

WHAT IS FAITH? (AND WHERE CAN I GET SOME?)

A Sermon Delivered at First Parish in Needham, Unitarian Universalist
The Rev. John Buehrens, Minister
Sunday, December 6, 2009

Call to Worship *God is One* Francis David (1510-79)
(adapted by Richard Fewkes and John Buehrens)
Read by John Buehrens and Molly Hough

In this world there have always been many opinions about faith and salvation.

We need not think alike to love alike.

But there must be knowledge in faith also.

For sanctified reason is the lantern of faith.

Religious reform can never be all at once, either in you or me, or in all of us,
but only gradually, step by step.

If other teachers offer something better, I will gladly learn from them.

The most important spiritual function is conscience, the source of all true spiritual joy.

Conscience will not be quieted by anything less than truth and justice.

Faith cannot be coerced, but comes only as a gift, from God, in our living.

We must accept this gift in our lifetime; salvation comes here on earth.

God is indivisible; one with us, among us, and beyond us.

Egy As Isten [pronounced: Edge Oz Eesten]

God is with us. For God is one and eternal.

*Hymn 221 *Light One Candle* Peter Yarrow

Ancient Reading Psalm 146 Stephen Mitchell/J. Buehrens

I praise the Eternal with my whole heart; with each breath I sing to my God.

Happy are those who trust and surrender their lives to the care of the Eternal.

Put no trust in rulers, nor in mortals, who cannot always help.

But in the One who creates us in her own image and fills us with his compassion,
opening the eyes of the blind and lifting up those who have fallen;

Whose justice shines from the depths, hidden but always present.

Praise the Eternal for what you can fathom;

For what you cannot fathom, praise the Eternal.

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'm following your will does not mean that I'm actually doing so. But I believe the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope 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 never leave me to face my perils alone.

Offertory Anthem

The Christians and the Pagans

Dar Williams

Amber called her uncle, said "We're up here for the holiday.
Jane and I were having Solstice, now we need a place to stay."
And her Christ-loving uncle watched his wife hang Mary on a tree;
He watched his son hang candy canes all made with red dye number three
He told his niece, "It's Christmas Eve, I know our life is not your style."
She said, "Christmas is like Solstice, and we miss you and it's been awhile."

So the Christians and the Pagans sat together at the table,
Finding faith and common ground the best that they were able.
And just before the meal was served, hands were held and prayers were said
Sending hope for peace on earth to all their gods and goddesses.

The food was great, the tree plugged in, the meal had gone without a hitch,
'Til Timmy turned to Amber and said, "Is it true that you're a witch?"
His mom jumped up and said, "The pies are burning," and she hit the kitchen.
'Twas Jane who spoke, she said, "It's true: your cousin's not a Christian."
"But we love trees, we love the snow, the friends we have, the world we share
And you find magic from your God, and we find magic everywhere."

So the Christians and the Pagans sat together at the table.
Finding faith and common ground the best that they were able.
And where does magic come from? I think magic's in the learning
'Cause now when Christians sit with Pagans only pumpkin pies are burning!

When Amber tried to do the dishes, her aunt said, "Really, no, don't bother"
Amber's uncle saw how Amber looked like Tim and like her father
He thought about his brother, how they hadn't spoken in a year
He thought he'd call him up to say, "It's Christmas & your daughter's here."
He thought of fathers, sons & brothers, saw his own son tug his sleeve sayin'
"Can I be a Pagan?" Dad said, "We'll discuss it when they leave!"

So the Christians and the Pagans sat together at the table,
Finding faith and common ground the best that they were able;
Lighting trees in darkness, learning new ways from the old, and
Making sense of history and drawing warmth out of the cold.

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“So what is ‘a little faith’?” she asked. “And where can I get some? ‘Cuz I need some big time. And I’m pretty put off by most churchy types.” Her question hit me. One of you had put it in a question box last spring. Then I’d heard again this fall. And here I was on an airplane, getting it again from a woman I’d just met, sitting next to me. Who didn’t even know me as a minister!

No, saying I was ordained would’ve violated a precept an older colleague gave to me years ago. “On a plane,” he said, “if your seat partner ever asks you what you do for a living, say that you’re a bookkeeper in a meatpacking plant. That’ll shut ‘em up! Then go back to your reading.”

But that was just the problem: she was pointing to the book I’d just opened: *Have a Little Faith: A True Story*, by Mitch Albom. You may remember him as the author of *Tuesdays with Morrie*, his account of weekly meetings with his beloved writing teacher and mentor nearby at Brandeis, as Morrie died of ALS, Lou Gehrig’s disease. I’d noticed when she sat down, and gave me her name, that despite her efforts to be friendly, that she’d seemed both sad and very anxious.

I thought for an instant of breaking my own rule and identifying myself by my profession. But I quickly decided against it. In my briefcase was the latest *UU World*, with a review of two novels about minister’s lives. The reviewer, a colleague who once edited the *New York Times Sunday Book Review*, began by saying that since becoming ordained, she’d found that people too often get inhibited, self-conscious, wildly projective or else terminally earnest when she tells them that she is now a minister. She also cites another colleague who writes, “the real reason people find ministers weird don’t really want us to come to their parties, even if they invite us, is because we are too comfortable with death.”

There’s something to that! I’d thought -- although people also expect us to try to help find meaning in life, including its very hard parts. So I simply asked her, “What’s going on?”

I won't violate her confidence by telling you all her story, about a parent dying, a divorce, and a sense of dread at having just been being tested for the same genetic flaw that killed her mother. But I will tell you a bit of what I told her about faith, out of the true story that Mitch Albom tells.

"Faith isn't the same as belief," I began. "At least that's what this guy found." She had read *Tuesdays with Morrie*, and was impressed, the way many people reading that book were, with the way Morrie faced into his dying straight on, without any armor of traditional religious belief. The only immortality he had much faith in was what might be called an immortality of influence, through the quality of his living, through students like Albom. "I wish I could do that," she said. "But I don't have any great confidence that I've made much difference to others, or even tried."

"Neither did Mitch Albom," I replied. "He made a lot of money from the book, got invitations to give lectures and speeches, spent most of his time in airplanes, and ended up feeling pretty empty and hollow. Then his parents dragged him to the synagogue in New Jersey where he'd grown up. And his childhood rabbi, now old and long retired, came up and asked if Albom would agree to deliver the eulogy when the time came for the rabbi's funeral. He couldn't find a way to say No. So he started visiting the old rabbi, sort of like he'd visited Morrie, every time he went back home to see his parents. At first he did it objectively, like a journalist, just gathering material. But slowly the conversation began to change him, just the way those with Morrie had."

"So he gets all religious, does he?" she asked. "No," I replied, no, not at all. You see, Albom's wife isn't Jewish; she grew up Catholic. But neither seems to practice their tradition very much."

"That was one of the issues in our marriage," my seatmate said. "Uh-huh," I replied, restraining my temptation to suggest a more embracing path to spiritual life and family nurture. "But Albom does begin, as he talks to rabbi, to see how much he and everyone in the synagogue, even when they didn't keep or understand all the traditions or rituals or prayers themselves, loved the way the rabbi's sermons were usually captivating stories, not admonitions, and the way he'd smile and sing all the time. He found that the rabbi's own life had been marked by real tragedy and failure, but that in each of those crises he'd found that faith is something deeper than a set of teachings, though those can help point toward faith as a better way of being, living and doing."

“Here,” I said, “is the rabbi’s take on why his tradition teaches that we all descend from Adam – or from a common ancestor like Lucy, as the anthropologists might prefer:

“Ask yourself . . . Why, if [God] meant for there to be faiths bickering with each other, didn’t he create that from the start? He created trees, right? Not one tree, but countless trees. Why not the same with man? Because we are all from that one man – and . . . from . . . one God. That’s the message.” Then why, [Albom asks], is the world so fractured?

“Well, you can look at it this way. Would you want the [whole] world to all look alike? No. The genius of life is its variety. Even in our own faith, we have questions and answers, debates, interpretations. In Christianity . . . in other faiths, the same: interpretations, debates. That’s the beauty. It’s like being a musician. If you found the note, and you kept hitting that note all the time, you would go nuts. It’s the blending of the different notes that makes the music.”

“The music of what?”

Then I paraphrased a bit: “Of giving yourself to a tune that is bigger than yourself.”

My seatmate laughed. “Now that I can understand!” she said. “I sing in a local chorus. And this rabbi – he liked to sing?” “All the time,” I said. “dawn to dusk.”

“But why?”

“Well, I don’t know that Albom ever asked. But what he did learn about the rabbi gives some clues. The first time the rabbi went to the seminary, they turned him down for ordination. They said he was too shy to be effective. Then that summer he listened deeply to a troubled kid at camp, whose life turned around. And that effectiveness caught the attention of a great Jewish scholar, who gave him a second chance. But the greatest crisis in his life was probably when his five-year old daughter, Rina, whose name meant “joy,” died of a severe, sudden asthma attack. Rather than pretend that he wasn’t angry with God, the rabbi told his people that he was bitter. And then he said kaddish anyway, which is a hymn of praise, as part of his mourning. You know, the psalms often begin in lament, but they end in praise. So I’m guessing that he started singing as a way to keep that tone going. St. Augustine once said that ‘to sing once is to pray twice.’”

She looked at me intently: “You’re some kind of minister, aren’t you? What kind?”

I replied, “Before I answer that, let me tell you the most important part of Albom’s story. In the midst of his visits to the rabbi, his work as a journalist in Detroit leads him to meet a guy named Henry Covington, a huge black man, a former prison inmate and drug dealer, who is pastor of a little flock called the I Am My Brother’s Keeper Ministry. Henry is trying to feed the

hungry and house the homeless, of whom there are many in Detroit, but in a huge old church that was abandoned by its denomination and now has a huge, gaping hole in its roof. At first Albom doesn't trust this so-called minister very much, and suspects he's still some sort of scam artist. But gradually he learns to have more faith in Henry, in his deeply changed life, in his big heart, and in what brought that about that he has in any of the city's politicians or social agencies. Still, he worries, as a Jew, about helping out a do-gooder Christian evangelical, but the old rabbi says, 'I constantly tell our people: you should be convinced of the *authenticity* of what you have, but you must also be humble enough to say that we don't know everything. And since we don't know everything, we much accept that another person may believe something else.' [p. 161] Again, faithful living, if authentic, is something deeper than a tradition or set of beliefs."

"In fact, in my tradition we teach that 'belief is many things; and so is disbelief; but faithful living for us is what happens when we open our minds to greater truth, our hearts to greater compassion, and open our hands to work to make this somehow a better world for us all."

"And what tradition is that?" she asked. "Unitarian Universalist," I answered. "Rather like Henry's church, we're not a big religious group in numbers, and we have too our human flaws and imperfections, like everyone. But we're big in other ways; ways that count, I hope."

"You know: most people put their faith in things just too small to bear the weight: faith in material things; in technology or techniques; in particular policies or politicians. Take poor President Obama. Sometimes I really worry about all the unrealistic expectations people have placed in him, expecting him to fix everything that's been damaged, and all at once, of course. But he's no messiah! "Put not your faith in rulers," says one of the psalms. I especially like the translation of that one when it then ends by saying, 'Praise the Eternal for what you can fathom. For what you cannot fathom, praise the Eternal.'"

She laughed again. "Then I have lots to praise," she said, "because I don't fathom much!"

The pilot came on, telling us that we would soon be landing: in Rochester, NY, where I was to give a lecture and preach at one of our larger congregations, and where she was returning to the school where she teaches after a trip to doctors here in Boston. "Before we say good-bye," I said. "I'd like to give you my card and another book I have with me." I opened my briefcase. Tempted though I might have been to give her a copy of my own little book, *A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism*, I didn't have one. So I gave her the book I did have: "This one may speak more directly to your condition. It's by Rabbi Harold Kushner, who wrote

Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People, and called *Conquering Fear: Living Boldly in an Uncertain World*.” She accepted it with thanks and my card.

Albom’s story turns out neatly. His rabbi blessed him helping Henry’s ministry. He wrote articles about Henry in *The Detroit Free Press*. People helped. The hole in the roof was fixed. The hungry were fed. The homeless were housed. Albom learns that faith is less about beliefs or differences than about living with integrity, courage, and caring. As the New Testament says, “What good is it, my friends, for someone to say he has faith when his actions do nothing to show it? Can that faith save him. . . Show me the faith you speak of with no actions to prove it, and I will by my actions prove to you my faith.” [James 2:14,18b]

My story is not so neat. I never saw Carol again. When I preached at First Unitarian in Rochester I kept looking for her. But there were over 600 people there. I may have missed her. She may have been feeling as she presented on the plane: part outgoing, one part sad and wary. So this week I just imagined receiving an email from her:

“You’ll be glad to know that I’ve been going to First Unitarian since we met on the plane and I heard you there. What I like about their take on faith is that it doesn’t have to be all one kind. What they value is authenticity in diversity. It’s like good music, and that have that, too.

“By the way, I read Kushner’s book. It helped. The news from the doctors was not good. Not terrible; I may have years to live, but I do have the same genetic disease that killed mother. It’s likely that my daughter does, too.

“So I’ve been bringing her as well, on weekends when she isn’t staying with her father. There’s a hymn they sang one Sunday that made me schedule an appointment with one of the ministers. ‘Just as long as I have breath.’ That’s how I want to live for her. Thanks for helping me say Yes in the face of life’s experiences of No – the way his rabbi and Henry did for Mitch. And yes, I’ve read that one too! And found a little faith, where I didn’t expect it.”

May your holidays be full of warmth and light, despite all the growing cold and darkness. Your fellow traveler, Carol.”

I pray for her, wherever she is this morning. So let’s close our worship now with that very hymn:

*Hymn 6

Just As Long As I Have Breath

Alicia Carpenter

Closing Words

Our closing words are those used at the very end of Harold Kushner's book, *Conquering Fear*, and are taken from the philosopher-psychologist William James: "These then are my last words to you: Be not afraid of life. Believe that life is worth living and your belief will help create that fact."