

“Becoming a Contagious Christian: Questions?”

Date: May 15, 2016

Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: John 14:24-31

Theme: Witnessing, doubt, questions

Occasion: Contagious Christians, series

Well, we're at the end of our series on Contagious Christians. We've talked about how much people matter to God and how to make a transition in conversation to talk about spiritual matters. We've talked about learning how to tell *your* personal story and how to share the gospel message with a friend.

But what about, when they have questions? What do we say to someone who has doubts, or is even a little antagonistic towards Christianity? What do we say to them? That's why I've chosen this passage where Jesus deals with the questions that Thomas has.

I like the way our authors describe a possible scenario between Jesus and Thomas in their book (*Becoming a Contagious Christian*, p. 165): Thomas is speaking:

“Just give it up, will you? What do you take me for anyway, a fool? I'd have to push my finger into the wounds of his hands and feet, and stick my arm into his side all the way up to my elbow before I'd ever believe he was raised from the dead.

“So you can fantasize all you want to about a resurrection,” Thomas continued, “but it looks to me like I've already wasted three years of my life. I'm not going to give up one more day on anything associated with Jesus. Don't you get it? It's over!”

The disciples were huddled together in a house trying to make sense of the recent events. It was a few days after Thomas's tirade, when Jesus suddenly appeared in the middle of the room. It soon

became obvious that he wasn't there just to have some Christian fellowship. He carefully looked around the room, as if to find a certain person. Then he locked eyes with Thomas.

When I let my imagination run wild, I'm reminded of those old Western movies, where two guys square off in a saloon. While they're staring each other down, everyone else starts diving behind tables and chairs to make themselves scarce, because they know there's going to be some action.

Well, I can just picture Jesus squaring off with Thomas. And I can imagine the other disciples, remembering Thomas's tirade a few days earlier, clearing out of the way. My guess is, they were thinking: "Is he ever going to get it? He's going to regret ever opening his mouth."

Fearing the worst, they covered their eyes as Jesus walked up to within a foot of Thomas. The room became deathly quiet, and they heard Jesus utter two words: "Touch me."

Not "beat it," or "drop dead," or "get lost." Not even "straighten up." Nothing like that at all. Just, "Touch me."

Those words communicated volumes about the character of Jesus. Thomas and the other disciples learned a lot about Jesus that day. And the lesson is one that we need to keep in mind when we're talking to our friends about our Christian faith.

It's okay to have questions. It's okay to have doubts. It's okay to take your time. Jesus warmly invites any and all who have sincere questions to come, to seek, and to ask because He wants to help clear up the haze.

In regards to our questions and doubt, Jesus simply says, “Touch me. Do whatever it takes in order to find out I’m’ real.” So don’t be afraid when friends express doubt and raise questions along the way. It’s actually a positive sign that shows they have some genuine interest in what you’re telling them.

Some people have questions about the nature of God, because of inaccurate portrayals of God they’ve heard about, or been taught. If God is pictured as a helpless old man, or a harsh judge, a disinterested deity or a cosmic kill-joy, who in their right mind is going to want to follow that kind of God?

Our authors give us a helpful line to use, borrowed from Jay Kesler. He says, “Tell me about the God you don’t believe in. Maybe I don’t believe in that God either.”

The best way to help people is to listen to them and share with them your best understanding of who God is. I love to share the image of the Father in the story of the Prodigal Son, who loves us so much and is ready to forgive us whenever we’re ready to come home.

Some people we might talk to have questions about why there is evil in the world, especially if God is so good. That’s a tough question and no easy answers. But there are answers to share with them.

First, we can share with them that God gives people freedom and much of the evil in the world is caused by people acting in evil ways. God knows about this, and will hold all of us accountable for our behavior.

Second, we can share with them that the cross of Jesus Christ is God’s way of dealing with evil, taking the pain and suffering of the

world upon Himself, absorbing the sin of the world, and then redeeming it through Jesus' resurrection.

Christianity doesn't deny that there is evil in the world. We know it very well. But we believe that God is at work through Jesus to redeem suffering, to transform bad things into good things.

And then, you may run into people who have questions about whether Christianity is even needed, since science can explain the universe without the need for God. This is a very interesting question and one that I love to engage people in discussing.

I was a biology major in college before changing majors. I found that the world of science *deepened* my faith in our Creator God, as I explored and discovered the wonder and diversity of life itself. More and more physicists, astronomers, biologists, paleontologists are finding evidence for a divine Creator in the evidence of the physical world. We do not have to choose between science and faith.

We may not have all the answers that our friend is looking for. But we can listen to their questions. We can offer to find answers. "Let me go talk to my pastor about that." Or, "Let me do some homework and I hope we can continue our conversation."

We don't have to be afraid of having religious conversations with our friends. If they disagree with us, or if they have questions you can't answer, bring it back to church and let's talk about it. And there are plenty of great authors we can read who can help us become better at answering these kinds of questions.

Most importantly on this Pentecost Sunday, we need to remember that when we talk about our faith with family or friends, the

Holy Spirit will be with us, to help us know how to respond to the questions our loved ones ask. The Holy Spirit is a gift from God to help us remember all that Jesus taught us, and to help us offer an explanation as to why we believe.

I'd like to close our sermon series by reading this poem. It's a challenging reminder from Sam Shoemaker's poem "So I Stand Near the Door:"

I stay near the door.
I neither go too far in, nor stay too far out,
The door is the most important door in the world –
It is the door through which people walk when they find God.

There's no use my going way inside, and staying there,
When so many are still outside and they, as much as I,
Crave to know where the door is.
And all that so many ever find
Is only the wall where a door ought to be.
They creep along the wall like blind people,
With outstretched, groping hands,
Feeling for a door, knowing there must be a door,
Yet they never find it.....
So I stay near the door.

The most tremendous thing in the world
Is for people to find that door – the door to God.
The most important thing anyone can do
Is to take hold of one of those blind, groping hands,
And to put it on the latch, the latch that only clicks
And opens to the person's own touch.
People die on the outside of that door, as starving beggars die
On cold nights in cruel cities in the dead of winter –
Die for want of what is within their grasp.

They live on the other side of it – live because they have found it.
Nothing else matters compared to helping them find it,
And open it, and walk in, and find Him....
So I stay near the door.

May we all be contagious Christians, helping people to find the door to God, through Jesus our Lord. Amen? Amen.