

## Doubt

A sermon by Lee Storrow

May 20, 2007

(Lee is a graduating senior from Asheville High and a member of First Congregational for the past 4 years. He has been involved in our congregation in a variety of ways, including serving on the staff transitions task force. We are delighted to have him preach for us on this occasion.)

For the last 8 months I have been heavily immersed into the college application process. In January I mailed off my applications and in April I started receiving acceptance and rejection letters. By March I was picking between two schools, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and American University in Washington DC. Chapel Hill is a large public school with a wider variety and focus, whereas American University a smaller school with a focus on political science, my intended major. I would literally change my mind about what school I wanted to go to every day. One day I would wake up thinking "I want to go to American", but by the time my head would hit the pillow that night I would be sure Chapel Hill was the right choice for me.

I knew that I wanted to be involved with theatre during college although that was not going to be my major. American's theatre program is small, whereas Chapel Hill has a large theatre program with many different organizations. The bedrock of the Chapel Hill program is the Playmakers Repertory Company. When I checked their website in April, they had announced 4 of the 5 productions they would be doing next year. One play however, had not yet been announced. They claimed that it was a very current Broadway play, which because of rights and royalty issues could not be announced until April. I keep up with the plays that open in New York, even though I am not likely to see them. If there was one play that opened in the last couple of years that I want to see in New York, it is Doubt. Written by John Patrick Stanley, Doubt tells the story of a small Catholic school in New York in 1964. Father Flynn has recently come to this small community to serve as bishop. Following the Second Vatican's directive, he believes the clergy should be more accessible to the parish. His colleague, Sister Aloysius, is an old-school nun who insists that her students not be coddled: "Every easy choice today will have its consequence tomorrow. Mark my words."

At the beginning of the play, Father Flynn directly preaches to the audience and asks, "What do you do when you're not sure." Several characters in the play must grapple with that question when Sister Aloysius accuses Father Flynn of having an inappropriate relationship with a young boy at the school.

I wasn't sure about what college I should go to and I knew that as the days ticked off toward May 1 I would continue flip-flopping back and forth. So I decided to treat this play selection as an opportunity. I decided if Playmakers announced Doubt as their final play of next year it would be a sign from God that Chapel Hill was the choice for me.

I've always had a hard time with the concept of God and religion. I can't grasp a hold of religion with my two hands, I can't see it or measure it or weigh it. It was so easy as child to understand what religion meant. Noah, Jesus and Mary were as familiar as Peter Pan, Snow White, and the Gingerbread Man. It was just as easy to believe children could fly or a pumpkin could turn into a carriage as to believe that a man could walk on water. The stories of the Bible seemed like fables that happened in bedtime stories and not events that actually happened. As I grew older I started having trouble with these stories. I knew that Cinderella and wicked witches didn't exist, why should I continue to believe other stories that were just as unrealistic as fairy tales? Can flaming bushes actually talk? Can Jesus really turn one fish into many? How did Jesus rise from the dead? I began to doubt what I so willingly accepted as truth as a child. As time passed by doubt began to increase. Every story from the Bible was explained by modern science. The Red Sea parted not because Charlton Heston put a stick in the ocean, but because a great wind cleared a shallow part of the water for a short period of time. Some scientists believe that other plagues that occurred while the Jews were in Egypt were related to the eruption on the Santorini volcano. Every story seems to have a logical explanation that doesn't have to depend on God.

As I began high school I had even more questions. The more we studied the Bible in Confirmation class, the sketchier a source it seemed to become. The stories in the Bible are centuries old, and have been changed and adapted and rewritten and changed and rewritten in a new language and altered and adapted again. It's difficult to keep the same message intact when ten people tell telephone, it seems impossible over thousands of years. Zach Herman told us of the Council of Nicaea, when Christians chose what they wanted in the Bible and what got thrown in the trash. I don't really want someone cherry picking what goes into the book that is the foundation of my religion.

On top of that, in Art History last year we studied the evolution of Jesus in religious art. During the Era of Persecution, after Jesus' death, Jesus is depicted as a youthful boy, happy and young. As time passed the appearance of Jesus in Christian art changed. He steadily grew older. He became burdened and often appeared in a judge like role. At the same time he shifts, from Middle Eastern in appearance to white. Even Jesus, who seems the most stable, has shifted in appearance over generations.

My doubt begins to increase. I am beginning to realize that everything that I thought was so true and good may not be true at all. In the face of all the historical facts, how can I believe what's written in this adjusted text. What if it's

all a lie, what if I like Neo need to take the red pill, and wake up and realize what I thought was correct isn't? I needed something, anything to prove that there is some backing behind the Bible and the stories and the rituals and everything held dear in church.

I began to doubt. At the same time however, I began to realize something. There is a beauty in our ability to doubt and question the things around us. Doubt makes us stronger, because it forces us to justify our beliefs to our toughest critic: Ourselves.

In American today, people don't want to doubt. We want a clear cut answer, yes or no, black or white. We don't leave room for people to say, "I don't know." Politicians are held to this standard every day. Politicians should always have the rights answer. They should stay true to their beliefs and never waver. Heaven forbid that a politician in our country changed their mind about an issue or apologize for a mistake they made. We no longer give ourselves room to make informed decisions about issues, be it religion, politics or anything in-between. What's frightening is that when we don't give ourselves adequate time our decisions become much rash. Doubt is a vital part of ability to determine our belief system. My doubts force me to determine for myself what faith means, rather than accepting empty rhetoric. And by doubting I insure that I don't become the crazy Christians, as I call them. We recently watched Jesus Camp in youth group and it is frightening to see how children are indoctrinated to accept anything that the bible or the church says. Doubts are what makes our religion real to us as individuals. We've got to learn to live with a full measure of uncertainty.

John Patrick Shanley writes in the preface to his play *Doubt*, that "There is an uneasy time when belief has begun to slip, but hypocrisy has yet to take hold, when the consciousness is disturbed but not yet altered. It is the most dangerous, important, and ongoing experience of life. The beginning of change is the moment of Doubt. It is that crucial moment when I renew my humanity or become a lie.

Doubt requires more courage than conviction does, and more energy; because conviction is a resting place and doubt is infinite—it is a passionate exercise."

I had countless doubts during the college process. Eventually, as the May 1 date approached I chose Chapel Hill. While I changed my mind every single day, as I considered the situation it was clear that that was the best school for reasons that would take four sermons to explain.

A couple weeks ago, while I was looking around Chapel Hill's website I stumbled upon the Department of Dramatic Art. I clicked on the link to the Playmakers website, remembering that pact I made with God over a month ago. God doesn't speak to me, and I have never seen a miracle. When I clicked on the link to the 2007-2008 season, I saw the name of the final play they would be performing.

***Doubt: A Parable***  
**by John Patrick Shanley**

It wasn't a miracle. It wasn't life changing or altering. But with the simple announcement of a play, I got the sign I needed. Not the sign to blindly accept what is told me, but that there is something out there, something I can't explain. But my doubts make my conviction that there is something out there, in whatever form it may be, stronger.