

Doubting Thomas

John 20:19-31, 21:20-24 by Patty Friesen (Sept.6/15)

Our scripture today is about Thomas, doubting Thomas as he is famously known. Doubting Thomas appears only in John's Gospel and so we only have John's perspective on him. What would Thomas say of his own defense of his doubt?

Apparently he wrote his own gospel. There was a Gospel of Thomas found in the desert of Egypt in 1945, along with other hidden gospels like the Gospel of Judas, the Gospel of Mary Magdalene and the Gospel of James. These are additional gospels that were supposedly written by the other disciples and were used by groups of early Christians but didn't make it into our New Testament. Bishop Irenaeus in 200 AD believed that the rapid proliferation of groups of Christians called Gnostics was a greater threat to Christianity than Roman persecution itself. Gnostics believed that you could know the kingdom of God within yourself; that Jesus wasn't the only way to know God. Irenaeus believed that these Gnostic branches of Christianity presented too diverse and too human a picture of Christ. He established that only four gospels would make up the collection of gospels in the New Testament – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. All other gospels like the Gospel of Thomas, Judas, James and Mary Magdalene were deemed unauthentic and banned from Christian worship.

As a writer and pastor, I have a curiosity about banned books. What makes the Gospel of Thomas less acceptable than the Gospel of John? The Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of John are very similar to each other. Both Thomas and John assume the reader already knows the basic story of Jesus that Mark and the other gospels tell. Both Thomas and John claim to go beyond the basic story and reveal what Jesus taught his

disciples in private. When, for example, John tells what happened on the night that Jesus was killed, he inserts nearly five extra chapters of teaching, the so-called farewell discourses in John 13 through 18. Similarly, the Gospel of Thomas also claims to have secret teachings of Jesus to his disciples before his death.

While similar in style, John and Thomas are fundamentally different in content. John's gospel says that Jesus alone brings divine light into a world sunk in darkness. We can experience God only through the divine light embodied in Jesus. In John's gospel, Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to God except through me." In Thomas' gospel on the other hand, Jesus says, "The kingdom of God is within each one of you." The divine light of God is in everyone since we are all made in the image of God. Thus Thomas expresses what would become a central theme of Jewish and later Christian mysticism; that the kingdom of God is within each one of us, even though most people remain unaware of its presence.

John and Thomas could have been complementary interpretations of God's presence on earth – that God is revealed in Jesus and within each one of us. But they became rival interpretations and John's views that we only know God in Jesus of course prevailed and have shaped our Christian thought ever since.

John sets out to question Thomas' loyalty to Jesus in John 20:24, "But Thomas was not with them when Jesus came back from the dead." John suggests that Thomas is not physically or theologically present to the resurrection of Christ. "So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But Thomas said, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'" Jesus scolds Thomas for his doubt saying, "Blessed are those who have not seen

and yet have come to believe.” John’s Gospel continues, “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book,” meaning that there are other gospels about Jesus written out there. “But these are written, or specifically, the Gospel of John is written, so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

In 300 AD, Constantine, the first Christian emperor became convinced that making creeds and beliefs about the divinity of Jesus would help unify the Christian message. Yet for three hundred years before Constantine, diverse Christian groups welcomed new Christians without an emphasis on creeds and beliefs about Jesus. Justin the philosopher and one of the fathers of the church who cared about belief, said that the most important belief was that the pagan gods were false and that one should acknowledge only the one true God, along with Jesus his son. After that what mattered most to Justin was that new Christians share and practice the values of God’s people. “So,” Justin says, “we baptize those, who not only accept Jesus’ teaching but who undertake to live it accordingly.” (Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, p. 28)

Christians were begrudgingly admired, not for what they believed, but how they behaved. They took care of the sick during the Plague, and they started hospitals and care homes. Christians were admired for how they sang songs and testified to their faith while being eaten by lions in the coliseum. It was their lifestyle as much as their beliefs that shaped their witness to the world.

The early Anabaptists also, were a diverse group of Christians trying to discern God’s movement in the world. Some of these groups were pretty wacky, apocalyptic watchers who went out to the wilderness to wait for the second coming of Christ, or

violent radicals who tried to bring the kingdom of God to Muenster, Germany by killing people to convert them. Like Constantine and Irenaeus, Menno Simons tried to bring order to the chaos by implementing the tenants of Anabaptism around pacifism, church discipline and believer's baptism. Anabaptism was not ordered around the beliefs of the church but around the practices of the church.

Some of the early Anabaptists, especially the mystical ones would have loved the Gospel of Thomas and reveled in its hidden meanings. Menno Simons, however, would take the following issues with the Gospel of Thomas. First, he would say the Gospel of Thomas is not as important as the other gospels because not all gospels and not all books of the Bible are created equal in their importance to our understanding of Jesus and how we follow him. The Big Four gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are more important than the rest of the Bible and within the gospels, the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew and Luke, where Jesus taught us how to pray and how to act is the most important part of the whole Bible. All scripture must be tested and judged through the life and words of Christ.

Secondly, Menno would say that each of us are able to personally know God. But that knowledge must be tested through the scripture as it is interpreted in the church community. Menno countered some of the crazy Anabaptists with their personal visions of God by teaching that all Anabaptists should be biblically literate and discerning, to test the spirits of their leadership.

Thirdly, we do not just inherit the kingdom of God. We have to choose it. It is available to us but we have to be moved and converted by the Holy Spirit to receive it. We have to participate with God's kingdom through our belief and by our action. The

true test of the Christian is whether they are living like they have got the kingdom of God within them.

Menno would have loved this kind of debate over the Gospel of Thomas. As a reformer, he himself doubted the dominant Christian thought of his time. He would encourage us to test the spirits of those who make Christ merely moral example and he would encourage us to test the spirits of those who make Jesus merely a personal Savior. He would challenge us to find the relevance of Christ for our time.

Can we live with the tension that modern biblical scholarship and the Gnostic gospels bring to our faith? What can we learn from Doubting Thomas and what role does doubt play in our faith today? Someone said the opposite of faith is not doubt but certainty. It is doubt that keeps our faith alive and active. Let us pray...

Risen Christ, in mystery you are present in our lives, bringing new life out of death, hope out of despair. We thank you that you do not leave us alone but labor to make us whole. Help us to perceive your unseen hand in the unfolding of our lives and to attend to the gentle guidance of your Spirit, that we may know the joy of your love and rest in your peace. Amen.