

TEG Intro Sermon.

Big Idea: We all have gaps between our beliefs about God and our experience of God. This is natural and normal, but we can get unstuck and relax into God's presence with some intentional tools.

Beats and thoughts:

- Doubt is a normal part of faith, precious vs core beliefs, head beliefs vs body beliefs, treating ourselves as well as we treat others, noticing the patterns of our faith that keep us stuck.

Main text: Mark 9:14-24. The healing of the possessed boy where his father says, 'Lord I believe. Help my unbelief.'

Secondary Texts:

Jude 22: be merciful to those who doubt.

Matt 28:16: they worshipped him, but some doubted.

Have you ever noticed a gap between what you believe about God and what you experience from God? One of the great challenges of being a follower of Jesus is navigating the gap between our belief and our experience. I think there are 3 core gaps:

1. I believe God loves me but I struggle to feel it.
2. I believe God is with me but I struggle to see it.
3. I thought I'd be further along by now.

You may have other gaps in your faith. The issue isn't so much the gap, but how you handle it. What do you do with the gap? Some people ignore it, hoping it will go away or hoping no-one else will see it. Some are afraid to look into it, fearing that the gap may become a black hole of doubt that makes them lose their faith. Some feel a pressure to never admit to a gap, thinking it reflects poorly on them or reflects poorly on God.

But even people in the Bible had gaps in their faith and oddly, some of them had gaps even when Jesus was standing right in front of them.

After Jesus miraculously raised from the dead, Jesus gathered his disciples to send them all on missionary journeys to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom. It is an astonishing scene, the disciples had been through so much. So much doubt and fear after Jesus was crucified and so much jubilation when they discovered he had raised from the dead, but still some doubted. Take a look at Matt 28:

*Matt. 28:16 Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. 17 When they saw him, they worshiped him; **but some doubted.** 18 Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the*

name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

How could any of them doubted? But this is a normal part of faith. Some of the disciples were still making sense of all that had happened in a short amount of time.

But even after following Jesus for a while, struggling with a gap in your faith is normal. One of the authors of the New Testament was Jesus’ brother Jude. His advice? “Be merciful to those who doubt.” (Jude 22.)

When we think of people in the Bible we can assume that they never struggled with any gaps in their faith, but actually even when they are right with Jesus, we see them grappling with gaps.

Main text here. Mark 9:14-24. (Of course, select as little or as much of the text as works, but the key is ‘Lord I believe, help my unbelief.’)

It is this mix of belief and unbelief together that makes up our journey, doesn’t it?

As I started to dig deeper into this in my own life, I noticed something quite startling. I was not raised in the church, I come from a very secular heritage. I converted as a teenager and Jesus truly revolutionized my life. I would summarize my story this way: home was not a safe place, school was not a safe place. Church was my first experience with genuine love and welcome. I was so thrilled to be called by God to be a pastor and studied theology in college and then again in graduate school and I have been in full time ministry for almost 30 years now.

I say that not to give you my resume, but to say I’m all in on this. But also, I say it because I have always assumed that my belief in Jesus in my deepest, most core belief.

But recently I have discovered that it is not. My belief in Jesus is not, in fact, my most core belief. It is my most precious belief, that is true. There is nothing more precious to me than Jesus Christ.

But I have some deep beliefs that are pretty ingrained in my life, some of which I didn’t even know existed. And when life takes a turn or when things don’t go my way. When I am exhausted or irritable or generally left to my own devices, these deeper beliefs the over and drive my life.

SLIDE: Precious vs Core Beliefs

So it turns out we have precious beliefs and core beliefs and sometimes it is our core beliefs that infect our ability to enjoy the God we believe in.

Another way to consider it is that we have

SLIDE: Head beliefs and body beliefs.

I believe in the peace of Christ in my head, but my body doesn't always. I believe in my head in freedom in Christ, but my body betrays that I often feel bound and trapped.

How can we begin to line up our body and head beliefs? Because if we don't do something about them,

SLIDE: The body wins every time.

Do you have any deep beliefs that rummage around and take over your life? The thing about these beliefs, they can be hard to locate. They are so ingrained, so assumed that we don't pause to sift them and see if they are true.

I recently uncovered a belief that startled me: I believe that my job on this earth is to make whoever is in front of me feel better.

Does anything come to mind for you when you think about a core belief that infects your belief in God?

A deeper core belief I uncovered is that I am not worth loving. I am not worth your time. That is pretty stark, but there are so many implications to it.

- I prefer to help others, but struggle to ask for help.
- When people ask how I am doing, I say, 'I'm fine' when the true answer is, 'I don't know how I am doing.'
- I don't tend to pray for myself, because my core belief is that others have it worse than me and whatever I am going through is not that bad.

No wonder I struggle to experience God's love - my core beliefs and behaviors are blocking it.

I have learned a path forward which is to:

SLIDE: Put yourself on your conscious list of relationships

I know this sounds funny, but think of it this way: if someone asks who is in your family, you would get to your second cousins once removed before you think to include yourself.

But you have been in relationship with yourself for sometime and it turns out that your capacity to relax into God's love and God's presence is related to your relationship with yourself.

Over the coming weeks, we'll dive deeper into each gap, but in summary:

SLIDE: Experiencing God's love is connected to the story you tell yourself and learning to relax into God's love over your own view of yourself.

SLIDE: Experiencing God's presence is connected to your own reactivity and learning to notice and lower your reactivity.

SLIDE: Making spiritual progress is related to our approach to Scripture and our false expectations.

Each week we'll spend time with each gap and we're encouraging our groups to freely share when you meet as well. As you might imagine, this discussion goes best if you're willing to be vulnerable and honest.

Meanwhile, a couple of things you can do:

SLIDE: List 3 things you do or say for people you love.

I check on my friends. When they tell me how they are, I believe them. I don't say, 'BUCK UP DAVE, get it together!' I do that to myself, but not to my friends and family. And I try to be encouraging.

SLIDE: List 1 or 2 things you do or say to yourself that you would never do or say to someone else.

I call myself a moron a lot. I would never do that to someone else. I first started working on this in 2016.

So this week: what from the top list will you start for yourself? I now check on myself, because I tend to ignore how I'm doing. And I believe myself. I give myself permission now to have feelings and be sad etc.

I confess I've been really surprised. When I put myself on my conscious list, I now have more to bring to God.

As for the bottom list, I made a vow to stop calling myself a moron.

This way I treat myself, it reminds me of a water pipe in my house. Every water pipe has a valve. When the valve is across the pipe, the water doesn't flow. When the valve is in line with the pipe, the water flows. The pipe is the precious belief in Jesus, the valve is the core belief. I am just trying to line up the way I treat myself with the way God treats me.

Jesus commanded us to 'love your neighbor' but he added this pesky amendment, 'as you love yourself.' How might you be kind to yourself this week?