

FAITH FOR THOSE WHO WILL FOLLOW

A Sermon Delivered at
First Parish in Needham (Unitarian Universalist)
Sunday, August 21, 2011
The Rev. John A. Buehrens, Minister

Unison Call to Worship

Ralph Waldo Emerson

A person will worship something – have no doubt about that.
We may think our tribute is paid in secret
in the dark recesses of our hearts – but it will out.
That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts
will determine our lives, and character.
Therefore it behooves us to be careful what we worship,
for what we are worshipping we are becoming.

Unison Chalice Lighting

words of Christine Robinson

We gather this hour as people of faith
With joys and sorrows, gifts and needs.
We light this beacon of hope,
Sign of our quest for truth and meaning
In celebration of the life we share.

*Hymn 38

Morning Has Broken

Eleanor Farjeon

First Reading

from *Traveling Mercies*

Anne Lamott

read by Mark La Pointe, Dir. of Religious Education

In her spiritual autobiography, *Traveling Mercies*, writer Anne Lamott, a convert to progressive religion, talks about why she insists that her son Sam go with her to church. She knows that this is hardly common practice among her largely secular friends, and it is not always popular with Sam himself – at least until he gets there.

“The main reason [I make him go],” she writes, “is that I want to give him what I found in the world, which is to say, a path and a little light to see by. Most of the people I know who have what I want, which is to say, purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy, are people with a deep sense of spirituality. They are people in community, who pray or practice their faith, they are Buddhists, Jews, Christians, [and other] people banding together to work on themselves and for human rights. They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle, they are part of something beautiful.”

This is what we do here. We offer a faith in which we don’t have to think alike to love alike. We make a path by walking it –not alone, together. And we pray that along the way, those who come to walk with us find a deeper and more radical form of faith than they have known before. Not just for their own sake, but for the sake of generations to come.

Prayer and Moments of Silent Meditation

Second Reading from "Faith," in his book, *Beyond Words* Frederick Buechner

Faith is better understood as a verb than as a noun, as a process than a possession. It is on-again-off-again rather than once-and-for-all. Faith is not being sure where you are going, but going anyway. A journey without maps. Paul Tillich said that doubt isn't the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith.

I have faith that my friend is my friend. It is possible that all his motives are ulterior. It is possible that what he is secretly drawn to is not me, but my wife or my money. But there's something about the way I feel when he is around, about the way he looks me in the eye, about the way we can talk to each other without pretense and be silent together without embarrassment, that makes me willing to put my life in his hands, as I do each time I call him friend.

I can't prove the friendship of my friend. When I experience it, don't need to. When I don't experience it, no proof will do. If I tried to put his friendship to the test, The test itself would [ruin] the friendship I was testing. So it is with the goodness of [Life or of] God. . . .

Almost nothing that makes any real difference can be proved. I can prove the law of gravity by dropping a shoe out of the window. I can prove the world is round if I'm clever at that sort of thing – that the radio works, that light travels faster than sound. I cannot prove that life is better than death or love better than hate. I cannot prove the greatness of the great or the beauty of the beautiful. I cannot even prove my own free will; maybe my most heroic act, my truest love, my deepest thought are all just subtler versions of what happens when the doctor taps my knee with his little rubber hammer and my foot jumps.

Faith can't prove a damned thing. Or a blessed thing either. [And yet the question concerning faith is not, "Shall I be a person of faith?" The proper question is, rather, "Which faith is mine?" Or better, "Which faith should be mine?" For, whether a person craves prestige, wealth, security, or amusement, whether a person lives for country, for science, for God, or for plunder, that person is demonstrating a faith, is showing that he or she puts confidence in something.]

In a discussion of Shabbat, Adin Steinsaltz writes that we must do no work on the Sabbath – not even work on our souls. Yet we know that our souls are supposed to be elevated on Shabbat, that we should reach higher on Shabbat than we do during the week. How can that be if for the entire day we do not strive spiritually?

I remember when I was learning to swim. The hardest part was floating. Swimming is all about propulsion. One must kick, stroke, move. But floating asks us to be still, to trust in the buoyancy of the water. Swimming is work; floating takes faith.

In the ocean it is sometimes necessary to swim, but the swimmer goes beneath the wave while the floater rides its crest. Similarly, the one who works on himself or herself all week should aim to float on Shabbat. Floating will carry you higher than the often strenuous work of the week.

On Shabbat we are to consider the week's tasks complete; Shabbat asks us to trust the wave of God's world.

This Shabbat, do not work on the world or on yourself. Save that for the other six days, and when Shabbat comes, float.

*Hymn 352

Find a Stillness

Carl Seaburg/ Larry Phillips

Find a stillness, hold a stillness, let the stillness carry me.

Find the silence, hold the silence, let the silence carry me.

In the spirit, by the spirit, with the spirit giving power

I will find true harmony.

Seek the essence, hold the essence, let the essence carry me.

Let me flower, help me flower, watch me flower, carry me.

In the spirit, by the spirit, with the spirit giving power

I will find true harmony.

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Recently I had a chance to be present as my three-and-a-half year-old granddaughter, Isabel, took her swimming lesson. Maybe it was my presence, and maybe just her personality, but it struck me that she was almost trying too hard – kicking harder than she needed to, holding her breath longer, having a hard time just relaxing, and floating. And I thought not only of Rabbi Wolpe saying that “floating take faith,” but also of a poem by Philip Booth called “First Lesson.”

Lie back, daughter, let your head
be tipped back in the cup of my hand.
Gently, and I will hold you. Spread
your arms wide, lie out on the stream
and look high at the gulls. A dead-
man's float is face down. You will dive
and swim soon enough where this tidewater
ebbs to the sea. Daughter, believe
me, when you tire on the long thrash
to your island, lie up, and survive.
As you float now, where I held you
and let go, remember when fear
cramps your heart what I told you:
lie gently and wide to the light-year
stars, lie back, and the sea will hold you.

Back when Gwen and I were young parents ourselves, a leader in religious education who influenced us both [John Westerhoff] wrote a book called, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* Too many parents, he suggested, worry about whether their children will have precisely *their* faith and values. But that's narcissistic, and tribal. Better to raise our children to make wise choices about the distinctive *form* that their faith will take.

When I was born, in 1947, only five percent of all religiously active Americans were active in a religious tradition other than the one they had been raised in. Catholics stayed Catholic, Baptists stayed Baptist, and many sang hymns with lyrics like “*Faith of our fathers, holy faith, We will be true to thee till death.*” But fifty years later, in 1997, a survey showed that almost fifty percent of all religiously active Americans had chosen a faith tradition other than one that they were raised in. Today it’s probably even higher.

More and more parents, I’ve noticed, tell themselves that the only faith that they are sure that they want their children to have is faith in themselves. And that’s fine -- as far as it goes. The question is, does it go very far at all? In a recent *Newsweek* article called “The United States of Narcissism,” Daniel Altman writes:

“Imagine a person who does what he wants, regardless of how it affects other people . . . [who] refuses to take responsibility for his own mistakes . . . [who thinks] he’s unbeatable . . . despite mounting evidence to the contrary. Sounds like a textbook narcissist, right? Well, these days it also sounds like [Uncle Sam,] the United States [meaning US].” *Ouch!*

Altman cites how we’re happy to spend, but resist shared sacrifice; insist that our economic system is best, but refuse to invest in the education, infrastructure, research and regulation needed to keep it strong. Psychologists who have been tracking narcissism through surveys of college students since the ‘70s say that levels of it – measured as a lack of empathy – have never been higher. And when you consider how many levers there are in our society pushing us in that direction – from ads that say “you deserve it!” to reality TV shows that turn regular people into selfish battlers from celebrity, to Twitter feeds and Facebook pages offering endless opportunities for self-admiration, it’s not surprising. Our politicians tend to indulge these short-sighted, selfish trends by promising people they can make things better without anyone having to make a sacrifice. Meanwhile the crushing debts of the Me Generation restrict our ability to get out of the economic slump we’re in. And even talented young people go jobless. The best hope, Altman concludes, is in the parents of this generation raising children who’ll see beyond themselves. Who will crave not mere prestige, wealth, security, or amusement, so much as meaningful service to others, to the planet, to the human future.

Fortunately, the young people who grow up in congregations like this one often seem to do just that, as I know them, although each in their own way. They “get it” -- that ours is not so much a religion of belief as a religion of behavior. Instead of must-be-believed doctrines, what we most have to offer our children is simply the example of a diverse community of reflective people committed not just to growing their own souls, but to doing so by being reflective about how to promote the rights of others and a sustainable future. Often recharging by relaxing into a spirituality amazed by the beauty and grace that can, and really does, sustain us all.

In her latest book, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, historian of religion Karen Armstrong says that is simply sick of having people who know religion primarily through the news tell her that religion is the chief cause of human conflict. “Nonsense!” she replies. When religion gets dragged into conflicts it is almost invariably because some shallow, narrow soul that craves power or plunder and then wraps that egoism in some form of pietism. The true essence of religion, across traditions, is “imaginative compassion” –which Thomas Hardy said is also the essence of poetry. You can’t prove poetry, and neither can you prove authentic faith – almost by definition. Yet all the countless acts of justice-seeking, peace-making, and courageous compassion that religion -- authentic faith -- has also inspired? What about them?

Because Buechner is right: authentic faith is *not* the same as a package of abstract beliefs, no matter what religious orthodoxies may say. Here we practice what I increasingly think of as “Open Source Religion” – in which we freely draw on wisdom not only from many traditions – humanist, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, earth-centered, Muslim – but also stays open to direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder, and to ethical insights that hard-won experience can bring to each of us. Not that any of us should be so narcissistic as to think that we can be truly religious all by ourselves. That way lies delusion. “We need one another,” as a reading used here last week put it. Only together can we find the path of authentic faithful living.

“We have religion when we stop deluding ourselves that we are self-sufficient, self-sustaining, or self-derived,” said my late colleague, Ralph Helvorson . . . “when we look upon people with all their failings and still find in them good, when we look beyond [ourselves] to the grandeur in nature and the purpose in our own hearts. . . when [after] we have done all that we can . . . [we then] entrust ourselves to a life that is larger than our [own].”

At the end of his book, *Why Faith Matters*, Rabbi Wolpe writes, “Why does faith matter? [Because] love of this world, of one another, is [our] sole hope in an age when we can destroy ourselves many times over. There is no power that is only good, that cannot be twisted for evil. Religion is no exception. But while there are many things that can doom us, only one thing can save us. Faith. Not blind or bigoted faith, but faith that pushes us to be better, to give more of ourselves, to see glimmers of transcendence scattered throughout our lives. Such a faith is both an achievement and a gift: It is an achievement of seeking, questioning, yearning, reasoning, hoping, and it is a gift of God who fashioned this world . . . [and] sustains and whose [wisdom] could save it if only we – believers and deniers alike – would listen, would love.”

My wife, Gwen, as most of you know, is a priest in the Episcopal Church. She and I may differ on *some* things, but I’m sure we both agree with the rabbi on that. When we were raising our own children, we were like Lamott: Go to dad’s church or mom’s, but you can’t stay home!

Now both of our daughters are pregnant. That’s right! By December, we’ll have *three* grand-children, not just one! Our younger daughter, Mary, who teaches in the Boston public schools is carrying a little boy, who will be raised by Mary and her wife, Anna, in the Unitarian Universalist congregation of the First Parish in Dorchester, which they joined last spring. Erica, our older daughter – who was confirmed as an Episcopalian, but then joined a vibrant Unitarian church in Washington, DC, full of other young adults – later married Andy, the son of a synagogue president. They now live in San Francisco, where Isabel loves the pre-school at the UU church, and where Andy will add a Jewish element to the religious education in their home. He, by the way, develops wind farms, while Erica works on public policy in healthcare on behalf of the hospitals that serve the uninsured and most vulnerable.

Do I now take some narcissistic pride in my family? You bet I do! All parents should. But when they were growing up, Gwen and I sometimes joked that if, like most preachers’ kids, they rebelled, we still hoped that they’d become people of faith – Buddhist, Baptist, or whatever. Now we both suspect, because we’ve each served in ministry many years now, that the faith that will sustain them and our grandchildren will have outward differences from the forms of faith

that nurtured us: seeking new forms of worship and practice, new and even more “open source” music, poetry, and patterns of preaching, teaching and commitment.

So will our children, and our children’s children, have faith? I have faith enough to say that they will, if we ourselves now show them deep and authentic lives of faith; if we stay open and relaxed enough faithfully to turn the future over to them, having done and lived our best.

“In this world there have always been many opinions about faith and salvation,” said a Unitarian forebear of the 1500s, Francis David. “We need not think alike to love alike.”

That is a faith, my friends, worth keeping: the faith of the free. May we not only preach it, but also show it, to those who will follow. Amen.

*Hymn 287

Faith of the Larger Liberty

Vincent Silliman

Benediction

adapted from Barbara Pescan

Because of those who came before, we are;
In spite of their failings, we persist in faith;
Because of, and in spite of the horizons of their vision,
and our own,
May those who will follow us catch the spark of faith from our lives.
Let us go forth then, remembering to love mightily,
to think reflectively,
to remain open,
to float faithfully
in the Great Mystery that sustains us all.
Go in peace. Amen.