

Keeping Faith Is The Hardest Work

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Faith, the bible tells us, is the "assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." (Hebrews 11:1) What is faith in our lives, and what is it to keep faith? The idea of this sermon arose in the wake of the recent U.S. Senate election in Massachusetts. Now the results of that election were a great shock to political liberals, of which I am one. I say it in this way because I am now preaching to the congregation, and I am aware that some of you were pleased with the outcome of that election, and I want to reaffirm right here that this church is open and welcoming to all political stripes; we are religiously liberal, but you can be a religious liberal and a political conservative. The Episcopal Church, which I left in my youth, used to be described as the Republican Party at prayer (though that was a different Episcopal Church and a different Republican Party) and I don't want the UU church to be described as the Democratic or Green party at prayer. It behooves us all to be both passionate for our political convictions and humbly aware that we may not have a complete lock on wisdom.

With that as context, the message I posted, aimed at those of my fellow liberals discouraged by the elections results, was that Lincoln was right that you can fool all of the people some of the time and some of the people all of the time, but that I still had faith that you couldn't fool all of the people all of the time. And a friend of mine replied, "You still have faith ... well, yes, but that's your 'job', to be a man of faith ..."

My first reaction to that was that it's no more a clergyman's "job" to keep faith than it is anyone else's. I don't feel that I get paid to keep my faith. Crises of faith happen to everyone, certainly including the professional clergy, especially including the professional clergy.

As I thought more about it, the idea occurred to me that keeping faith is about the hardest work there is, and no amount of compensation could pay for it. Faith is sort of out of the labor market.

Now the concept of faith puts some UU teeth on edge. It sounds like what some of us were trying to get away from in the Roman Catholic or Episcopal or Lutheran churches of our early years. I want to recap those Jewish and Christian concepts of faith to give us a context for how I see faith today.

In the Hebrew Bible, keeping faith meant keeping the covenant with Jahweh. In the covenants, God made certain promises to humans, and much of the narrative force of the Hebrew Bible relates how humans strayed from that loyalty and were punished for it, or kept that loyalty

and were rewarded. In the Christian New testament, the passage I read from Hebrews outlines this, but of course gives a Christian twist to it, including the classic Christian definition of faith as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” The book of Hebrews was written, scholars think, during the early period of persecution of Christians, and perhaps this is why the passage ends by saying that while faith is rewarded, it is not always rewarded in the way one would expect.

Christianity, particularly the Gospel of John, brought faith closer to the meaning of belief, and this is why UUs often have trouble with the concept. John 3:16: For God so loved the world that he gave his only son Jesus Christ, that all who believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. Belief in Jesus is over and over called the key to salvation. UUs who have decided they don’t believe in God or in the divinity of Christ or other precepts of the Nicene creed conclude that they are without faith. But to equate faith with belief is to play the orthodox’s game on their home field.

To me, faith is a lot closer to trust than it is to belief. Let’s say I am standing in front of you facing away from you and you assure me that you will catch me if I let myself fall backwards. Can I do it? Can I trust you? That’s faith. When I get on an airplane to fly somewhere, I have faith that all the systems have been checked out, that the screws are tightened and the fuel loaded properly. Now when I get on a ladder to go five feet in the air, I can do all the checking myself; I make sure the ladder is well grounded, that the rungs are in good order, that it is straight and will not shift with my weight. But when I am going 30,000 feet in the air, I have to take some things on faith.

The mystic Baba Ram Dass reportedly said that belief is a holding on, while faith is a letting go. Faith is the willful surrender, the falling backwards into your waiting arms. Faith is placing myself at the mercy of the pilot, the flight crew and the ground crew.

But what is the content of our faith? What is it we are to have faith in? I think the content of faith is a moving target. As UUs, we will not all have faith in the same things at the same time. Each of us individually are constantly in flux as to what we have faith in.

Let me tell you about my encounter with the late Sister Jeanette Normandin fifteen years ago. Sister Jeanette was a dedicated and progressive Catholic nun in Boston; she had set up halfway houses for women with HIV/AIDs getting out of prison. She had frequent clashes with the Roman Catholic hierarchy of Boston. She was a fiery and faithful soul.

My freshman year of Divinity School, Sister Jeanette was invited to meet with my class of ministry students. She talked with passion about her work. Then one of my classmates asked her an off the wall question – “what or who is God for you?” I’ll never forget her answer. She said that it depended on what she was thinking at the time. She had been reading a book on the religion of Australian aborigines, and for a time God was every rock and tree and mountain.

Then she read some reflections of St. Theresa of Avila, and God was more like a mystical emotional presence.

What struck me was that here was a person who had taken religious vows and was being true to those vows. She prayed for the first 30 minutes after rising every morning. She had devoted her life to God, had given herself to God, was doing her best to be completely faithful to God, and yet she could not say with precision who or what God was.

This gave me great comfort as a UU. If a Catholic nun did not need to decide what God was, I didn't either. If a Catholic nun could devote her life to God without being able to define God, I could devote my life to the pursuit of God without having to decide whether I believed God existed.

So when I think about faith, I would like to say that God is defined as that in which I have faith, rather than say faith is defined as my relationship to a known quantity that I call God. Let me say that again: God is defined as that in which I have faith, rather than say faith is defined as my relationship to a known quantity that I call God. Tillich calls God our ultimate concern, and the process of faith development, of faith growth over our lifetimes, is to constantly shift the object of our concern. What concern is truly ultimate?

Let me try to illustrate this from my own life. The other day, I was going through a box of photographs that my mother had collected. One particular picture tugged at my heart: a shot of me and my first wife Lee and our two teenaged children on the rear deck of our house in Charleston taken shortly before I left to go to Divinity School. What a confident, beautiful little family we were! There was no hint in that picture that in two years time we would be scattered geographically and emotionally to the four winds by our educational programs and then by divorce.

That family was the center of my being, the principle reason for my existence. I used to tell myself that Lee's and my personalities were so intertwined I didn't know where one began and the other left off. I used to say we were like two trees that had grown together. I would never have contemplated going into the ministry if I knew that my marriage was the price I would have to pay, for I was convinced I could not pay that price and survive.

Yet two years later, there we were getting unhitched. And when the phone conversation came in which it was clear that divorce was going to be outcome, I said to her, this is a holy moment. I did not mean that it was particularly exalted; there were no angel choirs. There was, on the contrary, unbelievable emotional pain.

But I knew that this development would force me to make new meaning in my life, that the crack in the shell of my security would throw me on my own resources, emotionally, spiritually and financially, and that I would have to rebuild.

My faith in the strength of that marriage turned out to be misguided, but at the same time

my fear that I could not stand on my own also proved false. I have since been blessed to find another extraordinary woman who agreed to marry me, but I also found that I have a strength separate from my relationship with my significant other. I have developed faith in my own resilience, and have uncoupled my faith from my surroundings. As in the reading, I did not receive what I thought I was promised, but something which may have been better. As that great theologian Mick Jagger put it, you can't always get what you want, but if you try sometime, you just might find, you get what you need.

Faith, "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen," requires, almost by definition, a leap into the unknown. The person standing behind you is unseen, you don't know that that person is going to catch you when you fall. Soren Kierkegaard talks about a leap of faith, or more accurately, a leap to faith. In Kierkegaard's view, the idea that Jesus is 100% God and 100% human cannot be comprehended by reason, and requires faith to get to it.

For many of us, this reasoning is exactly why we left orthodox Christianity. We have faith in our power of reason, and a concept of God which offends reason we would just rather reject than leap to.

It's not the unseen part that gives us trouble. If faith is the conviction of things not seen, we have a lot of things that we don't see but science tells us are real. We don't see the age of the earth, but we can see the rocks which tell us that age. We don't see atoms or electrons or quarks or leptons, but we take on faith that the universe is made up of such things. Science tells us that this disk contains all the words in the Bible, and we can't see it, but we can feed it into our computer and see it for ourselves.

No, it's not the fact that traditional religious faith takes as its object the unseen, but that it seems to require a rejection of reason. Yet if we are reflective we must admit that reason only goes so far. We accept that the universe is full of mystery and paradox. Science cannot tell us why we weep at the Ninth Symphony, how Michelangelo was inspired to paint those figures, why you fell in love with Jane instead of Molly.

Keeping faith is the hardest work there is. Sometimes what we had faith in turns out to be a delusion; sometimes the person or people or church with whom we were keeping faith weren't keeping faith with us. When faith is breached, we have two choices. We can lead faithless cynical lives, refusing to trust in any person or thing again. Or we can start building new meaning, start building new trust with new people or in new things.

Orthodox Christian churches are organized around a creed, which states a belief. We often say that we are the church without a creed. When we say our affirmation, we say this is not a creed but a statement of values and aspirations. Similarly, we often say that our Principles and Purposes are not a creed but a statement of values.

It is true that these UU formulations are not creeds in the sense that that term is used in

orthodox Christian churches. No one is required to affirm them or to say them in order to be a member or in order to be allowed to participate in any ritual.

But I think the Principles and Purposes does come close to a statement of faith in the sense of the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Look at the introductory clause: “We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote...” We wouldn’t covenant to affirm and promote them unless we felt they were pretty valuable.

Now let’s take the first principle: the inherent worth and dignity of every individual. When we covenant to affirm and promote that, does that mean that we really think that every person has inherent worth and dignity as a matter of fact? I can think of a lot of scoundrels, criminals, dictators which seem to contradict this if it is considered a statement of fact.

That’s why I prefer to view it as a statement of faith. It is something hoped for, something unseen. To say that we covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person is not making a statement about every person, it is making a statement about us. It is saying that *we* choose to treat every person whom we encounter as having inherent worth and dignity. And it isn’t that I have faith in the truth of the statement; my faith is that treating people as if they have worth and dignity is the best way to live.

This first principle is the closest thing we have to a common faith, and it is faith enough. And that faith, like all faiths, is best seen when it is tested. Persecution for one’s faith is not just ancient history, but very much alive today. You may remember Mark Kiyimba, the Ugandan UU minister who preached here last July. Mark is now at the forefront of local opposition to the bill pending before the Ugandan legislature which would make homosexuality a capital crime. At great personal risk, Mark convened a conference of 200 people in Kampala last Sunday, Valentine’s day, and out of the conference grew a petition to the legislature. UUA President Peter Morales wrote a letter to the conference and in it he said this:

I know that by standing up to institutionalized discrimination, you are accepting great personal risks. We Unitarian Universalists frequently affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person, but seldom are we called to stake our own well-being and safety on this core principle. Your willingness to do so is a moving example for all of us. Please know that there are many Unitarian Universalists around the world who are with you in spirit as you gather in Kampala.

What is truly ultimate? What is the content of faith? Some of us may say it is the goodness of people. Some of us may say it is the goodness of life. Some of us may say that it is the conviction that if we live out our values and work for them, we can make the world a better

place. Some may say it is that life is worth living. Some may say that it is the power of love to transform us. Some may say it is the power of love to outlast death. I cannot tell you what to have faith in, it is something you have to find out for yourselves.

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Keeping faith is not just my job, it is yours and yours and yours and it is the hardest work there is, and keeping faith does not mean that you will get what you think you were promised, since God, or fate or karma, may provide something better.

Amen.

Reading:

Hebrews 11 (NRSV)

1 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. 2 Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. 3 By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

4 By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's. Through this he received approval as righteous, God himself giving approval to his gifts; he died, but through his faith he still speaks. 5 By faith Enoch was taken so that he did not experience death; and "he was not found, because God had taken him." For it was attested before he was taken away that "he had pleased God." 6 And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. 7 By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household; by this he condemned the world and became an heir to the righteousness that is in accordance with faith.

8 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. 10 For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. 11 By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old — and Sarah herself was barren — because he considered him faithful who had promised. 12 Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead,

descendants were born, "as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore."

13 All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, 14 for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. 15 If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

17 By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, 18 of whom he had been told, "It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you." 19 He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead — and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. 20 By faith Isaac invoked blessings for the future on Jacob and Esau. 21 By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, "bowing in worship over the top of his staff." 22 By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave instructions about his burial.

23 By faith Moses was hidden by his parents for three months after his birth, because they saw that the child was beautiful; and they were not afraid of the king's edict. 24 By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called a son of Pharaoh's daughter, 25 choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. 26 He considered abuse suffered for the Christ to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking ahead to the reward. 27 By faith he left Egypt, unafraid of the king's anger; for he persevered as though he saw him who is invisible. 28 By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel.

29 By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. 30 By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. 31 By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

32 And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets — 33 who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, 34 quenched raging fire,

escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. 35 Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. 36 Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. 37 They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented — 38 of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

39 Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, 40 since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.