

The Blessing of Being Doubtful

Oftentimes we get the impression, as Christians, that to doubt any aspect of our faith is a dangerous or even shameful undertaking. We contrast faith and doubt, assuming that we cannot harbor both in our hearts and minds. We may have been told somewhere along the way that we ought to get all the aspects of our faith sorted out, straightened up, and tied together with a neat bow, never to be re-examined again.

But for most of us, life and faith can't be that tidily managed. And maybe that's for our own benefit. We think Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner makes a good point when he says: "Whether your faith is that there is a God, or that there is not a God, if you don't have any doubts you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving."

What a provocative thought! Maybe doubts are not our enemies after all. Maybe they are instead the helpful little irritants that remind us to stay alert and willing to grow, as life places its trials and challenges before us. They keep us from getting lazy or even falling asleep on the job. They are best not suppressed or exterminated because they serve a beneficial function in the life of faith.

So stop to consider, what are the ants in the pants of your faith? Have you had some life experience, or read something, or witnessed something that has given you pause, lately? What are you struggling with? What answers seem insufficient? What notions make you uneasy and keep you unsettled? These just may be the starting points for you of far deeper, richer, and stronger faith.

How can we say that? Well, consider this. Faith is classically understood to be a system composed of three dimensions: beliefs (those assertions we claim are true), loyalty (allegiance to the God we worship), and trust (confidence in and reliance upon God.) When doubts insert themselves into our faith life, they usually creep into our beliefs. But when we've addressed the doubts, not only is our belief restored, but the whole system of faith is stronger for it.

While doubts may cause us to question our prior thinking in light of some new awareness or evidence, this is not a tragedy, but an opportunity. Is a belief that cannot withstand the stress of exposure to our further experience or reflection really a belief worth keeping? Of course not. We want our beliefs to be honest, durable, versatile, hardy, helpful, sustaining. A mark of strong, mature faith, we find, is skill and practice in managing doubt in order to develop belief which is just that serviceable.

So let the ants in the pants of your faith do their work. If they get you jumping and moving once in a while, you'll never wind up with a brittle, breakable faith. You'll have developed a remarkably fit and flexible life of faith!