

A little while back, a college student came into my office and she had Questions. Let's call her Beth. Beth heard that St. Thomas' was a place where people could ask questions. Sidebar, it's kinda cool knowing we've got that reputation, isn't it? Anyway, back to Beth. Beth had Questions. She'd started reading a lot of philosophy and particularly liked metaphysics. As is typical for first year philosophy students, her world split right open in ways she loved and that troubled her deeply. So, when Beth sat down, what she wanted were Answers. Which tickles me, because if there's one thing I don't have a lot of, it's Answers. Beth didn't know much about church, never grew up sitting in pews. Her family wasn't religious, and she didn't think she was either, but big questions that didn't feel all that not-religious stalked her. "What happens in church? Why do you do it that way? Why does it matter?" And maybe my favorite: "Jesus seems alright, but how can you still be Christian after everything Christianity's done?" It was a fun conversation. I answered what I could, asked questions back, and sent her on her way with a book and a lot for both of us to think about.

I bring up Beth because I think it's easy for us to get discouraged about the State of the Church these days. I can't tell ya how many times I've heard church people say "Where are all the young people?" Thing is, there's a million Beths out there asking questions searchers've asked for centuries, and they're shocked to find out they aren't the first ones to get there. While Beth and I were talking, at one point she said, "You know, sometimes I feel like I know what I'm supposed to do, and I just can't do it. Or I know what I'm not supposed to do, and I can't help but do it. What's that about?" I wish you could've seen her face when I told her that that was scripture. She didn't even know she was quoting the Bible. She just knew something in her soul, and that something shook as it stretched back two thousand years to Paul and his insight.

Have we talked about Rumspringa before? Y'all know what Rumspringa is? It's a practice for the Amish where young adults take a period of time to leave their sheltered communities and live among the rest of us. Sometimes they're a little rowdy, but at the end of it all, they get a choice. Do they want to live the rest of their lives like that, or do they want to go home, commit to the Amish life, and set aside what we've got out here? And they choose. Where are all the young people? They're on Rumspringa or whatever it is for Episcopalians. They're experiencing what the world has to offer. Some'll find satisfaction with that, but many won't. The problem we face now is that, where the Amish go on Rumspringa and then know what they get to choose between, people like Beth don't know what they're choosing, or even that they get to choose. The burdens of the world weigh heavy, and we've all got to figure out what to do with 'em.

Thing is, Beth wasn't sitting in her dorm room thinking, should I read more Bentham or should I go to church? She wasn't debating between a life of wild oats and a life of faith. She just wanted to understand her place in the universe. She never grew up in a way that made space for religion, so she doesn't have a place to return to, a post-Rumspringa home. So she thinks she's alone or weird or maybe even hypocritical for asking these questions at all. 'Cause people like Beth know a lot about the church, at least, they know a lot about what they see. And a lot of what they see ain't all that great. So why does she still feel drawn to it? The many hypocrisies of Christianity now and throughout history make it all rather unappealing, especially if that's all you know. No one ever took the time to show her that it could be something else. Or, more likely, she never saw (or never registered) the Christians quietly doing good around her. Our bishop is fond of saying, "You've heard it said that we should preach the Gospel at all times and only use words when it's necessary? Well now it's necessary." It's necessary because so many people just don't know. Too much quiet humility means no one knows what we actually get up to. I'm not saying we need to brag, but there's only so much self-abnegation we can do before we self-abnegate ourselves into oblivion.

I don't know if Beth's here this summer, but I hope she saw y'all giving out hotdogs and walking with the Pride float last Tuesday. I hope she sees us trying, and I hope she gives us or some other church a second look. Because these places are places with answers, or if not answers, at least a community encountering the same questions. It's not an easy road that stretches out before Beth, no matter what she chooses. There are other communities that ask big questions, some faithful some not. She'll find a home somewhere I'm sure. I'd really dig it if she found her home here. But no matter what she chooses, it won't be easy. Jesus does say his burden is easy and his yoke is light. But that doesn't mean following him is easy. It means that what he asks of us is simpler than a list of 613 commandments. He gives us the easy synopsis: love God, love your neighbor. Period. It does not matter a lick who that neighbor is, we love 'em. Real love, not that so-called love that's actually just hate justifying itself. Following Jesus, y'all know this, it's not easy. It means loving folks you don't even like. It means holding space for people you don't understand. It means selling all your possessions and giving the money to the poor. It means being ready to give up everything in favor of justice. It means looking at the cross and instead of saying "what a shame," saying "am I ready for that to be me?"

With Beth, she'd heard that whole "light and easy burden" thing before, but she thought it meant that Christianity didn't require anything of her. And if it didn't require anything, why bother? What kind of worldview lets you keep on keeping on? What kind of religion that doesn't actually matter can keep going? Beth longs for something that asks her to do hard things. She needs her nascent faith, her questions, her philosophy to matter. She needs whatever she chooses to push her to live differently. I think it's worth all of us asking those same questions. Does our faith actually push us to live differently, to live better, to love more? Beth needs a spot where the person next to her is the last person she'd choose to associate with. She needs a friend that'll take her to scary places -- safely, of course -- but she needs a friend to take her to scary places and say, like Thomas, this is your church.

I'm beginning to think Beth might be us. At the very least, she shines a light on us. St. Thomas', I couldn't be more proud to be with y'all and to be included in that y'all. Because I know we practice what we preach. And also, I know we've still got big questions. And we've still got places we can do better, be more like Christ, carry that burden lightly with the heavy responsibility it requires. I know we're asking hard questions and sometimes find answers but more often get comfortable in the ambiguity together. I know we're loving our neighbors. I know we're pushing against a million phobias and wealth disparity and helping our neighbors plug up leaky roofs. I know all that, and I still know we can do better. Because that's what our faith asks of us. It asks us to do better, no matter how much better we've already done. And our long tradition knows how hard that ask is, too. Paul's own "I do not do what I want but the very thing I hate" takes us there. We all know that, we all live that, and still we gather trying to do better anyway.

I have no idea how Beth's Rumspringa's going these days. I haven't heard from her in a bit. It's summer. Maybe she's back home talking to another priest around the corner from her parents' house. Maybe she's found a philosophy club. Or maybe she's just enjoying the beautiful days before her studies resume in the Fall. I don't know. I'm just glad she's out there, and a bunch of other Beths, too. I'm glad they're out there, and I'm glad they're searching, and I'm glad they've got Questions. And I'm glad that when she or they or anyone comes to Hamilton, they know they can come here to ask 'em.

St. Thomas', we're building something here. We're building a home, a refuge for uncertainty while keeping our path clear. Like Elizaveth I, I don't care what you believe. But I do care what we do. Show up. Love your neighbor. Do the thing you know you should do, the thing you long to do. And when you don't, come on home, and try again. Show up. Love your neighbor. And try again.