

FROM DOUBT INTO BELIEF

Mark 9:14-29

On top of our shoulders lie 100 billion neurons. Each of these neurons makes 7,000 connections with other neurons. The total number of connections is from 100 to 500 trillion. Maybe we can understand the number trillion in terms of the national debt, but imagine all of that packed into our brains? By comparison a simple roundworm, a nematode which is 1 mm long, has 302 neurons. We humans are made to think.

With the ability to think comes the ability to question, to doubt. That can be a good thing because it can keep us from foolish things. It is not smart to jump from a window twenty feet off the ground. It is not smart to drive 50 in a school zone where a policeman is waiting. It is not smart to miss your yearly check-ups.

In school we are taught to think critically—to not just accept things, but to find out the truth for ourselves. That kind of doubt led people to think about new things in new ways like the microchip, the electric generator, and the video screen. Think of what our lives would be like without those things.

Critical thinking, though, is not enough. A man named Schrodinger won the Nobel Prize for physics in 1933 in the very intellectual area of quantum mechanics. He said about science:

I can't tell you as a scientist about red and blue, good and bad, bitter and sweet, physical pain and delight, beauty and ugliness, God and eternity. Science knows nothing about them. Science sometimes pretends to answer questions in those areas, but the answers are very often so silly that we don't take them seriously.

The man who encountered Jesus had his doubts. His son was possessed by a demon. It wasn't just that at that moment his son was acting crazy. This happened again and again. Imagine having to spend all those years as a parent watching your son suffer? We often picture fear and doubt as something we face in quick situations like accidents. Do I jump out of a plane trusting that the parachute will work? Do I leap over the wall trusting that there is not a deep drop on the other side? Do I ask that girl out for a date? Do I take the risk and buy that car? Do I decide to switch from engineering to education? But for this father his doubt involved something day in and day out. Should I stay in a marriage? Can I handle getting older? Can I remain in my faith with all the distractions and doubts I have? Can I have faith for the long term when my marriage is over or I don't see any hope for someone to be married to me, when an illness won't go away, or when I'm stuck with a job I hate?

On top of that, doubt causes pain. The symbol for a question is the question mark. It looks like a fishhook. That is what it does to us when those questions get caught in us. They

get our attention, and then sink deep in us, causing so much pain. It isn't just that someone close to us died. It is also the question, "Why did he have to die?" It isn't just the uncertainty when we lose a job. It is the question, "Why did I lose the job? Will I get another one? Will we survive until then?"

In September 1868 a group of 50 army scouts were trapped on a sandbar in the Arikarie River in northeast Colorado by an overwhelming force of Cheyenne warriors. Though the Native Americans outnumbered the scouts, the scouts had killed their horses and used them with pits they quickly dug in the wet sand to protect themselves and had repeating rifles. To encourage his fellow Cheyenne, Chief Roman Nose assured his warriors that the white bullets would not harm them. They had the faith to attack head long against the island, but it did no good. When many of the warriors, including Roman Nose, himself, were shot and fell, the Cheyenne realized how wrong that faith was.

What good is it to have faith when what we believe is false? It would be like kamikazes who tried to sink the U.S. Navy at the end of World War 2. It is like the terrorists who become human bombs and believe this will take them to paradise. Perhaps you have been taught that, "God helps those who help themselves," or "Cleanliness is next to godliness," or "the Bible says that gambling is wrong," or "Jesus never said anything about hell." All of those are false. So many things that people attribute to Christianity are not true, so why believe any of it?

But the other end of the pendulum is to have no faith at all, to have to insist that everything be proven. Then all we are left with is doubts. Nothing can be trusted. Eventually as humans we have to believe in something. Even sworn atheists believe there is no God, not that they can prove it. They have to abandon doubts that say that god could actually exist and actually believe there is no God.

So how do we find that point between the pendulum swings of blind foolishness and total doubt? The same way the man who came to Jesus did. He said to Jesus, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief." We look to Jesus. In Jesus we have the two things needed for faith—certainty and love. Our critical thinking leads us away from things that are not certain. But eventually it will leave us with nothing certain. Our beliefs can give us something to hold on to, one thing we think we love, but it is empty. But in Jesus we see God, the one certain thing in this universe. T. S. Elliot, who so long doubted God, said, "God is the still point of the turning universe." In Jesus this certain God became one of us. In Jesus we see that the certain God is also the God who totally loves us, the God we can truly believe in.

Jesus knows those doubts because He had them Himself. He is the Son of God. But how did He know that? He had to trust God's word. When the devil tempted Him, He began with the words, "If you are the Son of God?" In other words the devil was saying to Him, "Go ahead and prove it." When Jesus was confronted with people like the man with the demon possessed

son, He trusted that His Father would give Him the power to help those people. He drove that demon out, just like He fed the 5,000 and calmed the storm. But He never did those things to prove who He was. He did them to help people. Jesus didn't know intellectually with total scientific proof that death on the cross would take away our sin and that He would rise on the third day. He trusted His Father's word. If He had to wait for that proof, He would never have gone to the cross. But because He believed, our sins have been forgiven. The demon was taken out of the man's son. We, who are so full of doubt, can believe!

We have our doubts. They can be good when they prevent us from believing in foolish things, when we are cautious about getting rich quick or the latest fad or in putting our hands in anything else but God. Those same doubts kept the boy's father from trusting in anything but God. But our doubts then leave us with nothing. That's when we have to leave them behind and cling to Jesus.