

Let's talk about Progressive Christianity

Session 5: There is more value in **questioning** than in absolutes.

Discussion Guidelines

It is okay to disagree but not okay to be disagreeable.
Be respectful of one another and each other's experiences.
Be open to exploring new ideas and concepts.
Be ready to participate and speak for yourself.
Be sensitive to others comfort level during discussions.

Remember: we are not here to tell you what to think. We want you to develop your own personal theology, but we want to give you the tools to be able to accomplish that.

Opening Exercise

Are you a rule follower or do you like to forge your own path?
Do you enjoy questioning things or is it easier for you to accept information given to you?

The ability to ask questions is the greatest resource in learning the truth. – C.G. Jung

As Progressive Christians we say we “commit to a lifetime of learning;” but, what do we mean? First, we begin with the assumption that nothing is permanent and everything changes. There has never been a time in history when this fact should be more obvious. Not only are we in the fastest changing time in human history, but the rate of change apparently continues to increase. This includes an increasing amount of information from every field of study from science to theology, from space travel to archeology, from the smallest known cell to a new way of understanding myth as part of a culture.

We assume it is the responsibility of every Progressive Christian to open their mind to as much of this information as possible. Always ask this challenging question: “Does this new information change my understanding of my faith?” This is the essence of Progressive Christianity by definition. Like many things, the process can become both an obligation and an opportunity. It is an obligation to open our eyes and our minds and an opportunity to grow and evolve into all we can become.

Were you encouraged to question your faith in your previous faith communities? What do you think or feel about using the question: “Does this new information change my understanding of my faith?”

According to the gospels, Jesus rarely gave a direct answer to a direct question. Instead, he responded with another question or told a puzzling story. At the risk of disappointing his questioners, Jesus put them in a position of having to think for themselves. Rather than offer his disciples answers to life's most perplexing problems, Jesus introduced them to deeper and deeper levels of ambiguity. Matthew's collection of Jesus' aphorisms known as the

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Sermon on the mount, shows how Jesus confronted his disciples with contradictions. He told them nothing in the law could be changed, not the tiniest letter or the stroke of a letter.

Nevertheless, he also taught them to question some of the most basic principles of the law, such as the rules concerning murder, adultery, retribution, alms giving, and prayer. Jesus would not provide absolute answers because answers, by providing false confidence and security, can become barriers to an awareness of God. Answers become substitutes for God. The task Jesus bequeathed to the church was providing a context in which those who follow him can find the courage to pursue their questions.

Do you believe it takes more faith to live in ambiguity or more faith to believe in dogmatic religion? Why?

Many of us are not comfortable with unknowns or contradictions. We tend to be more comfortable with absolutes and often surround ourselves with people who believe the same things we believe or want to believe. For thousands of years, humans have created myth to try and explain those things that happen in their lives that otherwise did not make sense. It is human nature to desire to somehow have control over our circumstances. We want to believe right behavior will keep us from suffering. In ancient times there were so many things people did not understand in their turbulent and often mysterious three-tiered world. The ancients created stories to explain those things that were otherwise inexplicable. The people came to believe that if they did what God wanted them to do, they would suffer less. These myths were usually shared and repeated within the whole community, the tribe, including men, women, and children, and were passed on from generation to generation.

The other alternative is to embrace the uncertainty and accept that everything changes. We are given the opportunity to change and evolve along with the rest of creation. The truth is the world has always been uncertain in part because knowledge is elusive. Human nature abhors a vacuum and thus we will keep searching for the answers despite the fact they usually lead to more questions and uncertainty, but we do not believe that this is where we will or should necessarily find it. We believe churches should be teaching us to be comfortable with ambiguity and mystery.

What do you think or feel when you hear us refer to God as “Infinite Mystery?”

Eminent Harvard theologian, Gordon D. Kaufman writes in his book, *In the Face of Mystery* these words: “Faith in God... means living with a certain tension in all our moral and intellectual convictions and judgements, a tension demanding that we always take into account their ‘questionableness’ and thus the necessity to revise, correct, and refine them. It is a tension that must leave us always unsatisfied with our own insights and understanding, a tension always urging us to reach beyond our present position.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Kaufman has no reservations about having faith in and even dependence on God, but he makes it clear God should be the last thing in which we claim certainty. He argues we must always admit that religious symbolism is a product of the culture from which it came. “My contention that our religious symbolism is our own construction is intended to emphasize just this point: that we humans create the structures of meaning within which we come to dwell. But simultaneously this emphasis on our human creativity deepens our consciousness of the inscrutable mystery within which we live, and which gives us our being as human.”^{iv}

In what ways might absolute certainty keep us separated from God and each other?

The great theologian, Karl Rahner once wrote: “...what is called knowledge in everyday parlance, is only a small island in a vast sea that has not been traveled.... Hence the existential question for the knower is this: Which do [they] love more, the small island of [their] so-called knowledge or the sea of infinite mystery?”^v

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WE AFFIRM that the Path of Jesus is found where Christ's followers value the pursuit of wisdom, which is found at the intersection of head and heart, where God seeks relationship with the human soul.

WE CONFESS that we have moved away from this Path when we have denied either role of the mind or that of the heart in seeking of wisdom. Further, we have moved off the Path when we have denigrated the role of doubt or pursuit of scientific knowledge as if they were enemies rather than allies of faith.

Discuss anything that was new to you? How do you feel or think after tonight's session?