

FAITH AS A VIRTUE

The Classical Virtues Today, VI
A Sermon Delivered at
First Parish in Needham
Sunday, March 11, 2007
The Rev. John Buehrens, Minister

Responsive Reading 654

Impassioned Clay

Ralph N. Helverson

Deep in ourselves resides the religious impulse.

Out of the passions of our clay it rises.

We have religion when we stop deluding ourselves that we are self-sufficient, self-sustaining, or self-derived.

*We have religion when we hold some hope beyond the present,
some self-respect beyond our failures.*

We have religion when our hearts are capable of leaping up at beauty, when our nerves are edged by some dream in the heart.

*We have religion when we have an abiding gratitude
for all that we have received.*

We have religion when we look upon people in all of their failings and still find in them good; when we look beyond people to the grandeur in nature and to the purpose in our own heart.

*We have religion when we have done all that we can,
and then in confidence entrust ourselves to the life
that is larger than ourselves.*

Ancient Reading

Mark 9:23-24 KJV

A father brings to Jesus a child afflicted with what is called ‘a spirit’ that makes the boy unable to speak, that causes convulsions, and says, “if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.”

“Jesus said to him, ‘If you have faith, all things are possible.’
And straightaway the father of the child cried out and said with tears,
‘I have faith, Lord; help thou my lack!’”

Modern Reading

Skepticism and Animal Faith

George Santayana

I have a great respect for orthodoxy; not for those orthodoxies which prevail in particular schools or nations, and which vary from age to age, but for a certain shrewd orthodoxy which the sentiment and practice of lay[people] maintain everywhere. I think that common sense, in a rough dogged way, is technically sounder than the special schools of philosophy, each of which squints and overlooks half the facts and half the difficulties in its eagerness to find in some detail the key to the whole. I am animated by distrust of all high guesses, and by sympathy with the old prejudices and workaday opinions of [hu]mankind; they are ill-expressed, but they are well-grounded.

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“[Faith] is the virtue of the storm, just as happiness is the virtue of the sunshine.”

Ruth Benedict, in Margaret Mead, *An Anthropologist at Work* [1959]

“I have faith, Lord; help thou my lack.”

Mark 9:24 KJV

Maybe it’s just me, but when I think of faith, I think of times when it just wasn’t in me. Take the first time I stepped into a pulpit. Last week, while our teenagers were waxing eloquent in this one, I was preaching at First Parish in Lexington, where I was the student minister and youth advisor – age 22 – the first time *I* was given an opportunity to preach - on Palm Sunday, 1970. I stayed up half the night trying to pour everything I had learned in my first year at Harvard Divinity into that first sermon. I may even have succeeded. We’ll never know. Like last night, that was the night the clocks were moved forward. Awakened by a roommate reminding me, I was already tardy when I set off in a pouring rainstorm, in my little British-made car, which, when I went through a huge puddle on the Fresh Pond Parkway, got all wet in its electrical system, and then refused to start again. So I stood there, at 10:15 or so, in the downpour, waving my arms, praying for a Good Samaritan. No one stopped. Finally, a Cambridge cop came by, concerned that my car was blocking the road. When I explained my plight, he shook his head, helped me push it off the road, and then, telling me that he could get in trouble for this, drove me out to the Lexington church. I arrived just as the minister was launching into an improvised sermon – something about how Dr. King had set his face toward Memphis – when the ushers waved at him, pointed to me, threw a choir robe over my sodden frame, and he called for another hymn. During which I walked down the aisle - *squish! sploosh! squish! sploosh!* – making the most un-triumphant entry into a pulpit in human history, wanting to die. When I reached into my jacket for my sermon – which I had handwritten out in ink – nothing was legible. I tried to remember my message. My effort encountered three small problems: no clear beginning, middle, or end. Finally, the minister put his hand on my shoulder and, blessedly, called for the final hymn. He gave the benediction.

Then I had to face the people. The first of whom was the Chair of the Parish Committee. A tough old woman who looked me in the eye and said, bless her, “John, you must preach for us again – soon.”

I had no faith that I could do it. But those good people told me I not only had it in me, but that if I couldn’t find it, I should try looking for it. My supervisor assigned me the theme, “The Faith That Sustains Me.” This week, I re-read that old sermon. It went over well. While many things have changed in my life, the faith that ultimately sustains me has not. Call it an “animal faith,” if you will; or existential. It is not primarily a faith that can be equated with belief in this idea or belief in that. Nor is it loyalty to this form of religion or to that one. Let’s face it: both types of faith have a bad reputation these days.

And the last time I spoke about these matters from the pulpit, that’s what I tried to lift up: “Two Types of Faith” [April 17, 2005]. The great Jewish scholar Martin Buber saw two different understandings of faith in the Bible. In Hebrew, the word is *emunah*, or *amana*, as in the name of the utopian community out in Iowa that ended up producing Amana appliances. Remember them? The Hebrew word has connotations emphasizing relational faith as loyalty, trust, holding steady, holding firm, being reliable. But in New Testament Greek, by contrast, the word for faith is *pistis*, related to the word *epistle*, meaning a letter: and there faith often means a belief, as in a proposition or idea or ultimate mystery such as God.

Last week *The New York Times Sunday Magazine* top story was “Why Do We Believe?: How Evolutionary Science Explains Faith in God,” [by Robin M. Henig, March 4, 2007]. After I read it, and before I went to Lexington, I went to the gym, and while working out, listened to two of America’s top TV preachers – Charles Stanley and D. James Kennedy – explaining faith as they understand it. It’s all about believing in a very Calvinist God, who controls all things, has predetermined all things, and needs nothing from us humans, except our spiritual submission to his almighty decrees. Now – I have to admit that like most of you, I don’t do submission well. And that sometimes it is surely necessary. But if faith is a virtue, I’m not sure that’s what it’s all about; not always, surely.

Faith can also be resistance. Especially to what seems to be Fate, or destiny, or even the will of God. Although I'll warn you: don't believe what most preachers declare to be God's will. All too often they invoke it to justify some form of human-made injustice: religious intolerance, racism, second-class citizenship for women or same-sex families, or even the idea that if you were born in a particular caste, God wants you to stay there! No!

I say that faith, as an evolutionary process, often challenges all this. That it often partners with skepticism. That it is deeper than the kind of belief with a particular creedal content, frozen in time; and wider than your loyalty to any particular family, even family of faith, that is narrower than the whole human family, as all children of the One Mystery known by so many names, or by none at all. This existential faith is deeper than belief and wider than tribal or creedal loyalties. But it wavers. You and I know that it wavers.

“At times our own light goes out,” said Albert Schweitzer. “And is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted [and re-lighted] the flame within us.”

I don't know about you, but I am skeptical of every attempt to be faithful without support from others. All too often, that's just shifting faith in an almighty God out there to faith in almighty Me, right here. Another delusion. The real truth is far complex than all that.

I have great respect for all the more orthodox frameworks that help to produce people of authentic faith who then learn to resist the very orthodoxies that nurtured them. But I also know that those of us who are, shall we say, “post-orthodox,” need communities of faith to help further develop the skepticism and existential faith that can move us beyond where we are on our journey of faith today. Faith is gift, not a doctrine. But it is a gift that is received and nurtured and developed in real relational communities.

While studying at Harvard, and preaching in Lexington, I was working with teachers who believed in a “stage development” idea of faith – like one of cognitive development, psycho-social development, or moral development. Today, I must tell you, I take all such

theories as distant abstractions. “Faith,” said the anthropologist Ruth Benedict to her friend Margaret Mead, “is the virtue of the storm, just as happiness is the virtue of the sunshine.” But only you, and, you, and you, and I know the storms in which we must show a faith that is deeper than belief and, often, wider than any conventional loyalties.

The real triumphs of faith are those over fear; over bad, tribalistic, and violent theologies; and over the manifold delusions, promoted in our consumer society, saying, “What matters is YOU: you’re the center of all decision-making, you shape your life as want it.” To which I say, “Good luck! But don’t cut yourself off from people who know better! Who may very well be the channels through which flow what tradition calls the grace of God. Reminding you of your human fallibility. And bring you back to the cultivation of all the virtues; among which one of the chief spiritual virtues is the capacity to have an existential faith in life’s ongoing possibilities: Beyond belief; beyond tribal loyalties.

My grandmother, may she rest in peace, came to this country all alone, as an immigrant. Orphaned, she had worked as a maid to earn her passage. As a teenager, she had only an older married sister in Chicago to greet her after she made her way through Ellis Island. After she married another orphan from Eastern Europe, she and my grandfather buried their first four children. The last of them died in the influenza epidemic of 1919. And yet, my mother was born two years later.

When I ask myself about faith, I know that I do NOT believe, like some Christians, that faith is a matter of accepting Jesus. I do NOT believe that it is a matter of accepting creeds and hierarchy. I do not believe that it is a matter of tribal loyalty. And yet, I hold that faith is a spiritual virtue essential to cultivating all the other more practical virtues. Compassion. Generosity. Hospitality. Integrity. My grandparents displayed all these and more. And yet I know my ongoing need to grow in faith, of which I have so little, if I am ever to do any good on behalf of anyone else. So I pray as their tradition taught me to do, “I have faith, God; help thou my lack.”

The Catholic peace activist and contemplative, Thomas Merton, who learned to channel the restless energies of his soul in the direction of faith by writing both a journal and for publication, once penned this prayer:

“My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope that I have that desire in all I am doing. I hope I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.”

Amen, and amen.

*Hymn

Faith of the Larger Liberty

Vincent B. Silliman

Faith of the larger liberty, source of the light expanding.
Law of the church that is to be, old bondage not withstanding:
Faith of the free! By thee we live – by all thou givest and shall give
our loyalty commanding.

Heroes of faith in every age, far seeing, self-denyng,
Wrought an increasing heritage, monarch and creed defyng.
Faith of the free! In thy dear name, the costly heritage we claim:
Their living and their dying.

Faith for the people everywhere, whatever their oppression,
Of all who make the world more fair, living their faith’s confession:
Faith of the free! Whate’er our plight, thy law, thy liberty, thy light,
Shall be our blest possession.

Benediction 698

Wayne B. Arnason

Take courage, friends.
The way is often hard, the path is never clear.
And the stakes are very high.
Take courage. For deep down there is another truth:
You are not alone.