

Acton Congregational Church
Sermon 4/16/23
Sacred Ambivalence
Franki Bennett

Thomas gets a bad rap in John's passage. A "Doubting Thomas" is a derogatory term that describes someone who habitually doubts everything. I don't know how many decades or centuries the term "Doubting Thomas" has been unfairly used to describe Thomas the disciple. How can we chastise Thomas for lack of faith when we have our own doubts, we may not publicize our doubts as Thomas did in this passage, but we wouldn't be human if we didn't have an occasional doubt.

Thomas was known as an insightful and faithful follower of Jesus. He could see the big picture and asked questions that the other disciples chose not to ask. Sometimes we are relieved when someone else asks a question that we are too embarrassed to ask for ourselves.

Uncertainly during this time of Jesus' death is an understatement to say the least. The disciples were smack dab in the middle of history and had no clue of the significance—yet. They had no name for the resurrection. Death had the last word.

We have had the benefit of perspective. We saw the movie trailer, and the movie, and we have read the book about Jesus' birth, death and resurrection. The disciples had none of these advantages.

The disciples were so confused: What's this about Mary speaking to Jesus when the tomb was empty? How did Jesus enter the room where the disciples were hiding from the Jews, yet the room was locked? Didn't Jesus die on the cross? The disciples were amazed at the sight of Jesus's wounds but they did not share the good news, they kept it among themselves. It sounds like a case for Detective Columbo or Nancy Drew.

And Thomas was not present the first time Jesus appeared to his disciples.

Thomas' absence during Jesus' appearance is an integral aspect of this story. Was this part of the grand scheme? If he had been present with the others, we would not have known that Thomas asked the disciples questions and asked questions of Jesus. We would have learned nothing from his doubt.

Acton Congregational Church
Sermon 4/16/23
Sacred Ambivalence
Franki Bennett

When Thomas was satisfied with the proof of the wounds, he was the first to address Jesus as God. Face to face with the Father, Thomas spoke these words to Jesus “My Lord, my God!” He took a circuitous route to belief, it was a hard earned and genuine belief.

Rather than calling him “doubting Thomas”, I prefer to use ambivalence or ambiguity. Ambivalence and ambiguity are both defined as fluidity; able to hold two possibilities at the same time. Ambivalence accepts uncertainty; able to tolerate not knowing, to make decisions with less fear and duress. Ambivalence is defined as being of two minds, neither indifference nor a *laissez faire* attitude.

Kathleen Norris author of Amazing Grace quotes Fr. Martin Smith, Anglican monk. Fr. Smith writes that ambivalence is a sacred emotion and he finds:

“a widespread need in contemporary spirituality to find ways of praying and engaging with God, our selves, and one another that have room for simultaneous contradictions, the experience of opposite emotions. We need to find the sacredness in living the tensions and to admit how unsecured, how disconnecting and profane, are the attempts at praying and living while suppressing half of the stuff that fascinates or plagues us.....”¹

Do we not allow our simultaneous contradictions and opposite emotions to fascinate us?

I was fascinated and wondered why the bible described Thomas as the twin. A twin to whom or to what sibling? But wait, Thomas saw the big picture, he contemplated, he saw both sides of a situation, he asked logical questions of Jesus. Simultaneous contradictions! This fluid curiosity is quite the opposite of certainty and a fixed mind.

During one of my high tides of clarity and internal exploration on this passage, I did a “what if.” What if “twin” was a metaphor for being of two minds? He is a man who thinks creatively, has the courage to ask questions and thinks outside the box. The inner twin, the mind of *both- and*.

Acton Congregational Church
Sermon 4/16/23
Sacred Ambivalence
Franki Bennett

I have twin grandchildren and, believe me, as youngsters, Connor and Molly could be of two minds in two bodies. Their conversations went like this:

“No way!” “Yes way!”

“I didn’t do it!” “Yes, you did!” “No I didn’t!” “Yes, sir.” “No sir.” “Yes sir.”

You get the point. Any siblings close in age may play this game.

Thomas, of two minds in one body.

Ambivalence is normal and healthy, ambivalent and ambiguous thinkers are often emotionally and intellectually mature. They see the big picture, They don’t rush to judgement, and they weigh both sides. They can live in the “in between” and tolerate uncertainty.

I am not referring to the agonizing stuckness called *rumination*, which is defined as the inability to make a decision when one is paralyzed by fear and anxiety.

The opposite of ambivalence is absolutism. The sharp edges of absolutism is in abundant supply and overstock today—in politics, religion, ethics, and philosophy. .. Expressed in rigid black and white language, wrong or right, left or right. A narrow viewpoint leaves no room for discussion, or possibilities, or the big picture, or a vast horizon or changing one’s mind. Absolutism puts the brakes on a balanced discussion. Certainty is the absolutist’s drug of choice.

Irish poet and writer John O’Donohue, a wise man who died too young, wrote that **“certainty freezes the mind.”**³

Our lives are full of uncertainties and “in-betweens” in between life and death, pregnancy and birth, sowing and reaping, between intention and action.

Our soon to be graduating high school seniors are entering an “in-between” time: to leave a known high school and home life and to begin a somewhat unknown journey. Whether they (you) are leaving home to go away to college or entering the work force, feeling ambivalent is quite normal. If we feel ambivalence, if we recognize it and if we can name it, as Thomas did to the disciples and as Jesus did to Thomas, we are emotionally honest with ourselves and to others.

Acton Congregational Church
Sermon 4/16/23
Sacred Ambivalence
Franki Bennett

Of course, I must add that the graduates aren't the only ones to feel ambivalence.... Their parents, grandparents, and siblings do too. The summer of "in between" can be tough on everyone. A popular saying goes like this "sometimes it is easier to leave home mad than face the complex emotional feelings of fear, doubt, and uncertainty. The summer before they leave is often referred to by parents as the summer from "h*ll," the opposite of heaven.

And teens leaving home is only one example, we adults could replace leaving home with other events such as leaving a relationship, a job, or even a church. If we leave mad and angry, we carry with us a backpack full of distress, resentments, and grievances. Jesus did not leave this earth mad and angry, He left with enduring love for all.

We can embrace the soft edges of mystery and uncertainty. Katherine May wrote in her recent book, Enchantment, **"We have fresh understanding when we invite the mystery to dwell within us."**²

Let's allow some ambivalence into our all too rational and concrete part of our brains. It is natural to hesitate, to be of two minds occasionally, to be uncertain. Many of us, our youth, our young adults, we older adults may be feeling ambivalent now, as we ask ourselves, am I/we on the right path?

The other day, I saw some teens so aptly maneuver their long boards, a longboard is a long skateboard or a short surfboard with soft wheels. A foot on each end and a gentle shift back and forth, back and forth as they moved forward with such grace. Another metaphor, a "longboard metaphor."

John O'Donohue writes **"The difficulty here is our tendency to jump to conclusions. When we make the connections too easy for ourselves, we let the mystery, like sand, slip through the openings. Our sense of uncertainty and our need for security nail down our world."**³ In other words, It confines us to an unimaginative narrow world that lacks creativity.

Acton Congregational Church
Sermon 4/16/23
Sacred Ambivalence
Franki Bennett

In the 1980's my family moved to Acton, our sixth move in 10 years, all military moves. It was a very difficult transition, we knew no one and dearly missed the tightly knit military community.

ACC was convenient and a no brainer, we could walk to church and they had a vibrant youth group and Sunday School for my kids. Those were our early reasons to join.

When we began attending regularly, I created a story in my head: I assumed that everyone in the pews here was so much more knowledgeable about the bible than I and they were far into to what is often referred to as their "faith journey." I was intimidated. I doubted that I could ever measure up to their faith level. As if faith was a competitive sport.

I was ambivalent about my faith, I bumped into a wall of intimidation, a wall that I had built myself. and, by the way, shame does not make good mortar for building walls. I didn't dare ask faith questions, I was afraid of revealing my ignorance. But, I hung in there and attended worship and shared my gifts.

I felt more confident arranging flowers for the altar than leading a prayer. I felt more confident in the church kitchen than in the sanctuary. I felt more confident serving on the welcoming committee than serving communion. These ways of volunteering were all guiding me to feel comfort in the church and with God— no matter how I participated.

Acton Congregational Church
Sermon 4/16/23
Sacred Ambivalence
Franki Bennett

Look around, we are all in different paths of faith. Those spiritual paths are not fixed nor are they permanent. They change from month to month, day to day, hour to hour. Some days we may confidently feel like we are walking parallel with God, other days we are simply J-walking or running perpendicular to God or on another road from God.

Some of us have returned from Covid or hiatus after months and years. Some of us are new to the church. We come to church for different reasons, the music, the fellowship, the youth programs, SHYF, mission trips, the sermons, the scriptures. [In summary](#), maybe Thomas was the clearest thinker and strongest believer of them all. He was not afraid or ashamed to feel ambivalence and he had the courage to ask Jesus.

Call this emotional honesty. Call this sacred ambivalence.

Lord, I believe, help thou mine unbelief. (gospel of Mark, KJV)

1. Norris, Kathleen. Amazing Grace pp 67-68
2. May, Katherine. Enchantment, awakening wonder in an anxious age.
3. O'Donohue, John. Eternal Echoes pg. 115 and pg. 122