

My Journey into Faith

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I am fascinated by the fact that Jesus assessed people's faith. Sometimes he was impressed ("no such faith in all of Israel!"), but often he found them lacking ("O you of little faith!"). I grew up in the faith in that I was baptized and raised by parents who were missionaries to Burundi, Africa, and was always in worship environments from my earliest memories onwards. My faith only "became my own" in a series of encounters with Jesus's sacrificial love for me—when I was an adolescent. As a child, I was very much focused on my experiences. Was I really experiencing God? I just sinned again: do I really know God? ... etc.

Those insecurities gave way over time to a more settled trust in Christ—knowing who I was in him. But at the time, they were also joined, by the time I left for boarding high school in Kenya, by a social insecurity. I loved my Burundi and Kenyan friends, but especially in Burundi, I always felt keenly my social separation. Though in the U.S. my family of origin would have been described as barely lower-middle class, in Burundi we were wealthy. So, unlike many missionary kids, I had no idealized story of the mission field. It was too magnetized in me with the contrary pulls of social inequality and grinding poverty against my sense of being comparatively wealthy. I always felt this gap, this difference, as an alienation. And then later, *as a longing*. What I longed for, first, was community that brought people together across lines of difference—of race and of economic class. And then this longing matured also into a desire for justice. I remember in graduate school, I had a conversion of sorts, in which my longing for community also took on an opposition to injustice and a desire for progressive change.

My vulnerability, early on, as a child of God aware of spiritual neediness, and my growing awareness of the vulnerability of the socially and politically marginalized, I now see as somehow connected. Faith is knowledge of a different kind. Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. God sees right through all posturing into the weakness and vulnerability in all of humanity, wherever they are on the class ladder. God has a special heart for the poor, and the poor in spirit. God has a strong insistence on obedience and on compassion and on structural justice. I cannot say that I have all this congealed into a coherent (personal) theology, but I know that following Jesus, I love people, and I also have a special heart for the vulnerable, and desire strongly to be a part of God's solution. To be a part of God's kingdom coming on earth, even as it is in heaven. In graduate school, pursuing my degree in Victorian cultural studies, I studied the culture of justice and injustice. In personal life as a neighbor, and later in seminary and as a pastor, I lived in neighborhood with the poor, attempting to practice incarnational ministry. Here in Pittsburgh I live in an inner-city at-risk neighborhood as a "relocater," following the evangelical leftist model of John Perkins and the Christian Community Development movement.

In Africa as a kid, in university, in the pastoral ministry, I feel joy in knowing God, in growing deeper in my faith in Christ, in attempting to grow more and more into the heart of the Good Samaritan, in making myself available to the personally and socially transforming work of Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. I take joy in Scripture reading, prayer, and some contemplative prayer (although I'm very much a beginner in silent contemplative prayer). Above all, I want my faith to deepen. I seek deeply to "know him and the power of his resurrection."