

GIFTS OF THE DARK WOOD

2) The Gift of Uncertainty

John 5: 1-16

Rev. Ron Dunn

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During this Lenten season, we are thinking about the Gifts of the Dark Wood—a book by Eric Elnes that suggests that it is in the “dark wood” moments of our lives, the places where we struggle with the true challenges of living, that we are most likely to learn and grow and become the people that God is calling us to be. Elnes suggests that is in the “dark wood” experiences of our lives that we are most likely to meet God.

I don’t know about you, but I can honestly say that some of my darkest moments have also been the most enlightening. For, I have discovered the wisdom of Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of the first beatitude: **“You’re blessed when you are at the end of your rope. With less of you, there is more of God and God’s rule.”** As strange as it may seem to us, there is often a blessing of wisdom, understanding and depth that emerges from our own struggles in the midst of the dark wood.

This morning we consider the blessing (gift) of uncertainty. That sounds a bit strange, don’t you think? How can uncertainty be considered a gift? Especially in a culture that prizes the ability to be certain.

Armed with our GPS devices, we now travel with precise certainty. Thanks to this amazing technology, we can travel knowing exactly where we are on our route and precisely, how far we have to go—down to a tenth of a mile.

Certainty matters. And not just in the technology that we use, but also in the ways we choose to live. Many of us would like to live with a reasonable amount of certainty when it comes to the life choices that we make and the financial plans that we put in place. It makes us nervous when there is a change in plans and we suddenly have to opt for “plan B” or even, “plan C.”

This need for certainty, of course, is perhaps most vividly revealed in the way some people approach the matter of faith. Rather than understand faith as a mystery to be explored, they tend to view as a problem to be solved. Rather than allow the deeper questions of faith to emerge, they are inclined to suppress them in favor of the “right answers” that someone else has provided for them. Indeed, there are some religious communities that actually believe that faith is essentially about having all the correct answers, about being absolutely certain about all of their beliefs. Certainty is the badge of true faith! Uncertainty, in the form of doubt or question, is viewed as a sign of weakness and a loss of faith. But, is it really?

As Eric Elnes points out, many of the biblical heroes and heroines of faith were hardly models of certainty. When you delve into the lives of Abraham and Moses, of Esther and Ruth, of Peter and Paul, you soon discover that their lives were lived under the shadow of uncertainty and struggle. They clearly did not have it all together. They had their share of

doubts and they struggled mightily to discern God's will and way for their lives. And, at times, the answers that they thought they had would merely dissolve into more questions.

Yet, it was through their struggle, through their willingness to live into their questions, to entertain their doubts that they were able, over time, to develop and harness a faith that would leave a lasting legacy.

Author Anne Lamott suggests that **"The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty."** I think she makes a persuasive point.

I remember a very brief conversation that I had with a woman in my home church—right before I left for seminary. She had heard stories about how seminary's can ask so many questions that they end up planting the seeds of doubt and disbelief in their students. So it was that she said to me: "Now, whatever you do, don't allow them to take away your faith with all of their questions." It was, I remember thinking, an ominous farewell.

That was, as it turned out, the last time that I talked with that woman. But if I would have had the opportunity, upon my return from seminary, I would have told her that it was precisely in the questioning, the doubting, and the uncertainty of it all that my faith came alive to me in a way that it never had when I had kept it neatly under wraps. It was my uncertainty that, eventually, opened the door to a new and revitalized faith.

The Israeli Poet, **Yehuda Amichai**, gives witness to this understanding in the poem entitled,

"The Place Where We Are Right"

***From the place where we are right
Flowers will never grow
In the spring.***

***The place where we are right
Is hard and trampled
Like a yard.***

***But doubts and loves
Dig up the world
Like a mole, a plow.***

***And a whisper will be heard in the place
Where the ruined
House once stood.***

It's true, is it not? In the place we are absolutely certain that we are correct, it is difficult for the seed of a new idea or possibility to grow. The ground is hard and trampled.

But our uncertainty and doubt have a way of digging up that trampled ground, like a mole or a plow, allowing for the possibility of a seed to take root, sprout and grow.

A vital faith, a faith that is fully alive and growing, is one understands that uncertainty is not something to fear, but something to accept as a necessary part of the process. This doesn't mean that we have to embrace it or seek it out. It simply means that there is great wisdom in choosing not to run from our uncertainty or avoid it, but simply to allow it to lead us beyond the comfortable limitations and boundaries that keep us from a deeper, more vibrant faith.

Maxie Dunham once observed that, "Some people prefer the hell of a predictable situation rather than risk the joy of an unpredictable one." Think about that for a moment, if you will. Are there times in your life when you have opted for the hell of a predictable situation rather than risk the joy of the unpredictable? I suspect that many of us could answer, "Yes."

I suspect that the man by the Pool at Bethzatha could also have answered in the affirmative. You may be familiar with his story. He had been lying by the pool for 38 years, waiting to get into the pool first when the waters were disturbed. The belief at the time was that this disturbance was a divine action and that the first into the pool after such a disturbance, would be cured of their illness.

Well, as you might imagine, without someone to actually help him get into the pool, this paralyzed man had grown quite accustomed to his predictable life by the side of the pool. Over 38 years, he had managed to create for himself a decent enough life. His begging allowed him enough to live on and he, no doubt, had a network of friends that he could rely upon. It wasn't the perfect life, of course, but it was predictable. His routine was certain and he had become quite accustomed to it.

Then Jesus happened by and suddenly, everything changed. When Jesus asks the man, laying there on his pallet, if he wants to be made well, the man doesn't offer a direct answer. Instead, he offers the excuse that he, no doubt, had used over the years: "There is no one to help me into the pool."

Jesus, however, wasn't eager to listen to the man's well-crafted excuses. Instead, he simply instructs the man to stand up, take up his bed and walk. There is no indication here of the man's gratitude, no expression of thanksgiving. The man, we are told, simply walks away. When the religious authorities question him about his healing—which had taken place on the Sabbath—the man doesn't even know who healed him. He hadn't taken the time to ask. Then, after a second conversation with Jesus in the temple, the man returns to the authorities and identifies his healer as Jesus. John then adds that the authorities started persecuting Jesus because he had broken their law about healing on the Sabbath.

I find it ironic that the very man that Jesus healed would, in turn, express his gratitude by identifying him to the authorities who were anxious to punish him. A very strange way of saying, "thank you," don't you think?

One plausible explanation for this man's response can be found in the understanding that he wasn't all that thrilled to suddenly be faced with the uncertainty of having to make his way in the world. It's possible that he actually preferred the hell of his formerly predictable situation rather than being willing to risk the joy of a new and unpredictable life. It might stretch him beyond his comfort level.

How many people do you know who are like that? How many people are living paralyzed lives—lives that are not paralyzed physically, but paralyzed emotionally and spiritually—lives paralyzed by the fear of the uncertain and unknown—lives afraid to take the risk living life without a clearly defined path and a neat stack of answers to rely upon?

As much as we may fear it or try to avoid it, our uncertainty can be a gift that opens doors to new ways of thinking and living. It can invite us to grow in ways that we might never have imagined if we were content to stay within the realm of the predictable and certain.

But having said this, I would like to be clear that there is, I believe, one certainty that serves as the bedrock for our living as people of faith. It is the certainty of knowing...the certainty of trusting that it is the love of God that is the one constant in a world that is constantly changing. It is the love of God that invites us and enables us to risk the joy, the depth, the meaning and the mystery of life that resists pat answers and simple equations.

Oswald Chambers suggested that it is important to **“Continually revise your relationship with God until the only certainty that you have is not that you are faithful, but that God is.”**

It is my hope and my prayer that, as a people of faith, a people who are certain that God is faithful, we will be unafraid to be uncertain, unafraid to ask the difficult questions...unafraid to be honest in our doubt...unafraid to live into the mystery of not knowing, of not having all the answers. For it is, I believe, in the “dark wood” of these experiences that we will find a faith worth savoring, a faith worth celebrating, and yes, a faith worth building a life upon. **Amen**