of the universe was correct and that anything in conflict with it had to be false. The third group refused even to look through the lens. They didn't want to see anything that might cause them to re-examine the basic assumptions on which they thought their lives depended. They were afraid of any uncertainty, which means they were also afraid of new truth.

Third, when John the Baptist sent his disciples to visit Jesus because he was skeptical about whether or not Jesus was God's chosen one, here's what Jesus told the followers of John to tell their teacher. He said, "Go and tell John what you hear and see — the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them." Note that Jesus didn't put down John's skepticism. He, however, implied that the way to handle skepticism is to be open to the activity of God that is present in the world, even though that activity doesn't always fit our preconceived notions of what we think God is doing, or what we think God should do. God's ways are not always our ways.
Jesus was also saying to John that there was no way in which he could absolutely prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that he was God's chosen one. Faith, in the last analysis, is a

basic trust in reality that goes beyond facts or absolute proof. It is also an openness to mystery. A vital and active religious faith implies a continual search for meaning. Even the scientific enterprise, dependent as it is upon empirical verification, would come to a halt if scientists insisted upon nothing less than absolute certainty before proceeding further. Scientific knowledge would be little if limited to certainties; it is made up of probabilities, approximations, and hypotheses. The true scientist is seeking to understand as he or she continues to search for the truth. The assurance that the scientist is on the right track arises from a growing interpretation and understanding of the data.

Our Christian faith flourishes best too, not when we are insisting upon infallibility or inerrancy, but when we are concerned with understanding our faith in relation to the happenings of everyday life and when we are not afraid of some skepticism or doubt.

Can one be too skeptical? Of course. If you were too skeptical, you would never be able to make a decision or a commitment. What we need is what I call a “healthy skepticism.” A person who possesses healthy skepticism is one who is not afraid to ask new questions or explore new possibilities and at the same time maintains a sense of awe and mystery about life and creation.

The Christian faith is, above all, a self-transcending, trustful love of God. In that way, faith and love are quite similar. Love is always more than rational reflection and the marshalling of facts in order to prove the certainty of love. Love begins and grows in a relationship. The same is true of faith. The more we live and explore our relationship with God, the more our faith grows as well. Amen.