

Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 112:1-10; 1 Corinthians 2:1-16; Matthew 5:13-20

5th Epiphany A; 02.05.23; G. Miles Smith+

I am going to begin today with a big question: **Based on your experience of life, why do you think people lose their faith?** As a witness to my own life and the lives of others, I would say there are a few main reasons *why people lose their faith*:

1. They have suffered a great personal loss that seems irreconcilable with their beliefs in God.
2. They have been disillusioned by themselves, the world, or other Christians.
3. They have lacked a mentor when they most needed one.
4. They have been distracted.

They have suffered a great personal loss that seems irreconcilable with their beliefs in God.

Terrible things can happen to us beyond anything we could have imagined when we were younger. Somehow, we thought that if we tried to be good and religious enough that we would be safe. So when the *loss* comes and the grief is intense then we may have no way to fit that raw experience into our beliefs about God. The experience then appears to prove the falsity of our faith.

They have been disillusioned by themselves, the world, or other Christians.

This experience is very similar to the other—in fact it may be just another way to speak of a great personal loss. But to speak of *disillusionment* can expand the sense of loss to include times when our own personal failures seem to opt us out of faith...or when we are demoralized by the world's seemingly endless ability to be destructive...or when we are demoralized by other Christians who can be just as destructive. All these experiences can seem to give the lie to faith.

They have lacked a mentor when they most needed one.

Sometimes when we experience some great personal loss or disillusionment and we don't have *someone* who can stand with us and bring a different perspective on things, then our faith, in its isolation, can wither or be lost. I think too of those souls who reach a point of *thinking that they have reasoned themselves out of faith*, and then think that their reasoning is incontrovertible and absolute. But the experience of a *good mentor* can reveal that faith has its very good reasons too. And such a mentor can be a living person who can listen and talk with us...or it can be a person who has written compellingly now or in the ages past.

They have been distracted.

People have always been capable of being distracted. For most of human history it could be the intense effort it took just to survive. But now, in addition to the shape of our own survival needs, we are inundated with so many voices and choices, that we can lose our faith almost without even noticing. We simply spend all our time looking in other directions.

There are lots of ways that people can lose their faith...for a season...or for a long time.

And so, now, I want to turn to the other side of this issue, with the question: **Based on your experience of life, why do you think people do have faith?** And I would say then that there are also several main reasons *why people have faith*:

1. They have known faithful Christians who in some way or another have been good mentors in their life.
2. They have witnessed the irrepressibility of goodness—whether from Christians or others.
3. They have experienced the resilient credibility of the gospel in both wisdom and love.

They have known faithful Christians who in some way or another have been good mentors in their life.

There are some very private moments in our experience of faith...but the way our faith is evoked and sustained is mostly by other Christians who pay attention to us and care about us. Seldom, if ever, do we have faith completely by ourselves.

They have witnessed the irrepressibility of goodness—whether from Christians or others.

Honestly, sometimes our faith is sustained by the simple or exceedingly courageous goodness of complete strangers--people whom we may not know anything about their religion or lack thereof—who become a light to us in any given moment. Despite the efforts of the world to convince us that goodness isn't really real or even interesting, we actually encounter it a lot and it makes the difference in whether we have had a good day or bad. Actually, God's goodness is pervasive in the goodness of so many imperfect people like us, many of whom don't even realize its source, but nevertheless embody it and make it real to us.

They have experienced the resilient credibility of the gospel in both wisdom and love.

I am continually amazed at the depth of wisdom to be discovered in the faith proclaimed by the Bible...and by Christian writers now and from ages past. The nonsense of some Christians doesn't hold a candle to the wisdom of so many Christians throughout time. There are many people of faith whose presence now and writings from the past still speak so compellingly that we can find ourselves being mentored into a faith come alive again.

Yes, there are many ways people can *lose* their faith and it helps to be aware of those so we can recognize them. But there are still many ways that a real and living faith is *given* to us. God is very much alive and moving through the changes of time...and the changes of our lives...to find us.