

# Doubt and the Faith Community

*Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.*  
Frederick Buechner

*We both believe, and disbelieve a hundred times an Hour, which keeps Believing nimble.*  
Emily Dickinson

*Be merciful to those who doubt. . . .*  
Jude 22

Over the years you would think I would have learned never to be surprised by unusual revelations on pastoral visits. After all, there was that time in the early years of my ministry when a dear sister was determined to show me the scar from her recent surgery. After struggling for a few moments, she successfully pulled up her hospital gown and described with colorful language what “they done cut off.”

But more recently I was once again taken aback, this time by a revelation of a different sort, when an elderly brother pulled off his religious mask and bared his soul. The beloved old brother was weak when I arrived, weaker than I expected. Even though he was well into his nineties, his health always had been robust and his spirit strong. But on this day he quickly and somewhat awkwardly moved the discussion from the mundane to deep matters of the heart.

In the middle of small talk about politics and the weather he blurted out, “Did you hear about how those letters of Mother Teresa’s were published after her death? Well I have doubts, just like her. She didn’t want people to know, but now everybody knows, and I need you to know I have doubts, too. Sometimes I wonder where God is and why God doesn’t do something.”

As I sat there beside him, slowly rocking in a chair, I noticed the expression on his face soften. It wasn’t just his face; his entire body seemed to relax. It was as though he had this inner pressure building within him that had to find release. I wondered how many years he had struggled with doubt. So I gently asked him to reflect on his doubt. I carefully asked him to describe the guilt that he experienced as a result of his doubt. With complete candor and with no concern for how this revelation might make him look, he opened his heart and poured out his soul.

As I sat there listening, I felt as if I were on holy ground.

We shared some conversation, some silence, and a prayer before I left. As I drove away I began processing this conversation, turning over in my mind experiences with doubt and passages of scripture. I recounted the men and women of the Bible who doubted God, themselves, or both. I considered how doubt functions in the life of a believer. Its true doubt can play an important role in spiritual formation. How many times in scripture do we see people doubting and growing as a result? Yet there are times when doubt can be toxic to the life of a believer. So I can understand Jesus telling people in such situations to “stop doubting and believe” (John 20:27).

Doubt can be constructive to one and destructive to another. Doubt can be an infrequent occurrence or a constant plague. Doubt can be a natural part of how we are wired or triggered by some particular incident. Doubt can be a faith matter or a lifestyle problem. So the more I tried to get a big-picture grasp on doubt, the more I realized there was only one thing about which to be sure: God is gentle with those *who doubt*.

Elijah found doubt more difficult to conquer than the prophets of Baal had been (1 Kings 18 and 19). Though Elijah had joined with God in defeating the prophets of Baal, he fearfully runs for his life when Jezebel threatens vengeance. Elijah isolates himself from everyone, fleeing into a remote desert region. Exhausted, he collapses in the shade of a solitary bush and prays to die. God’s response is merciful. God does not answer Elijah’s prayer of doubt with death or even a harsh rebuke. Instead, God mercifully answers by sending an angel who awakens Elijah and provides bread and water. Elijah eats, drinks, and sleeps some more before the angel returns.

God’s gentle mercy is seen again when Elijah arrives at the mountain. God asks Elijah, “What are you doing here?” Rather than answering God’s question, Elijah responds with what reads like his own emotional “talking points” of doubt and discouragement. He proclaims his own faithfulness and complains about the unfaithfulness of God’s people. Maybe Elijah was just waiting for someone to listen to him. The words seem colored by Elijah’s loneliness and doubt of both his ministry and his God.

Again God’s gentleness is apparent when Elijah is told to stand on the mountain and wait for God. Elijah waits for God and meets Him, not in the wind, earthquake, or fire; but in a quiet, gentle voice asking him again, “What are you doing here?” Elijah responds, owning his doubt and fear; repeating his words about his faithfulness and Israel’s unfaithfulness, and the resulting loneliness and doubt. With great mercy, God sends Elijah back on mission.

But Elijah was far from the only one to wrestle with doubt. Having been thrown into jail, John the Baptist found himself shackled by doubt (Matthew 11:1-19). John questions whether Jesus really is “the one.” His doubt seems to spring from his personal circumstances. John says, in effect, “If Jesus is the one, then why am I in such a miserable situation?”

While Elijah was with God but isolated away from people, John was separated from Jesus but apparently in the company of his disciples. John needs to express himself to Jesus. So he sends some of his disciples to Jesus and boldly asks a question that betrays the doubt growing in his heart: “Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?” Jesus gently responds to John, sending a message of assurance and even declaring the importance of John’s ministry in the kingdom.

Doubt happens. Doubt happens even in the hearts of men and women God has commissioned for ministry. Sometimes God’s servants doubt God. Other times God’s servants doubt themselves and their ministry. Sometimes doubt breaks in when God’s servant is isolated from the faith community. Other times doubt erupts when God’s servant is with his people, but God seems far away.

My elderly friend needed to express himself. He needed to be heard so that he could get his doubt out on the table. Elijah and John seem to have had that same need. Some long for a way to talk to God. Others long for a community of faith where doubt can be acknowledged. May God’s gentle mercy shape our faith and our faith community. May God’s gentle mercy bring us reassurance and peace when we doubt. May God help us join Him in being merciful to those who doubt.

And may we join God in creating a community of faith that allows people to express themselves, even their doubts.  
Merciful God,

Thank You for gently loving us when we doubt—

For listening For not giving up For patience  
For using us in spite of our doubt.

Thank You for people who gently love us when we doubt—

Who listen Who never give up Who are patient Who affirm our value even when we doubt.

May we be merciful to others who doubt—

Listening Refusing to give up Showing patience Encouraging ministry in the face of doubt.

In Jesus' name, AMEN

- by [Bob Clark](#)