

Today I want to talk about doubt.

Thomas doubted. Just like my friend who said, "I'll believe in God when he answers my prayers," Thomas wanted proof. But when given the opportunity he drew back. Why? Because it wasn't what he expected. He didn't really want to put his hands in Jesus' side. He just wanted the uncertainty to go away. We are uncomfortable with not-knowing. We want to know

So we don't often talk about doubt and uncertainty as a positive thing. Most forms of Christianity emphasize the importance of believing specific things, and to doubt them is seen as backsliding or stepping away from the true path. Since Christianity is a path of faith, it might almost seem unfaithful to talk about and think about doubt.

Yet, in the dvd "Jesus and Buddha", Chung Hyun Kyung, a Korean Buddhist Christian who teaches at Union Theological Seminary, talks about her experience when her Buddhist teacher told her to meditate on who she was. She sat for many years with "Who am I?" on the in breath and "Don't know" on the out breath. Who am I? Don't know. Who am I? Don't know.

Talk about doubt. Talk about uncertainty.

In a society where self-esteem is highly valued, to sit in the not-knowing of the very basis of one's identity is a radical form of doubt. But for Professor Chung, this not-knowing opened up a wideness, she says "Emptiness is your wide openness." When we let go of pre-conceptions and certainties we open up a wide space which allows the Spirit of God to enter. We open up a space of possibility which allows those around us to heal because we haven't trapped them with our own perceptions and expectations.

In the Letter to the Philippians we read, "Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." (Phil 2:5-8). This emptying out of God is a very important part of our understanding of Christian spirituality.

We are asked, like Christ, to empty ourselves. "Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus... [who] emptied himself.."

When we are full of ourselves, there is no room for Spirit to come in. When we are full of our own self-importance, our own plans, our own certainties, there is no room for the new, there is no room for God to open up possibilities.

Who am I? Don't know.

Most of us are aware of an emptiness somewhere inside us. An emptiness which we try to cover up with activity, with entertainment, with shopping, with family and friends or with a variety of addictive behaviors. We are scared that when we ask the question Who am I? the answer will be Don't know or even Nobody.

For Buddhists like Professor Chung, once you have spent enough time sitting with the emptiness, accepting it instead of avoiding it, you move through the fear that our society does everything it can to

avoid. You move through the fear of non-being, the fear of emptiness into spaciousness. Then you are free. As she says "Emptiness is your wide openness."

So doubt is an important spiritual experience. Doubt removes our certainty that we know all the answers. Doubt allows us the freedom to explore. The symbols of our faith are just that – symbols. They all point to the truth of God but they are not themselves the answer. It is God whom we worship. And in many ways God is unknowable within the limits of the human mind, so we have symbols and stories which stick to our guts in a way that allows us to help one another along the path that leads to deeper and deeper intimacy with God. But when we become too attached to those symbols and stories and rituals and ways of doing things, sometimes they become hollow. Doubt allows us to question, to look for new ways of understanding. Doubt allows us to ask for new insight and revelation.

But too often we think that if we doubt, there is no place for us in the church. The disciples didn't say to Thomas, "well if you doubt what we're saying you have no place here." Of course not. He was one of the disciples. Once we have enrolled in the reign of God we are members of the mystical Body of Christ. That is our place even when we doubt.

"Who am I? Don't know" allows us to set aside the idea that we have a fixed self and to be open to whatever God puts into our lives. But as Christians we do have an answer. Who am I? I am one whom God loves without reservation. I am the beloved.

So emptying is not becoming nothing. Jesus emptied himself in order to fulfil the plan – in order to fulfil his Father's will which was also the culmination of the deep love of the Trinity. Emptying ourselves of the little ego with all its preoccupations about status, its storage of grievances, its anger and grasping, allows us to be filled with God's love. Often we cannot fully connect with God's love because we don't have room. Our minds and hearts are already full.

We empty ourselves in imitation of the one whom we love and seek to follow, and find that in so doing we are filled in a way we had never imagined.

This kind of emptying is not about being a wimp. There was nothing wimpy about Jesus. This is not about pretending you're quite unimportant and letting other people walk all over you. It actually makes you stronger because it helps you to see more clearly. You are no longer so busy defending yourself and your own turf that you cannot see the possibilities in the situation. As we learn to empty ourselves, we are able to be present in the moment in a new way which enables us to pause before we react and opens up new points of entry for the Holy Spirit in every interaction.

Thomas saw Jesus and cried, "My Lord and my God." He saw him in a new way. His doubts enabled him to have a whole new experience of Jesus just as the trials of Job eventually led him to a new revelation of God.

So when you have doubts be at peace with them. Use them as ways to open yourself to new possibilities. And if you don't have doubts, look to see whether your certainty may not be getting in the way of your spiritual deepening.