

Reel Faith Sermon Series
Doubt – Matthew 28:16-20
August 18, 2019
Rev. Kory Wilcoxson

“What do you do when you’re not sure?” That’s how Father Flynn begins his sermon at the opening of the 2008 movie, “Doubt.” We’re continuing our summer sermon series called, “Reel Faith,” in which we’re looking at the ways God speaks to us through popular movies. This week’s film is an outstanding one starring Phillip Seymour Hoffman, Meryl Streep, and Amy Adams, and it centers around the relationship between doubt and certainty. Which of these should take precedence as we seek to live out our faith? How certain should we be, and how much doubt should we be OK with?

The movie is set in 1964, the year after JFK was assassinated. In the opening sermon, the new priest, Father Flynn, is trying to help his congregation cope with the enormous changes the church is facing. Not only has the nation’s top Catholic been assassinated, but the church is reeling from the consequences of Vatican II, which introduced sweeping changes for Catholic churches. You may not be aware of this, but churches don’t always do well with change.

At my last church, I once proposed in a newsletter article that we consider moving our worship time back 15 minutes to allow for more time for Sunday school. Even though I only floated this out there as an idea, the backlash was so extreme I had to re-read my newsletter column to make sure I hadn’t accidentally put a few cuss words in there. You’d have thought I suggested we change the color of the carpet in the sanctuary! Churches don’t do well with change.

So, imagine being a Catholic in 1964 when your world was rocked in more ways than one. The country is changing, the church is changing, and there’s a lot of fear and trepidation about the future. Father Flynn represents a more progressive Catholicism that embraces that change, concluding his sermon by saying, “Doubt can be a bond as powerful and sustaining as certainty. When you are lost, you are not alone.”

I’m sure those words were comforting to many in his congregation who were struggling, but there’s one person who was not happy with the priest’s vulnerability and openness to doubt. Sister Aloysius, played by Streep, is an old-school, hard-line nun who is principal of the church’s school. While Father Flynn is preaching, she patrols the aisles, smacking boys upside the head when they talk during the sermon and hissing at kids who’ve fallen asleep. Later, when she calls one boy out in the middle of class, Father Flynn says, “The dragon is hungry.” To Sister Aloysius, Father Flynn represents everything that is wrong with the changes coming to the church. He wears his nails long, he uses a ballpoint pen, and he dares to recommend secular songs for the annual Christmas play. When he suggests “Frosty the Snowman,” the sister rebukes it, saying, “It’s a song that espouses a pagan belief in magic. It has no place in the church.” Thank goodness he didn’t suggest, “Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer.”

This cold war between the sister’s certainty and the priest’s openness to doubt boils over when a young nun suspects that the priest is having an inappropriate relationship with the only African-American boy in the school. She reports it to Sister Aloysius, who sees this allegation as the opening to get the priest removed and to restore the church to the way things used to be.

Ah, the way things used to be. The good old days. The days when everything was predictable and nothing ever changed. Remember those days? Me either. Because they don’t exist. They never have. The world is constantly changing, so it’s natural for us to long for a

simpler time, but when it was that simpler time, we longed for an even more simpler time. Today's cellphone is the last generation's television is the last generation's automobile is the last generation's sliced bread. "Back in my day, we had to eat the whole loaf at once...and we liked it that way!" But when faced with the forecast of change, especially change that is inevitable, we long for the days when we were more comfortable, when we could be more certain about things. Change forces us to doubt the truths that we've held for so long, truths like "presidents don't get assassinated anymore" and "no one would fly a plane into a building" and "government officials are elected to serve the people." What do you do when you're not sure about things that used to be certain?

The winds of change that blow all around us are represented in the movie by the actual wind, which seems to thwart Sister Aloysius' attempt to be in control. In one scene, she walks into a classroom in which the window has been left open and the wind is blowing in leaves and debris. She slams the window shut and shouts, "Who keeps opening my window!" In another scene, she curses the wind, calling it peripatetic. I had to look that one up. It means something or someone that travels without a plan from place to place. Kind of like when Jesus says in John 3, "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So, it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." So, according to Jesus, those who are led by the Holy Spirit are open to the kind of change that faith in a living God can bring.

That is not the kind of person Sister Aloysius is. Once she has it set in her mind that Father Flynn has committed a sin, nothing can convince her otherwise. After the priest offers a plausible explanation for the accusation made against him, the sister dismisses it, saying, "I'll bring him down." When the sister confronts the priest a second time, he says to her, "You haven't the slightest proof of anything," and she responds, "I have my certainty!"

I believe that kind of certainty has become a sin in our world today. When it comes to political or social issues, people on both sides have so convinced themselves that their way of thinking is right that they won't allow their views to be corrupted with the facts. With social media and 24-hour news channels, we've created echo chambers that make us think that our way of thinking is the right way of thinking. Our certainty has become the iron cage we've built around ourselves, locking us into a tunnel-vision perspective that serves as spiritual blinders, not open to the fresh winds of change brought to us by God's spirit. In our divisive world, it feels like there's no room to be not sure.

But life compels that from us. Who can be sure about anything these days? Change is coming at a pace faster than we can process it. I rented a car last week and got upgraded to an SUV with all the bells and whistles. When I sat in it for the first time, it had so many dials and buttons I felt like I had to call mission control to get cleared for takeoff before I started the thing. Nothing seems simple anymore. Long-held beliefs are being challenged, foundations of faith and practice are developing cracks, and the world we once knew is no longer the world we live in. We're no longer sure. So, what do we do?

I think we have two choices. We can acknowledge our doubt, exploring it as best we can, accepting that there are some things we can't know, and live with the frustrating ambiguity of our lives, trusting that God walks with us. Or we can retreat into dogmatic certainty, suppressing any doubts, living as if we have access to the absolute, incontrovertible truths about everything. Do we choose doubt or certainty? Certainty is simpler, isn't it? Black and white. Clear-cut. A definitive understanding of right and wrong, who's and who's out. That is, until the wind blows

and scatters what we think we know. Albert Einstein said, “The world as we have created it is a process of our thinking. It cannot be changed without changing our thinking.”

In the passage I read from Matthew, the writer tells us, “When the disciples saw the risen, they worshipped him; but some doubted.” Disciples pastor Fred Craddock says this passage should be translated another way: “They worshipped him and some doubted.” They worshipped and they doubted. Do those two things go together? Worship and doubt? You bet they do. Have you seen that bumper sticker that says, “God said it, I believe it, and that’s that”? Boy, it’d be nice if faith were that simple, that easy. But it’s not, is it? Unless Jesus is driving that car, the person behind the wheel can’t live up to the message on the bumper. No one has that kind of faith; even when the resurrected Jesus was standing right in front of them, they worshipped and they doubted. If the disciples couldn’t be certain then, what hope do we have?

In the movie, Sister Aloysius’ certainty seems to win the war when Father Flynn gets transferred to another parish. The climactic scene is a conversation between Sister Aloysius and the young Sister James, who’s been caught in the middle of this battle, at times believing in the priest’s innocence, at other times sharing Sister Aloysius’ certainty. Sister James asks the older nun if she ever proved that the priest had done anything wrong. The nun says, “I told him I had called a nun in his previous parish and found out about his previous infringements.” The younger sister says, “So, you did prove it.” The older sister says, “I made no such call.” “You lied?” “Yes. But if he’d had no such history, the lie wouldn’t have worked.” The younger nun says, “I can’t believe you lied.” And the principal replies, “In the pursuit of wrong-doing, one steps away from God.” Think about that line. “In the pursuit of wrong-doing, one steps away from God.”

That’s the curse of certainty. We’ll endeavor to hold so fast to our certain beliefs that we’ll do so at the expense of who God is calling us to be. God never calls us to stay the same, and yet to be open to change means admitting that we may not have all the right answers and that previously held beliefs may need to be reexamined and struggled with to see if God might be speaking a new word to us. We hold so tight to our certain beliefs because we’re afraid of the change that might come with letting go, and yet, when we look up, Christ is already out ahead of us, beckoning us to let go of what we think we know and trust in who he is calling us to be. We can either stick to what is comfortable and familiar, or we can open ourselves to the ways God’s peripatetic Spirit is moving through our lives.

The movie ends just two lines later. After her line about stepping away from God, Sister Aloysius says to the younger nun, “Of course, there is a price.” Then she breaks down in tears and says, “I have doubts, I have such doubts.” The danger of certainty is the threat doubt poses to it. We can build a world of certainty that is resistant to new ways of seeing the world, which can close us off from the work of the Spirit. Our world is going to keep changing, and so is our church. Each new person who joins Crestwood changes us in ways we can’t expect. I pray we stay open to the ways God is calling us to change, as people of faith and as a church. Once, I thought I knew everything. Now, I have such doubts. Thanks be to God.