

“Holy Doubt”

Matt Meyer

*“Before the burning bush of this world,
Asking us to love all its holy, hurting ground,
Come with whatever seed of faith you can muster, and listen...” -Enfleshed*

Join us for a celebration of faith and doubt through story and song. Matt will reflect on a high stakes wager, a secret doubt, and what it takes to stand up to bullies in heaven and earth.

Chalice lighting / Reading

Before the burning bush of this world,
Asking us to love all its holy, hurting ground,
Come with whatever seed of faith you can muster, and listen:
Listen for the voice of God thundering softly in your depths.
Listen with your hunger. Your hurt. Your heart and all its wisdom cultivated over
time in the company of others.
These are the soils from which God calls us to blossom and bloom, to bear fruit
that nourishes and grow our future with care.
This tending requires courage but it is not a sacrifice.
Just let yourself unfold in the direction of shared flourishing.
-enfleshed liturgies

Holy Doubt

Sermon by Matt Meyer

One time at band camp..

Well, drum camp, specifically, when I was in high school, I stumbled into a conversation one evening some fellow students were having with a camp counselor, who was sharing about his christian faith. He told us about a theological question called Pascal's Wager. The thing to know about Pascal, for those of you who aren't familiar with him, is that he was a theologian who had the idea of this wager.

Either god is real or not, and you either believe in him or not. So the smart thing is to believe in God, because you avoid the risk of hell if he's real. And even if he isn't real, then no one goes to hell or heaven anyway, so nothing gained, nothing lost. Essentially, by believing, you have a chance at avoiding hell, and by not believing you risk a *zillion years of suffering*.

Now, at the time I identified as atheist. And this question didn't quite convince me to believe in god, but secretly I did struggle with it for years. The logic seemed sound and I didn't want to admit it to others, or even to myself, that belief in god seemed like the more rational choice.

It was over a decade later, when I admitted my doubt out loud. In the kitchen one evening while doing dishes with a housemate, I admitted my doubt in atheism.

Being able to name that doubt out loud, opened up a conversation that helped me to talk through my complicated feelings about it.

And it was in that conversation I realized that you could place this same wager on any religion, on any idea of god. The choice was never only whether to believe in a specific kind of christian god or not. The choice *could* be between any of a *thousand* versions of god, in a thousand different belief systems.

And in that case, the most strategic choice, the rational choice in fact, would be to believe in whichever god threatens you with the worst violence for betraying them.

If every god says to you, “believe in me or else...” the one to pick is the one who’s “Or else” is the worst.

So you have the best chance at avoiding the worst version of hell.

Friends, this is no way to be religious. It’s no way to run a life.

Any god who would treat heaven as a bribe for the faithful few, is no god of love and no god worthy of praise. Our spiritual ancestors founded the Universalist tradition by proclaiming *this* heresy 200 years ago.

I’ll always remember the moment in my fourth grade religion class, when my teacher told us that the bible said only 144,000 people would get into heaven. At the time, as a fourth grader, I responded by wanting more than anything to be good enough to make the cut. But now, I wouldn’t actually want to be part of a club that was so exclusive to so many.

Unjust authorities all over the world maintain their power by offering privileges to pay off the loyalty of a few, at the cost of the many. I wouldn’t take that bribe. Not on earth, not in heaven.

If you’re in this sanctuary this morning, this is probably old news to you. Not many people attend UU congregations without having already rejected the traditional idea of hell.

But the story of an authority who would offer salvation to some at the cost of the many, in exchange for a regime of fear and loyalty. That is also the story of white supremacy. It’s the story of patriarchy. Offering privileges to a big enough group that they don’t question the injustice of the larger system.

The “Flying Horses Riot” took place in Philadelphia in 1834. An organized white mob destroyed the homes of African-Americans in their neighborhood. Irish immigrants, living in the same neighborhoods, were

told to put a candle in their window on the night of the riot, a symbol to identify themselves as white, or at least, not-black, so their houses would be spared. These Irish immigrants, my own cultural ancestors who were entering the racial hierarchy of this new country were asked to pick sides. They faced a question choosing between safety for themselves or dignity for all.

Many of them put the candle in their window. They chose whiteness. Their homes were spared.

Systems of injustice continue to offer the bribes of privilege, to many of us. Us white folks, us able-bodied folks, us men, cis folks, perhaps most egregiously, those of us who literally inherit money. We're promised safety and comfort for the few, as long as we put a candle in our window and close our eyes to the violence outside our doors. These systems perpetuate the lie that you can keep your family safe, as long as you remain silent about violence down the street.

Before I had admitted my doubt in atheism, I had struggled for so many years with Pascal's wager. Not because I had the wrong answer, but because it was the wrong question.

Don't just doubt the religious answers people give you, doubt the questions.

Doubt the questions that are meant to control. Doubt the questions that don't begin with love. Doubt the questions that are meant to divide us, particularly the so-called saved from the unsaved.

Three traditions of doubt

You all are familiar with the major religious traditions around the world. But I want to tell you about a religious tradition that is as old as any of them and as global as all of them. The ancient religious tradition of doubt. In fact, I want to tell you about three traditions of holy doubt.

The first goes at least as far back as Anaxagoras (an axe AGG or us), who was the first person in history to be indicted in court for atheism in 467 BCE. His crime was that after he saw a meteorite fall to earth, he theorized that the stars and planets in the heavens might actually just be fiery orbs of metal and rock, instead of gods traveling the skies.

One tradition of doubt is a tradition of people looking up to the heavens and wondering if they're not so different from the world we can grasp here on earth. On earth as it is in heaven.

This first tradition gave us the scientific method. It is doubt in the unquestioned supremacy of tradition. It is belief in the possibility of learning and change. It's belief in truth seeking.

A second tradition of doubt is a tradition of people looking not up to the heavens, but across to each other. Learning from each other across cultures and traditions can, wonderfully, lead to second-guessing our old narrow assumptions.

This tradition goes back at least as far Xenophanes (zen OFF An ease), who was also greek, but traveled all around the ancient world. And the more he traveled, the more he noticed that the Greek gods seemed so, well, greek. He ended up claiming that if horses could paint, they would paint their gods to look like horses.

This second tradition is a tradition of cross cultural engagement, that invites us to see the world through another's perspective. It's the basis of every movement for peace. It is doubt in the stories we may have once taken for granted. It is belief in the experience of those who are different from us. It is belief in diversity, equity, and inclusion.

A third tradition of holy doubt, is the sacred tradition of questioning unearned and unjust authority. And for this last one, let's go to the Bible itself. As an adult, I've come back to the bible, not to take it literally, but to take it seriously. And I love that the religious tradition of doubt is alive and well even in scripture.

Two separate times in the story of the Exodus, God gets angry with the infidelity of the Israelites and tells Moses to get out of the way, so he can destroy the whole lot of them. But Moses doubts god decision and stands in the way against the genocide.

First Moses appeals to god's more loving nature. But I love that when it happens again Moses appeals to God's delicate ego. He says, if you kill us, "Then the Egyptians will hear about it! and everyone will gossip about how you weren't strong enough to bring us to freedom, like you promised." God agrees and repents.

When we doubt the seemingly limitless power of violent authorities, when we resolve to stand strong as believers in love and justice, peace is possible and even god himself may repent for his violence.

This third tradition is the tradition of justice. It is the doubt of unearned authority. It is belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

Any god who would treat heaven as a bribe for the faithful few, is no god of love and no god worthy of praise.

Unjust authorities all over the world maintain their power by offering privileges to pay off the loyalty of a few, at the cost of the many.
Do not take the bribe. Not on earth, not in heaven.

Don't just doubt the religious answers people give you, doubt the questions that don't begin with love.

These are three traditions of holy doubt, which are also three traditions of belief. Three traditions of conviction.

1. Faith in the possibility of learning and change. It is a celebration of truth.
2. Faith in the experience of those who are different from us a celebration of thriving beloved community.
3. Faith in the inherent worth of every person. A celebration of justice and equity.

Our reading offered this invitation

*"Come with whatever seed of faith you can muster
let yourself unfold in the direction of shared flourishing."*

Whatever your understanding of god or the divine, Unitarian Universalists have inherited these religious traditions of doubt and these traditions of faith. These traditions of courage and shared flourishing.

Friends, join me in the tradition of those faithful to justice, peace, and truth.

Charge / Benediction

May you be blessed in the ancient religious tradition of doubt,
Doubt that invites us to learn more and to love more.
Doubt that questions the tyrants whether in heaven or on earth,
and stands in the way of violence, calling for peace.
And may you go with faith in peace, in justice, and in truth.

