

### WHEN IN DOUBT

This past year has been one of the most challenging years of my life--perhaps of yours as well. Aside from historical references to the Black Plague in the Middle Ages, they didn't teach us about pandemics in seminary, and unlike other difficulties that I have had to deal with personally and as a pastor, this one has been so very full of uncertainty. It still is. You know the questions; you've asked them yourself. When will it ever end? How many more deaths will there be? When will all my loved ones be able to be vaccinated? Is this just the first of many such pandemics? And the list goes on. There are economic questions, institutional questions, and far more. For churches and other religious institutions there are all sorts of uncertainties, like when to fully reopen buildings, what technological innovations must we adopt, and the big one: will folks come back when it's all said and done. So much uncertainty. So much concern. So many doubts!

In an effort to create a bit of connection with parishioners after we first went into lockdown a year ago, I began broadcasting on Facebook Live what I call A Poem and a Prayer. Each day I choose a poem to read, offer a few comments about it, and then a prayer. The prayer always includes intercessions on behalf of the sick, the grieving and those who yearn for a more just world.

I have been comforted, challenged, encouraged and sometimes puzzled by poets I have known most of my life, like Robert Frost, Langston Hughes and Carl Sandburg, poets I have only recently encountered, like Joy Harjo and Jeanne Walker Murray, and poets who are personal friends, like Tanya Hochschild, Jennifer McLean and Maren Tirabassi. I have read poems by Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist and agnostic poets. Black poets, white poets, Asian-American poets and others.

It has been a mainstay for me, and I am told for others as well, as we have moved through these very tenuous times. And each day one poet or another has put into words that which is often more complex, more vague, more abstract than what can be captured in mere prose or simple narrative.

Poetry, it seems, lends itself to times like these.

Kathleen Norris is both an essayist and a poet who most often addresses spiritual matters in her work. In an essay titled "Belief, Doubt and Sacred Ambiguity," she writes about how in worship and in the life of faith we are often confronted with ideas to which we may not be able to give our full intellectual assent. But that, she suggests, should not be cause for discarding terms and concepts like the Trinity, resurrection or even God. Such ideas may be

incomprehensible on one level or another, but that does not mean they are not true. “As a poet,” she writes, “I am used to saying what I don’t thoroughly comprehend. . . . And when doubts [assail] me, when what I believe] or [don’t] believe [flies] around in circles in my mind, buzzing like angry bees, I . . . recall the wise words of William Safford, who once said that he never had writer’s block because a poem failed to come, he simply lowered his standards and accepted whatever came along.” (*Amazing Grace*, 66)

I am not suggesting, nor is Norris, that we reject scholarship or science. There is a place, an important place, for both in our lives. Thank God for the research scientists who made it possible for me to receive my two doses of the Moderna vaccine. Because of their careful, exacting work, because of their paying attention to detail, because of their following the logic of cause and effect, I can feel safe in receiving the vaccine. I can feel a measure of security in the knowledge that it will aid in keeping me protected, as well as those around me. Science is important. It can lead to life saving measures and more.

But not everything in the world can be dealt with by science, through science, or in a scientific fashion.

Thomas wasn’t there when the other disciples first encountered the risen Jesus. He was away. Maybe they’d sent him out to get milk for the next day’s breakfast. Maybe he’d needed some alone time. After all they’d been hiding out and cooped up together ever since Jesus had been arrested on Thursday night. We don’t know why he was missing, but he was.

It wasn’t that he didn’t trust the others. He knew what Mary Magdalene had said about seeing Jesus in the garden on Sunday morning. But she was prone to being very emotional and may very well have been seeing things. And sure, the other guys wouldn’t intentionally lie to him, but they so wanted to believe it was true, they may have talked one another into believing Jesus was alive, and that they had seen him. But really, he appeared out of nowhere? He showed up at their supper table, even though the doors were locked? It just didn’t ring true. It was beyond believing. “Unless I see the evidence for myself,” says Thomas, “I just can’t believe it’s true.”

To his credit, Thomas doesn’t abandon ship. He doesn’t write the others off as a bunch of delusional has-beens. He sticks with them. Much like someone who I recently heard describing themselves as a church going agnostic. And so it is that Thomas finds himself the following week sharing Sunday night supper with the others.

Again, they have locked themselves in and are taken by surprise when once again Jesus appears out of nowhere. They are shaking in their sandals, when he offers familiar words of comfort and care. “Peace be with you,” he says. They breathe a bit more easily, all except Thomas, who is befuddled. He can’t believe his own eyes. Jesus turns to him and meets him

right where he stands. "Here, Thomas, put your hand in my side. Put your finger in the marks on my hands. Do not doubt--believe!" Suddenly something washes over Thomas that he can't quite explain. A sense of wonder? A recognition that it is love not physical evidence that binds him to Jesus? Whatever it is, he falls to his knees, and lifts his voice in words of praise, "My Lord," he cries out, "My God!"

Note, and this is important, Thomas never follows through on the invitation offered him by Jesus. He doesn't touch his wounds; he doesn't thrust his hand in the spear-caused hole in his side. He doesn't rely on logic. Logic tells him he is hallucinating. But despite his doubts, despite the very mixed signals of his experience, Thomas moves to a space where he is able to hold in tension seemingly opposite ideas. Dead men don't rise out of their graves, but love transcends death. It is like poetry in motion. As theologian Paul Tillich writes: "Doubt isn't the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith." (*Dynamics of Faith*)

When writer Kathy Dahlen was in college she majored in English and was enamored with words and ideas. But she felt a need at a certain point, as she puts it, "to study something tangible--something in the world of blood, bones and cells." (J. Allison and D. Gediman, editors, *This I Believe*, 36) So she registered for Human Anatomy and Physiology.

There was book learning in the course, but one of the required elements of the study was to attend an autopsy. As a group accompanied by their professor, Kathy and the other students made their way to the local morgue. There they entered the autopsy room, where they were confronted by the corpse of a man who had committed suicide lying on a stainless-steel table.

When the first incision was made, two of the students fainted. But Kathy moved in closer for a better view. Suddenly the pictures in her textbook of organs and veins, muscles and skin, became very real. "For some reason," she writes, "it struck me that all these parts and pieces didn't explain fear or lust, ambition or love. There wasn't an organ I could probe to uncover kindness, or some tissue I could explore to find human will, or the drive to make music." (Ibid, 47) This, she says, led her to recognize what she calls, "the holy core . . . the enduring soul." (Ibid, 48)

Kathy discovered the same thing that Thomas must have realized. Love transcends the merely physical. Love is greater than that which can be touched or probed or proven in a laboratory. A truth known and expressed by poets, in century after century. Thomas' doubt, ultimately, was part and parcel of his faith experience. Indeed, it led him to an even deeper understanding, an even deeper faith. A faith rooted in mystery. For ultimately, as novelist and poet Emile Bronte puts it in a poem addressed to God, faith is about the mystery of life:

Though earth and [we] were gone,  
And suns and universes ceased to be,  
And Thou were left alone,  
Every existence would exist in Thee.

There is not room for Death,  
Nor atom that his might could render void:  
Thou--THOU are Being and breath.  
And what Thou art may never be destroyed.  
(--"No Coward Soul is Mine")

Never. For love endures, and God is love--and all that is is caught up in that eternal love.

Can I prove that? No.

Do I believe it to be true.? Absolutely!

Without a doubt!

Amen

John H. Danner