

What to do with unbelievers?

Far too often, Christians, especially those of us who have been Christians for a long time, become unsure, even uncomfortable when we interact with our neighbors and family members who don't believe Jesus. What to do? What to say? Varied levels of response present themselves as options to our troubled hearts: avoidance, judgment, staring at our own shoes or talking about the weather... anything, but stepping onto that narrow, hard road that leads to life.

Thomas was a real live skeptic. He knew Jesus, but swore he would never believe again. "He said to them, 'Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.'" (John 20.25). Instead of avoiding Thomas or running away, Jesus did the opposite: he came right to him; sought him out even behind locked doors! Jesus simply, lovingly engaged Thomas directly at the point of his unbelief. He first said to him "Peace be with you. Then he said "Here, Thomas, put your finger here and put your hand in my side...see that I am real and I am for you."

Recently, I spent some extended time with a second cousin. We haven't seen each other in years, but there is enough blood and shared experience between us to make a bit of a relationship. He was expressing his skepticism and described himself as agnostic. I asked him, "tell me what you are skeptical about?... and about the god you don't believe in; maybe I don't believe in that god either." From there and over the next several days, a great and respectful conversation unfolded. He got to put his fingers in Jesus' wounds a bit.

All of us have our doubts and struggles. It is not your job to convince people of the truth of the Gospel; that is the Holy Spirit's job. We Christians of the Lutheran stripe confess "that the Holy Spirit works faith when and where he pleases – not when and where WE please. And the Gospel teaches that we have a gracious God, not by our own merits, but by the merit of Christ." (Augsburg Confession, Article V). It is not your job or mine to convince people of the Gospel. It *is* our job, your vocation and mine, to be **witnesses**, to turn toward unbelievers rather than avoid them... to gently, respectfully engage people at the point of their unbelief. When you turn toward an unbelieving neighbor or relative, when you simply engage

them with the truth and love of Jesus, you might be rejected... Or you might be surprised. It might even be through your hands, your ears, your words that they learn that Jesus is indeed real and for them.

Jesus has given himself for a whole race of skeptics – you included – and he has promised that the narrow, hard road is the road that leads to life... for you and for every other Thomas.

Let's pray: Use me Lord, use even me... That a few more people might know that you are real and for them. I ask this in Jesus' name amen.

Pastor Paul