

“I Believe! Help My Disbelief!”

A Conversation Between Pastor Leah Fowler and JunHee Han

Sunday, April 23, 2017

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

John 20:1-18

Leah: A clergy friend of mine is starting a new church in Chicago, which was featured on the Today Show because instead of sermons, in worship it is the members of the church who steer the reflection by sharing what is on their hearts and minds. Since I know that as a preacher, I am given the power to speak often without knowing what is on the minds of those sitting in the pews, I sometimes lament the one-direction communication that happens between preacher and parishioners. So, a church like this new one in Chicago has its appeal. At the same time, I recognize you called me here for a reason; you have examined my training and 12 years in pastoral ministry, and heard my theological perspectives, and have chosen to put your trust in my preparation over many years and also in the days I use to prepare a sermon. A recent Gallup Poll¹ revealed that hearing inspiring sermons from a worship leader is the primary reason most people come to church.

Still, I want to make occasion to challenge our congregation to share a bit of what it is like on their faith journey. After all, practicing faith is not only the job of the seminary trained pastor. It is the work of all the people. And it is not always easy work!

The Pew Research Center did a study on faith and American life several years ago, and found that the largest growing group in America is the “nones”²-- and I don’t mean the women wearing habits you might find down the road at St. John’s Roman Catholic Church. More and more people are choosing not to affiliate, and we are seeing churches of all denominations shrink and even close their doors, as was witnessed with

¹ <http://www.gallup.com/poll/208529/sermon-content-appeals-churchgoers.aspx> This April 2017 Gallup Poll lists that 75% of American churchgoers list as their primary reason for attending church is “Listening to Sermons that Teach about Scripture or Connect the Religion to My Own Life.”

² <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/> This 2015 report by the Pew Research Center shows a 6.7% growth in the religiously unaffiliated between 2007-2014, versus a 1.2% growth in non-Christian faiths, and a negative growth in Mainline Protestant (-3.4%), Roman Catholic (-3.1%), and Evangelical (0.9%) Christians.

the Lutheran Church here in town a couple years ago.

But before one moves from a fully robust faith to acknowledging no faith at all, I think we need to acknowledge a pretty large group of people who are showing up. Let's call them the "Somes;" these are the people who have some faith, but may not fit neatly into wholehearted confessions of faith, or may feel more like an outsider than an insider. The church's future relies on the hospitality to the "Somes" out there.

Luckily, the bible gives us some examples of doubt and struggle. This Sunday the lectionary gives us the story of Thomas demanding to touch, and to see, and to put his hands inside the wounds of Jesus-- until I do that, he says, I will not believe. Even before Thomas, we know of Jacob in the Old Testament, who wrestled with an angel along the Jabbok River and prevailed, and was given a new name: Israel, which means struggles with God.

This Sunday, I want to model how one Christian struggles with faith, and yet still finds a way to be part of the Body of Christ. He is here, and has graciously agreed to share his story.

JunHee: When Leah asked to do a personal story this Sunday I thought Leah underestimated my capabilities for public speech. I might be a little better at numbers than a speech!

I admit I don't have sufficient understanding in philosophy or a deep spiritual practice to give neat answers on the Christian's challenges between a belief and doubt. Instead I'm trying to put my own story of how my religious views have progressed and adjusted over time. I speak for myself; I am not trying to test *your* faith. In our congregation I may be viewed or recognized a normal Christian-- or maybe not. I come to church most Sundays, do choir and participate in some church events. My story could be a coming-out session; I want to try to reveal myself to you, and hope it will cause some self-awareness for me as well.

I've been thinking about the struggle between the doubt and belief at my current life stage. Let me begin with my youth.

My church life began when I was 5 years old. My dad died of lung cancer.

My mother seemed very sad and needed hope, and help raising 2 young boys. Perhaps the bible's message that Jesus will take care of the orphans and widows were a light for her life at that point. Our three family members started coming to church and found relief there. My mom and I became more active in church while my brother found his interests elsewhere. I enjoyed playing in the church band and the basketball games with other kids at church. Up to that point in Korea, Christianity was not that popular, but began boom when I was a teenager, in the 1980s. Many Koreans accepted the idea that western countries (especially U.S.) had been rich and blessed because of their strong Christian identity. In that time, Korea had an intense focus on the economy, which was developing rapidly. Christianity had been also spreading so quickly at that time. People in a poor and developing country need some hopes, I think.

Like most teenagers, I started asking questions: "What is the meaning of life?" "Who is God, and how can I be sure of a God's existence?" I couldn't understand why there were so many kids who cried out and confessed "Jesus is my Lord" during worship service. I was confused: I did not feel or hear any voices like Jesus speaking to me. How did my peers hear? I was eager to hear his voice, and I wanted to feel called to confess Jesus like the other kids. But it didn't happen to me. Once a young pastor pushed kids to stand up during a service if anyone felt a calling to be a future pastor. Some kids stood in response. I was surprised: How can one person totally change to a different person in a few hours, even accepting a calling to be a pastor? However, it inspired me as well. So I cried out so hard to listen for something in a worship service. While no "voice" spoke to me, I emotionally (maybe spiritually) felt that I was blessed and saved by Jesus. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" was a big hope for me. I thought I was more blessed because I believed in him without hearing anything.

In college, I kept busy with church activities, school, friends and other stuff, instead of focusing on spirituality. At that time I thought, I will go to heaven if I keep trying to be a good Christian and believe in God. But as I opened my eyes to modern reality, I noticed differences from what I heard and was taught by the bible. My confusion grew through my mid 20's, when I had noticed the existence of structural evil, and was disappointed to find that many Christians perpetuate this evil. I was uncomfortable seeing so many people come to the church asking that they and their family become

blessed with money and success. When they became rich or gained social power, they automatically became influential, favored church members. It felt wrong to me. Some churches grew enormously, and their pastors drove expensive cars and lived in extravagant homes. I wondered what was going on: if Jesus is alive and real and they believe in Jesus, how could this happen? I saw churches contribute to social inequality and unjust systems and policies when they gained political and financial power. I saw the church wanted to influence people and society with political and financial power-- not by love and mercy. The poor and hungry were no longer of interest to the church unless they helped to expand the church's size or to solidify the positions of the wealthy and powerful. This problem does not just belong to South Korea. As Christianity took its place as the most dominant world religion, the messages of Jesus were often corrupted, all over the world.

In Korea, Buddhism and Confucianism dominated our culture for the past 2,500 years. Christianity was introduced to Korea only about 150 years ago. Why did God not bring his message to my small eastern country thousands of years ago? What happened to people who had lived and died during that period? Some pastors or professors explain that the people who never heard of Jesus but lived conscientiously went to the heaven, so their eternal lives were not in danger. But I still didn't understand. Is going to heaven enough to satisfy life's meaning while life on the ground is without hope and happiness?

I felt many conflicts existing from the Old Testament to the New Testament in the bible. The tone of God's voice treatment of people seems totally different between two Testaments. Why did God only care about the Israelite people in the Old Testament, but then turn his interest to all the people in the world in the New? I've learned that we need to understand what God's intent behind the words is, but that's not clear enough to me.

When I came to the US in 2006, I hoped to gain knowledge and experience to bring to these struggles of faith. I arrived at our church that same year. The pastors I met, Rev. Debra and Rev. Chung, were different than the pastors I had known before. Their speech and teaching was not charismatic but very calm and soft, but they were confident in their faith and vision. They did not push people but delivered messages confidently. At that time, I was disappointed that I couldn't do much as I am too small to fight

structural evil, and even the burden of life was so heavy too. I admit, I wanted to do something good for me --not for God. I was relieved to realize I could do good just for doing good; it did not have to have the holy devotion which I was obsessed with feeling but kept seeming to miss. When I decided to focus on my inner self, it was a big turning point in my spiritual journey. Ironically, it drove me to bring the question of whether I believe in Jesus or not. I thought I had believed in Jesus through my life, but when I started to ask myself seriously about my faith, I was not able so sure about it. Was my faith really based on believing or seeing Jesus' resurrection power in my life, or just based on the emotional feeling, forced upon me at a young and impressionable age? Of course, I also felt a lot of moments when God was with me, but all came into question. I started asking a question myself more seriously "Do I believe in Jesus? Is God real?"

Perhaps I exaggerate certain negative attributes without seeing the whole picture. I am trying to understand how this Christian journey might be repaired, and what could be the truth. Maybe it does not matter what the truth is- perhaps no one has a clear grasp on it. However, in my struggle, I am finding meaning in my spiritual process. I did not listen to those who have different religious backgrounds before, but now am trying to open my ears to many different views. Now I understand that there are some truths and wisdoms in many traditions.

Sometimes I worry that after all my struggling I will find that I no longer have God. But at the same time I feel a strange confidence that I will have a stronger faith after this spiritual struggling-- although I can't imagine my struggles with faith will end anytime soon. I hope my story does not discourage your faith, but instead be helpful for you to strengthen your faith by seeing and admitting different views.

One more thing: my family and I have benefited greatly from our church family as we settled here for past 10 years. I have a clumsy and unsatisfactory way of sending appreciation to people, so the "thank-you" message that I wanted to do hasn't been delivered to our church family well. My family and I truly appreciate all your help, support, prayer, sharing, and the love you showed above all. I can't describe how much we are grateful. Meeting my church and church family is truly an amazing thing, even without knowing how much I believe in God.

Leah: Thank you for sharing this bit of your journey with us, JunHee. As we journey together in this adventure of faith, we know the journey is not done yet. Jesus says all it takes is faith the size of a mustard seed, and with that you can move mountains! For all the questions and doubts, we hope you find within this congregation a sufficient amount of faith to hold you up when your faith cannot do it alone. To tell you the truth, none of us on this journey can do it alone. Perhaps your satisfaction in what you call your “church family” is a place where you can further explore God, showing up in relationship and calling you to be part of the Body of Christ. You and your family are a treasure to our church, and we look forward to hearing how the story continues.