Springfield Presbyterian Church

August 25th, 2024

Skeptic or Cynic

1. Mayam Bialik

This morning’s sermon title is borrowed from one of my favorite

Podcasts called – The Bialik Breakdown, with Mayam Bialik. You might remember Mayam most notably as Blossom, or recently as Amy Farrah Fowler on the Big Bang Theory, or perhaps in her short stint as a host on Jeopardy. She’s a great actress, but she’s also a great scholar, known for her research and PhD in Neuroscience. She is quirky, a nerd, and curious about how the brain, body, and soul align. Of course, as a fellow quirky nerd myself, I’m drawn to this kind of podcast.

On this particular podcast show, she brought on a comedian, Iliza Schlezinger. Iliza has three or four Netflix specials to her name, and while she may or may not be your flavor of comedy, she has a lot of great insight around what it means to be a woman in this world and what it means to live with hope.

So, as Mayam and Iliza met up for this podcast, Iliza brought home an important point for all of us to take in. It’s not a new concept, but one that needs to be heard on repeat. Be a skeptic, not a cynic. What does that mean? Well, a cynic starts from a place of negativity. The cynic doesn’t believe that good will be an outcome, and that sense of hope diminished can be contagious.

In all truth, I think as we all get older, becoming a cynic can get easier and I put myself in this sentiment as well. As I’ve grown, I like to believe I’ve become wiser, but I’ve also seen patterns in many realms of my life that make me think, “Ah, this isn’t going to go well.” There can be an internal monologue for me; one that wonders how negativity can be broken in the many places I’ve lost confidence in. Now, I’m not always a cynic, but the truth I’m trying to convey is that being a cynic doesn’t help me and it doesn’t help anyone else. Negativity does not spur positivity. Cynics are not the ones who change the world.

Skepticism is healthy. Skepticism is an invitation to ask questions, with the knowledge of the realities around us. Our Governor, Wes Moore, recently said, “I’m not asking you to give up your skepticism. I’m asking skepticism to be your companion and not your captor.” I think that’s a beautiful statement – to say that skepticism can be a companion, a guide, a way to live and learn as we seek to navigate the world together as believers in Christ. This skepticism leads us to ask questions, like, “I wonder…”, “I’m curious about…”, “What’s going on here?” and “Tell me more.” Skepticism is important, and as we both hear the Word today and as we bless our students and teachers who are going back to school, I think it’s important to encourage skepticism, questioning, and wonder.

1. The Word

Both of our Scripture lessons speak beautifully to our topic

today. Proverbs, also known as the Word of Wisdom, starts out right from the first chapter proclaiming the goodness of knowledge and learning. It encourages us to continue to seek the truth and to do the right thing. It tells us to be learners throughout our lives.

I often pause at the words, ‘fear of the Lord’ because in our common vernacular, that can sound scary. For us, in English, we learn here because we respect and honor our Lord. We recognize that God is greater than we are, by far, and as we seek to grow closer to God, we need to learn and seek knowledge and wisdom.

The fools in this case are the ones who do not seek learning, pointing us again and again to the reality that God calls us to be ever-evolving and lifelong learners.

As for Isaiah, there’s an important caveat in this learning. There’s a humility here in our learning that is important. We are called to be curious, and in that curiosity, we acknowledge that we do not have it all figured out. We humbly submit that there are things that are too great for our human brain to consider. There are mysteries simply beyond our very understanding. And that isn’t a bad thing – there is God’s knowledge and our knowledge.

We are called to learn and wonder, and we are also called with joy to say, “only God knows.” It’s a balancing act, it’s an act of great curiosity alongside great humility. That is not discouraging, but rather encouraging, as we seek to live a life of faith that continues to grow more and more in our learning. This good work is never done.

1. Students

This season, you have been so faithful in the mission to buy

backpacks for our students. This will be an enormous blessing to not only them, but to teachers and parents alike. We are literally equipping them for the good work of curiosity and wisdom that they are seeking as they start the academic year.

So, we pray earnestly for our students, our teachers, our staff, our parents, and all who work alongside to help our young scholars grow. We also pray that we can be a part of that learning, a sign and symbol that learning and service are intertwined. We pray that God continues to guide us to be learners ourselves, continually asking questions and wondering, with the faith of a child, with earnest hearts and minds.

1. Poem

So, as we go from this place, to be curious, to wonder, to ask questions, to be skeptics rather than cynics, I’d like to share something with you. This past week, inspired by the Word, I wrote a poem I’d like to share with you, called, “To Wonder.” Let’s hear it together:

To wonder is to dream.

To wonder is to conceive of possibility.

For wonder and hope, they are inextricably held

They hold each other until both can be felt

And this curiosity – it leads us on,

It inspires us to ask, to dare, to sing its song.

It courageously dances in the soul,

It makes us question; it makes us bold.

Curiosity is a freedom,

A freedom so sacred and divine.

A place where we can grow,

For a humanity whose strength is yet unknown

And so, with wonder and awe,

With hope so great, so great that it breathes within us all.

We live our lives – curious about what is to come,

Because we know that this call is not for some – it is for all.

So, with those words and the Word on our hearts and our minds, let us go into this world as courageous and curious believers, ready to ask questions and to live in a state of wonder. Whether it is in the classroom, or the grocery store, or in the local café, the invitation is here for all – to ask questions, to grow, to learn, and to continue to live out that gained wisdom to serve and love our living and everpresent God. Amen.