

Rev. Karen Graham – Church of the Redeemer  
October 11, 2009  
Job 23: 1-9, 16-17; Psalm 22: 1-15; Mark 10: 17-31  
Welcoming Seekers, Doubters, and Resisters

Listen to these accounts – from a variety of sources:

“For most of my life I have struggled to find God, to know God, to love God....Now I wonder whether I have sufficiently realized that during all this time God has been trying to find me, to know me, and to love me....The question is not, ‘How am I to love God?’ but ‘How am I to let myself be loved by God?’ God is looking into the distance for me, trying to find me, and longing to bring me home.” (Henri Nouwen, The Return of the Prodigal Son, p. 106).

When I went back to church, I was so hung over that I couldn’t stand up for the songs, and this time I stayed for the sermon, which I just thought was so ridiculous, like someone trying to convince me of the existence of extraterrestrials, but the last song was so deep and raw and pure that I could not escape. It was as if the people were singing in between the notes, weeping and joyful at the same time, and I felt like their voices or *something* was rocking me in its bosom, holding me like a scared kid.... I took a deep long breath and said loud, ‘All right. You can come in’ (Anne Lamott, Traveling Mercies, p. 50).

“Hello. My name is John, and I’m a doubter. I have a doubting problem. I think it started when I was in Jr. High School. I had a group of friends who liked to doubt on the weekends. We’d get together sometimes, and whoever had doubts would share them with the rest of us. Before long it seemed like everyone of us had doubts of our own. We couldn’t wait to get together and doubt. We would even doubt on our way to church. Then we started doubting at school. And we went to a Christian school....And then I went to college. Forget about it. I didn’t care who knew. I stopped pretending. I doubted in public, right in front of people, professors, everyone...even my parents. I think I’ve got a handle on my doubting. I still do it more often than I like, but it doesn’t keep me preoccupied like it used to. I’m a functional doubter now....The one thing that gives me hope and strength is the knowledge that I am far from alone. I know lots of you struggle with doubting, too. I go to meetings with other doubters (we meet every Sunday all over the world). I have doubters over to my house. I sponsor several other doubters, and I’ve got a number of doubters who I can call at any time, day or night” (John Alan Turner, “Doubters Anonymous”, [blog.faith20.org](http://blog.faith20.org)).

“I went to America to convert the Indians but, oh, who shall convert me? Who, what, is he that will deliver me from this evil heart of unbelief? I have a fair summer religion. I can talk well, nay, and believe myself, while no danger is near. But let death look me in the face, and my spirit is troubled.”

(John Wesley, edited by Albert Outler, p. 44).

“So many unanswered questions live within me afraid to uncover them -- because of the blasphemy -- If there be a God -- please forgive me -- When I try to raise my thoughts to Heaven -- there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives and hurt my very soul. I am told God loves me -- and yet the reality of darkness & coldness & emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul.” (Mother Teresa, in a letter addressed to Jesus).

Who wrote these reflections? In order from first to last: Henri Nouwen, a Catholic priest and contemplative, Anne Lamott, a contemporary writer, John Turner who has a blog called “Doubters Anonymous,” John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement in England, and Mother Teresa, a Catholic nun who gave her life to the poor and sick in India.

Back in the spring I preached a series of sermons on Bishop Schnase’s book Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations. This fall I wanted us to focus more closely on each practice, a month at a time. In September we explored The Practice of Intentional Faith Development. And now in October we are considering The Practice of Radical Hospitality. Welcoming Children was last Sunday’s theme. And today it is Welcoming Seekers, Doubters and Resisters. In other words, welcoming people who ask questions, people who struggle with certain concepts or doctrines or practices of Christianity, and/or people who have trouble integrating the teachings of the faith into their own lives. In other words, regular people like you and me.

I have never pastored a congregation where people didn’t seek, doubt or resist. I’ve never known any person of faith who hasn’t struggled within him or herself on matters of faith. Dry spells, unfulfilled spiritual longings, intellectual conflicts, belief vs. practice incongruities -- these are the realities of our lives -- within the church and outside the church.

And I am convinced that the church must be a place where such seeking and doubting and resisting can occur. That our doors are not open nor stay open only for those who have everything so figured out they can’t relate to anyone else but themselves. We don’t check our brains along with our coats. We don’t erase our pasts before entering the church. Nor do we leave here on a Sunday morning so completely satisfied that we don’t have any need to think about what all this is about the rest of the week. If what we do together on Sunday morning isn’t connected with Monday to Saturday, then how relevant is all this? And if it’s not relevant, why come? Why take part? Why care?

Today’s scripture readings give us insight into real people -- with real concerns, with real struggles. Job is angry, Job is beside himself with suffering, and Job is unsatisfied with the pat answers his friends have been giving him. Job is also distressed in what he is experiencing as God’s unavailability: “Today also my complaint is bitter; his hand is heavy despite my groaning. Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling! ...If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive

him; on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him.” The psalmist also experiences suffering. The psalmist also questions God: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but find no rest.” Neither Job nor the psalmist sugar-coat their conditions. They aren’t comfortable in their relationship with God, either. Anger, doubt, fear, despair – it all gets expressed, it all gets put right out there on the table. These would not be easy people to be around, would they? What if they stood up during our sharing of prayer joys and concerns and cried out these words? Would we squirm? Would we say to ourselves, “Ooh, too much information, brother.” “Ooh, don’t go there, sister.” And then what if one of them wanted to join the church? Or what if one of them started getting involved in things here and wanted to teach a class, or chair a committee, or be a certified lay speaker? What would we say – how would we feel?

And then there’s the man in Gospel of Mark’s story, a man who ran up to Jesus and asked what he must do to inherit eternal life. A man seeking answers. A man concerned with his life. A man who cared about being faithful to God. “You know the answer,” Jesus said to him. “Follow the commandments. Obey God’s law. Keep doing what you know is right.” But the man wanted something more --- “I have kept all these since my youth”. But it wasn’t enough. Why not? Maybe his heart wasn’t in it. Maybe he knew that he was not doing all the outwardly right things, but there was still something missing. Something else he longed for. And Jesus senses that. He can tell the man isn’t fulfilled. So he challenges him -- “You lack one thing,” he says. “Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” Make your heart’s desire your own true desire, Jesus challenges. You want eternal life? Then really live with God as your first loyalty. Stop trying to control your life with your money, with your job, with the things you own. Show God that you trust him completely. “When the man heard this, he was shocked, and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.”

The man resisted. This was not what he was bargaining for. He wanted to know what to do – but yet, not really -- because he didn’t like the answer. Giving up everything and following Jesus wasn’t what he had in mind. So he walked away.

Now this particular text is usually approached from the perspective of stewardship or commitment. And I’ve preached this text from those perspectives. But today my mind is fixed on something else. I’m thinking of how the gospel reading includes this surprising sentence: “Jesus, looking at him, loved him.” He loved that the man knew and kept all the commandments. He loved that the man was seeking something more fulfilling. He loved that the man came to him. He loved him. And while Jesus invites the man to a way of life the man resists, and at the time can’t accept, Jesus doesn’t condemn or belittle him. He knows he has asked the man to do a hard thing. “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” he tells his disciples. “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” Because God doesn’t love rich people? Of course not. Because the kingdom can’t use the wealth the wealthy offer? Of course

not. So then why? Because the kingdom of God is more about God than it is about us. Because entering the kingdom of God requires admitting our dependence on and our need for God. And sometimes if we have more than enough else to live on, we can get so enamored with those other things that we lose sight of God, and we can end up thinking that it's our kingdom to run, our kingdom to control, our kingdom to determine the destiny of.

And when it sounds to the disciples that Jesus has made it impossible for any one, Jesus says, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

To me those words go along with the statement that Jesus, looking at the man, loved him. Because the two, taken together, suggest to me, that while we may have trouble doing the things God wants us to do, or even having the kind of commitment God wants us to have, God does not write us off. In our seeking, God loves us. In our misguidedness, God loves us. In our attempts to do things our own way, God loves us. And even when we walk away, God loves us.

And that's the welcoming message we and everyone we know needs to hear, and that's the kind of hospitality we and everyone we know needs to receive.

When I look out at you, I do not see people who have everything so together in their lives they do not need God. When I look out at you, I don't see Christians who are living up to everything that God demands of them, either. Is there anyone here this morning who is so single-minded in their devotion to God, that they never, ever get off course? Does every one here love God with all their heart and soul and mind and strength **all** the time? Does everyone here love their neighbor, day in and day out, no matter what time of day, no matter how ungrateful the neighbor is, no matter how unwilling the neighbor is to change their behavior? I don't think so. Am I wrong in my assessment?

One of the criticisms I hear from people who are not in church about people who are in church is that church people are hypocrites. They preach one thing, and do another. And that's true. It is. And that's why we're in church. Because we know that the way we want our lives to be and the way they are don't always match. Because we know we don't have all the answers. Because we know we need help figuring things out. Because we know how hard it is to practice what we believe, and so we keep coming just to get a little better at it.

I'm pretty sure that if that man had said to Jesus, "Well Teacher, I'm not sure I can do all that you've asked of me right away, but I'm willing to start trying, and I'd like to stick around with you to see how much more I can do," Jesus would have accepted that and this man in Mark's gospel would have become a disciple. No where in the gospels does Jesus only accept finished products. He always takes people as and where they are, and then loves them into becoming what they can be.

So – do you know people who are hurting?

Do you know people who aren't sure they can wrap their heads around the idea of a virgin birth, or water turning into wine, or a bodily resurrection?

Do you know people who have messed up their lives with bad decisions about money or sex or alcohol or drugs?

Do you know people who have good jobs, nice houses and cars, go on nice vacations, wear nice clothes, have lots of friends – but who still feel unhappy on the inside?

Do you know people who want to feel like their lives matter, and that they can make a difference in the world?

Do you know people who want to do the right thing, but aren't sure how?

Then -- share God's welcome with them. Let them know that there is a place here where they can be themselves -- where they can seek, or doubt, or resist -- all in God's wide embrace, and among other seekers and doubters and resisters. Let them know of God's unflinching love for them -- even if they aren't sure they're ready for that kind of love. And by extending God's welcome to them, accept it for yourselves too. Don't be afraid of your own questions, or your own fears, or your own reluctance to commit your whole heart to God. Accept God's unflinching and stronger than anything in the world love for you, as you are.

When I was in seminary, my homiletics professor, Dr. David Buttrick, liked referring to the church as the "being saved" community. He would tell us that the church is not the community of the saved, but the community that is being saved. Salvation is a process, not a product. And as individuals within that community, we are all at different places in that process. So there's no reason to exclude -- none at all. Christians who can recite the Apostles' Creed by heart without thinking about it are welcomed, and Christians who stumble over its claims because they aren't sure what it means are welcomed. The church is for people who have never read the Bible and for people who have been reading it their whole lives. The church is for those who are comfortable with the church's traditions, and for those who want those traditions to change. The church is for those who cry out in anguish, "O God, O God, why have you forsaken me?" and for those who declare with certitude, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not wan." God's love welcomes and embraces them all. God's love welcomes and embraces us all.

Amy Oden writes passionately about all this in her marvelous little book, *God's Welcome*. I want to share some of her words with you:

"The whole of each of our lives and our life together is the landscape for God's welcoming, salvaging work. Salvation is happening all the time. God's welcome is happening all the time. It is a welcome feast. This is good news indeed, and one that people are hungry to hear. The good news is so deep in the bones of the Christian message that we may take it for granted. When we take it for granted, however, we withhold the food of grace from those who are spiritually hungry. Too many people have heard that salvation is something God will grant once they get their act together, or once they start going to church or reading the Bible. For others, salvation is a ticket they got one time on their knees and now they must wait for the real thing after they die. The good news we have to share of God's welcome promises much more. God's

welcome happens whether we are faithful or not. God's welcome happens whether we respond or not. God's welcome comes from unexpected people and places in our lives. God's welcome comes even amid scarcity, and it is persistent. The good news of salvation is that God's welcome happens in a nanosecond and over a lifetime. God's welcome is working at the molecular and at the cosmic level. I would put it this way: In every moment and in every molecule, God is welcoming us deeper into the divine life" (p. 103).

She concludes her book with this benediction:

God has welcomed each of us.  
We live in the abundant life of God's welcome.  
You don't need to become someone or something else.  
Just live in the welcome you already know.  
You have it.  
Now claim it, share it, and give thanks to God.

Claim it -- God welcomes you as you are.

Share it -- through your words and actions, by your own accepting attitude and open invitation -- share God's welcoming love with those who feel far away from God, with those who suffer, with those who doubt, with those who are unsatisfied, with those who struggle.

And give thanks to God. For all that God has done in your life, and in the life of our church, and in the life of the world -- to save, to forgive, to restore, to transform....to love.