

From Certainty to Possibility

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[0 : 00] So I'm going to start us off in a very logical place, and I'm going to talk about my teenage years. So my parents are what I consider to be the best parents ever.

I will fight you all on this. But both of them had quite a bit of loss. My dad lost his dad when he was 12 and his mom just after his 18th birthday.

My mother's father was not in her life until after she was out of college, and her mom was a functioning alcoholic. So when I turned 13, they sat me down and they said, OK, we need to have a conversation.

Neither of us has any good examples of what it's like to raise a teenager. We don't know. We don't have the experience. We don't have all of that generations of wisdom.

And we know what has been. Like, so far, we've had all these boundaries and rules for you. We've had the things that we expected you to obey. And there's been discipline when you have it.

Because what we've been trying to do is help shape you to be the kind of person that can be fully themselves, but the kind of person that other people want to be around, the kind of person that can listen and care, but also have fun and have life.

[1 : 13] And now you're about to become a teenager. And so this little box of boundaries, this expectation of obedience has to change. Because the way we see it, the next kind of period of life is when the boundaries start widening.

And you begin to step out less in having to obey and more into having to make choices to see what the way is and figure it out when a situation arises.

And our boundaries are still going to be there to kind of provide some buffer. But the older you get, the wider those boundaries are going to be. So we have to figure out a way in the meantime for you to begin to develop an ability to trust yourself.

And also maybe trust us to come have conversations if you don't. And we'll together work on what expectations we have for you and expectations you have for yourself and what responsibilities and consequences might come with that as you begin to launch on your own.

And overwhelmingly, the goal of that was not for me to be like the perfect little Becky. The goal for them was to help me become the person who I could be, like the fullness of me.

[2 : 30] And I'm going to be honest, that was sometimes a rocky road because I am me. And I have some very distinct ideas of what should and should not happen.

And I also did a good job of projecting my insecurities on my mother. And we had a lot of moments where we would clash. And often we'd have like long arguments into the night.

And my dad would try and mediate. And we'd have conversations. And my mom even told her best friend at one point in time, if she doesn't go to college soon, like I'm going to jail because there's just one of us is leaving this home, right?

And people were like, you're not serious. And my mother's like, try. But you know what would happen is we'd have these moments and these, these like, and it would be bad and we'd be crying and there would be a lot of things going on.

And my dad would intercede. And as we brought that to like a sort of a sense of detente or denouement or whatever, my dad would look at me and he'd go, you know, Becky, I love who you're becoming.

[3 : 37] And like the only thing my mom and I agreed on, I think in the last two years, I was in the home before college was that my dad had kind of lost it. Especially since he thought, you know, I think one day you guys are going to be best friends.

And we were like, okay. But my dad would use that phrase often. It didn't just exist in the good times. Like when I was doing well, when I excelled at a school play, when I performed well, when I

got a good grade, that didn't always come out there.

Sometimes it did. But when I was at my worst, that's when it would show up. You know, I love who you're becoming. There was no caveat.

There was no, you know, if you would just make this one more choice, I can see who you're going to become. It was just written into the soundtrack of my life. That even when I was at my messiest, there was something in me that was worthy of being loved.

And that's the core of me right now. Not just the phrase, but that knowledge that even in my worst, I'm still moving and growing and worth loving. And it's written into the spiritual and physical and psychological DNA that makes me up.

[4 : 53] And I hope it changes the way I see others on a regular basis. I feel like in these moments, my dad was being like God.

That he was doing something fundamentally in the nature of God. I bet all of us here would love or have loved hearing something like that at our worst moments.

But I don't think all of us would identify that this is the way we've seen or been told that God is. I think we've internalized some alternate messages growing up in the church or being in the Western church that speak to our identity and our certainty.

And these really affect how we see the process of questioning and changing and growing and deepening faith and how we see God.

One of these, I think, comes, I just often call it the wretch syndrome. But it's often taught about the way that we've seen God over the years. And we've been told that God sees us.

[5 : 58] So I can't sing right now, but there's a hymn that everybody knows. Amazing Grace. How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.

Right? Enmeshed in our faith culture in the Western world is an underlying principle that teaches us that we cannot necessarily be trusted. We're told the heart is deceitful above all things.

That comes from one of the wisdom books in the Bible. That I am a wretch in need of salvation. That I was broken until Jesus called me. And it teaches us in a very deep, pernicious way not to trust ourselves.

We're slave to sin. We hear it preached. We sing it in our songs. Here I would be, but for the grace of God who saw my wretched self and saved me by sending his son. That's not necessarily not true, but it is not the whole story.

Not by a long shot. But we focus on it so much that it becomes deep in the core of our faith. And if we add to this that a lot of our faith systems in the Western world have inadvertently taught us that we have to maintain our place as God's beloved wretches by setting boundaries that help us be certain that we're saved and that he loves us.

[7 : 20] All kinds of external measurements that know we're in God's plan, that know we're in God's blessing. We have all kinds of things. From some things that are kind of ridiculous, like you can't work on Sundays, or if you sleep with a boy before you're married, or if you're a boy kissing a boy, or, you know, if you don't tithe, if you don't pray, like so many different things that and boundaries that are set up in Western Christianity that help us be certain of whether we're in and saved or out in need of that grace.

In Western Christianity, we have this certainty problem, and we've identified and built up an entire belief structure based on surety. Which is kind of ironic for faith, wouldn't you say?

The end goal in all of this is knowing that we're going to get to heaven, that we're covered by the blood, and that means we're jumping through hoops, trying to make up for the us that we used to be, so that we can go to heaven.

And this doesn't pay attention to the process, or the journey, or the being present, here and now, the becoming.

Essentially, what we're saying is that this boundary is necessary for us in order to be loved by God and continue to be loved by God enough to make it to heaven.

[8 : 52] It's a boundary that is very similar to the boundaries of childhood. It's a black and white, easily understood faith. It starts out simple and beautiful, and before we know, it's confining and causing damage.

Go listen to last week's sermon that Anthony preached on his religious abuse and trauma. I think it's important to know that sometimes these very simple, right or wrong theologies can create a system of control and power based in fear.

Fear of sinning and missing it. Fear of being cast out. Fear of sinning and suffering. Knowing that God loves us and is with us and is for us. We're chastised externally, like we hear this all the time. It's demonic.

It's dangerous. We want excuses to sin by challenging the assumptions of faith. And we do it internally. What is wrong with me that I can't feel in the bike?

[10:24] It reinforces some of those deeply rooted and pernicious beliefs of how God sees us. And questioning can become oh so hard.

Just realizing that stepping out may feel like we're stepping outside of the range of the love and relationship with God. Makes sense then when we are rebuilding theology that relationship with God stays in limbo.

We can't quite recapture what has been because even though it was very lovely at times, it's still rooted in that foundation that may have been flawed.

God can not only handle our rage and frustration and pain and questions, but is in it with us all the way through it.

And my supposition here is that God is not like somebody patiently waiting for a toddler to stop throwing his hemper tantrum. Oh gosh, will you stop embarrassing?

[11:34] But one who is loving who we're becoming and actively invested in that process. I used to marvel at the amount of folks that I knew who deconstructed or went through really hard seasons in their faith that how many of them were the ones that I saw authentically seeking to be like Christ, pouring their hearts and their souls into living their faith daily and pursuing a deep relationship with God.

Unfortunately, systems of certainty don't always have the space for the deepening and the enlarging of our beliefs. And could it be then that wrestling with our learned faith processes is actually part of a maturing process?

And it isn't that we're going off the rails, but it is that we're growing. In the 1400s, conventional wisdom was that the center of the earth was the center of the universe.

Everything, the sun, the moon, the planets, the stars, all of them were in a globe kind of orbiting around the earth. And this was like based on both scientific study of the day, observance, but it was also based on biblical texts.

It was based on belief systems within the church. And then along came this guy named Nicholas Copernicus. He was a polymath, highly educated. He was also religiously educated as a Catholic.

[13:11] And in the last year of his death, he published this book that upended this understanding of the universe and was a catalyst for a lot of scientific discovery and change.

Now, science folks, I know I'm painting that with a very broad Western brush because there are some other pieces that were at play at the same time. But essentially Copernicus took what was a closed system where we were the center and everything was in this closed system around it and reframed it into a system of infinite possibilities.

He said, hey, actually the center of the universe is not the earth, but the earth spins. And then there's some things that orbit the earth. And then we orbit this light at the center of the galaxy, along with some of these other planets and also stars that are outside of that too.

He reframed something from being a closed system to being open with infinite possibilities. He took that time, the church at that time, from a journey in certainty to a journey into mystery, into possibility.

And that process began something that shook the church of his time and the next hundred years or so and even beyond that and opened the door for lots of scientific discovery.

[14:34] But best believe he upended a lot of senses of self within the religious community. And I think perhaps faith is the same way.

That we are meant to transition from that pre-Copernical closed system of belief to one that is post-Copernical. One that transitions from this closed system of clear rules and boundaries of certainty and surety to a place of deep and fuller faith and infinite possibility.

Or we move to a place that has more room, more freedom, more ability to make mistakes, to get up, to learn, to reaffirm who we're becoming.

And I would argue that in the middle of that God is invested in that transition, in our faith maturing, beyond just simple boundaries into the possibilities of what could be.

And I think we see that all through our sacred texts. You can look at it in the big picture trajectory of God's interaction with humanity. God is consistently broadening the horizons, pushing the boundaries out.

[15:59] And what started as an interaction with one group of people ends up in the promise and the prophecy at the end of a kaleidoscope of everyone in God's home around his throne.

He told his people, I will bless you so that through you, all the people of the world will be blessed. And every time they doubled down on rules of exclusion, ones that said who is in and who is out, God sent them a reminder to push beyond that and see the bigger goal.

My house should be a house of prayer for all nations. And when they focused on fulfilling the letter of the law and that expression that was just external expressions of faith, God reminded them that God was asking for something different.

This is the fast I've chosen. This is the external representation that I want. That you're breaking the chains of injustice. That you're getting rid of exploitation in the workplace, freeing the oppressed, canceling the debts.

What I'm interested in seeing you do is share your food with the hungry, inviting the wholeness poor into your houses, putting clothes on the shivering ill clad and being available to your own families.

[17:20] Isaiah 58, part of the message. It's one of my favorite scriptures in the Bible. Because in it, God goes on to talk with Isaiah about how those who do these things get to be about restoring and resurrecting the things that have been broken beyond repair.

And describes the kind of people they will become. And it's this beautiful picture of growth and possibility and change. You see Jesus doing the same thing.

He's reframing the rules when the Sadducees ask him, what are the greatest commandments? And he says, look, you can take all of the law and the prophets and boil it down to one thing.

Love the Lord your God with all your being and love yourselves and love all people like you love yourself. Widening the boundaries, not being defined by the exact measure of the law, but choosing to act in love.

We see this too in the early church. Paul, one of the earliest Jesus converts, had this letter to the Corinthians who, by the way, did you ever notice, sorry, I'm going to footnote here for a minute.

[18:32] Do you ever notice how Paul addresses the letters that he sends to people? He addresses them as brothers and sisters and saints. So he calls a bunch of ordinary believers who he's writing because generally they're getting things wrong or missing something out.

And he's like calling them out on this and he's like, y'all, please. But he calls them saints. I mean, it challenges that idea that like the wretch is not meant to be our identity.

Like maybe instead we're supposed to be remembering the identity of brothers and sisters and saints, right? The possibility of who we can be to each other, right?

And then you think about things like we say the Apostles Creed and it says, I believe in the communion of saints. That changes the meaning on that so much, right? It's not anymore this like all those people who have gone before who did everything right are communing together.

No, it means the us together. This community of saints doing life together, growing together, journeying together, eating together.

[19:46] Sorry, back to Paul and his first letter. I love footnotes in books and I'm sorry that I had to put them in a sermon too. But if we go back to Paul and his letter to the Corinthians, we're going to be in chapter 13, which of course is that chapter that we've all heard a million times.

He says, hey, look, when I was a child, I talked like a child, I asked like a child, I nursed like a child. But now that I'm grown with those ways behind me, it goes on in that passage to talk about how we don't see everything clearly yet, but that the goal of knowing and being known is continuing to progress.

Think that all of scripture, all of these holy books are telling us that we are meant to be growing and maturing, moving from a simple and childlike faith to a more complex and expansive expression of faith.

And that this process of becoming, this journey is more important to God than the destination of heaven. Because it means that things are happening here and now, not just in that faraway place. But stepping from the closed system into the infinite possibility can leave us feeling unmoored and untethered. Reframing and moving out of rules and regulations and rote obedience into possibility is, at a minimum, a huge adjustment.

[21 : 23] We're moving from certainty to something that can be nebulous. So what can we anchor to? I think this is an important question to ask because, in reality, we have a tendency to lean into certainty that I know this is true.

And it's easy to build authority around a certainty. And so we can do a whole bunch of work on our faith and then double down that this is the true way. And we can quickly set new boundaries of who is in and who is out.

And the sad news is, I am not going to give you the answer of, here's how you don't do that. Or here's what you anchor to.

But what I want to give us right now is some steps to reestablish both trust with who God is and learning to trust in your faith and you on your wisdom on the journey.

And the big part of that is what we spent the last 20 minutes talking about. Reorienting yourself in this process of becoming.

[22 : 30] Understand your journey, your questioning, your wrestling with faith is not a failure or a crisis, but a natural progression and growth.

And it is the journey of becoming that God is calling each of us into. And then also, reorient your identity and how God sees you in the process.

That I love who you are becoming. And I think we're going to do some of that in the next couple weeks. We're going to talk about how we see God, how we learn into prayer, lean into prayer again. And those are going to be great touchstones for us for redefining who we are and how we see God. The second thing I would just encourage you to do is to re-engage with sacred texts.

And that is a little bit more difficult because some of us have a different way of seeing the Bible than we did before. And scripture has often been used as a weapon against a lot of us.

[23 : 34] Or a prescription. Or do you remember the acronym for the Bible that we heard? It's basic instructions before leaving earth, right? Sigh. But there are some ways that we can engage with these sacred texts that give and bring life and bring points of anchor.

Part of it is finding resources that can help us see the arc of scripture or understanding the context of a lot of the books, a lot of the things that were written, when they were written, what they were speaking to.

And that helps us engage with it differently. Enables us to hold it sacred and hold it looser, right? And we can also look to see what themes we can hold to.

There's so much in the Bible that talks about justice and restoration and the nature of love and the nature of mercy. And these are things that we can begin to engage with and tease out and find ways to rebuild into our faith walk.

Sometimes we need to see from other people's lenses. So reading scripture through liberation theology or theological lenses that may not be our own, like feminist theology or black theology or Latinx theology or queer theology, that may give us a tool to be able to engage with these sacred texts in a new way.

[25 : 04] There are lots of people who have written books that we can kind of align with and understand, like Rachel Held Evans and Peter Enns, who we know that they've also been on a similar journey.

And they can talk to us about why scripture matters and maybe new ways to see how we can engage with it. And I think there are also some tools we can use to engage with scripture.

Sometime take me out for a drink and I will wax lyrical on one of my favorite podcasts, Harry Potter and the Sacred Text. One of the things it does is introduce a number of spiritual practices from across different expressions of faith from both Christian tradition, Jewish tradition, Hindu tradition. And it uses things like, use big words here, Lectio Divina, Florilegia, Pardes, Havruta, and imaginative prayer to engage with texts in a different way.

So if you ever want to talk about those, I will talk all day with you about that. And you will probably be like, why did I invite her out for three? But there may be some tools that you can use that help you engage with scripture and things that you hold dear in a different way than we've been taught over the year.

[26 : 23] Finally, I think one of the big important tools for us is about community and expressing faith and community. Some of us have been in community where we've been told what to believe and we've been cajoled or coerced into believing that or shamed into believing it.

We don't want that kind of community. We want a community that can wrestle with scripture and Jesus and God and who we're supposed to be and who we're becoming together.

If you ever take a minute to read Acts, which is kind of the story of the first believers in Jesus, the first churches, and they were consistently getting their faith broadened.

Okay, this is the way it is. Oh, wait, no, for the Gentiles too. Okay, so this is how it is. Oh, wait, no, all these things we thought were unclean or clean. Okay. Oh, wait, no. Like they just were consistently being reminded that the boundaries were getting pushed open.

And sometimes they weren't exactly sure what to do. You find story after story in Acts where they are wrestling with and discussing and praying together to try and figure out.

[27 : 34] Especially chapter 15, if you look, there is this great story of how they were trying to figure out how they were going to send some people to somewhere to address something. I think it was like Syria and Antioch and some other city.

And they sent this letter and they said, okay, we're sending Barnabas and this other guy to you. And it seemed good to the Holy Spirit in us. And I just love that that wasn't, hey, y'all, this is what God told us for you.

You should be doing. You need to do all of this right now or you're going to be in trouble with God.

And it wasn't that ringing like huge endorsement, but instead it was like the product of us doing faith together, discussing, figuring out, talking with the Holy Spirit together.

This seems good to us. This is what we're going to try. And I think that that is so important for us in this communion of saints. I'm struggling with this. I think maybe it could mean this.

What do you think? What is your experience told? And we all together can come to it. It seems good to the Holy Spirit in us. This is what we stand on.

[28 : 44] This is what we do. Faith becomes a product of community and communion with God of us listening and learning together. So, sorry that this isn't the sermon where I say, Pam, this is what you need to do.

I wish you could. It would be easier. But instead, I'm just going to end this time with an invitation.

Invitation for you to take a minute to breathe.

To think about reframing your faith journey and exploration into an ongoing journey of maturation. God is enthusiastically a part of.

And to reframe who you are and how God sees and engages with you in this process. And an invitation to continue this journey in the context of community, in this communion of the saints.

This is my invitation to you to choose to see each other's mess and to call out the truth of God to one another. That we love who you're becoming.

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