

## Uncomfortable Faith: Embracing the Discomfort

John 12:20-27

St. Mark's & St. James UCC ~ August 2, 2020

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Adam MCHUGH said, “We must put away our convenient notions of God – the one who always agrees with us, the one who always favors our nation or political agenda, the one who feeds us candy and never vegetables.”

I read that in the opening words of a new book I'm reading and thought to myself – there's trouble ahead. Those are fight'n words! Those are troublesome words.

Those aren't the words I want to hear at the beginning of a new book.

But, of course, they were intriguing enough to pull me deeper into the story. Because I wanted to find out where this was going. What did the author mean –

My convenient notion of God is one who always agrees with me.

And what does it mean that

we favor a god who feeds us candy and never vegetables?

Those words, in and of themselves, caused me to squirm in my chair. More so figuratively than literally; but squirm, nonetheless. I don't like it when someone points out that I might have the wrong notion of God; of who God is; of what I think is best for me and what God knows is best for me.

This makes me uncomfortable. It causes discomfort. And in that discomfort, I can do one of two things. I can get rid of all those things that make me uncomfortable. Just kick them out of my life so I no longer feel the sharp edges and points crowding me, poking me, pushing me in directions I don't think I want to go.

Or... I can embrace the discomfort. I can find out more about it and why it discomforts me and how it might shape me, move me, make and mold me into a different person if I try to understand it rather than ignore it, or kick it out of my life, or get rid of it.

Today's reading from John is one of those interesting passages that when you first look at it, doesn't seem to be one of discomfort. Perhaps except for Jesus statement, "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it..."

But before we even come to those words,

we see that a number of Greeks are seeking out Jesus.

This doesn't necessarily mean these are people from Ithaca or Crete or Milos or any of the Greek islands. Rather, Greeks was a catch all label for non-Jews. Much like that of Gentiles.

They came seeking Jesus but instead they approached Philip. Perhaps Philip was more approachable? Certainly, there was a certain amount of discomfort for them to come seeking Jesus. There was a definitive separation between the Greeks and the Jews – you saw this at the feasts and festivals. Greeks or Gentiles could go to these celebrations, but at the temple courtyard, they could only go so far as the Court of the Gentiles. And no further.

In fact, a wall separated the two – keeping Greeks and Gentiles from going any further into the courts or temples or sanctuary. Philip was a Greek name and perhaps that's why they came to him first. There's that connection – he has a Greek name; he comes from a Greek region. But, more importantly than a cultural or racial divide being crossed is the theological divide being bridged.

These Greeks represent the other sheep ~ the lost sheep. And they want to “see” Jesus. But seeing Jesus means far more than having the opportunity to sit down across a table from him, or to listen to him preach or teach. They are seeking an invitation to belief. They want to join the flock of Christ ~ to become his followers.

This too would cause Jesus some discomfort. He had to make a decision. That Jesus would be seen with Greeks could jeopardize his whole standing with the church leaders of Jerusalem. Jesus had challenges enough with Pharisees of Jerusalem who questioned Jesus and set traps for him; because his teachings were new and different.

There was always a risk for Jesus that the people’s opinion would sway back to the teachings of the Pharisees and the old ways. Jesus had labored for three years and had gained a hard-won popularity. Why risk that at the expense of a few non-Jews? A few Greeks?

Israel had fanatical view of racial purity. Going back to Moses; he had called them to remain separate from the Canaanites. Those who were married to Philistines, Phoenicians, Persians, Greeks or Romans were tainted. Their world was one of harsh judgement where people were divided into clean and unclean. Pure and impure.

So, to invite Greeks or Gentiles into the early church wasn’t just a matter of racial diversity and tolerance – it was a theological statement cutting to the heart of one of Judaism’s tenants of belief.

There's great risk for Jesus to meet with the Greeks who want to see him. But, if John 3:16 is to have any meaning at all, "For God so loved the world..." there could not be restrictions delineating the world.

Their encounter with Jesus begins with discomfort. They add to Jesus' discomfort – or more accurately stated, they add to the disciples' discomfort who are discomforted for Jesus sake. Yet, coming to know Jesus ~ to follow him ~ to change how we live our lives to live more like Christ calls us to is far from comfortable.

Think for just a moment with me... how many church related, Jesus related, Christian related things have caused you to squirm in your chair?

When you were confirmed, did you have to speak in front of the whole church, perhaps

recite something memorized, or share a personal feeling as to why this was important?

Have you ever been asked to take part in something – teach a SS class, lead a youth

group or VBS group or go on a mission trip – and you said to yourself, I can't do that!

Have you ever been asked to pray for the group? Outloud. In front of everyone else.

Did anyone ever ask you to tell them about your relationship with Jesus?

Did you ever have to stand in front of the church and say something?

Was there ever a time in worship where the pastor asked if you wanted to lift someone or some situation up in prayer ~ and you thought to yourself ... I do!

But the thought of speaking made your tummy wiggle. So maybe you said to yourself, if the pastor looks directly at me that will be a sign I'm supposed to share. Or if the person next to me or in front of me goes first, then I won't share because that's just too many prayers from this section of the pews. Or maybe someone else will lift the prayer for me. Darn it, I'll just write it on a note and leave it for the pastor.

There's so much more I could list, but as much as these things can make us cringe, they can also fill us with great joy. It's in those awkward, uncomfortable, difficult, challenging times that we grow.

If I had listened to my introverted instincts every time, I never would have been able to stand up before a congregation. If I had let my wiggly tummy dictate my relationship with Brenda, I never would have asked her to marry me.

We grow most when we are outside of our comfort zones.

We are more effective when we are on the edge of risk.

We hold beliefs more dear and pursue goals more passionately when they are accompanied by a cost.

So, as Christians, we embrace rather than avoid, the necessary grounding of faith in our church, however uncomfortable, awkward, and frustrating it can be at times.

And this too, should be why churches ought to embrace, rather than avoid, the uncomfortable aspects of Christianity, if they are to grow and thrive and make disciples in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

For here too we sometimes say, “Father, save us from this hour!” But no. For this is the reason we have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.”

When God’s voice sounds from the heaven there is a response to Jesus’ call Father, glorify your name. “I have glorified it.”

And I will glorify it again.

God looks down upon us and sees the work we are doing and knows our discomfort and sees how we embrace our faith and build up the church no matter the discomfort.

And God says, I will glorify it again.