



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Speaking of Faith,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on September 14, 2014

“Faith,” says Sharon Salzberg, “is an inner quality that unfolds as we learn to trust our own deepest experience.”¹ So let’s start there, with our own deepest experiences. Think of a time when you were overcome by awe, or touched by beauty, or moved, perhaps to tears, by some experience. Can you remember a moment like this, when all of a sudden you saw things differently, perhaps more clearly, when things seemed to fall into place; when you felt at home, in your body and on this earth?

Don’t try to analyze the experience, just remember it and be in touch with it. Bask in it for a moment.

Isn’t there, in these kinds of experiences, a sense that you are part of something larger than yourself? Isn’t there a connectedness in these holy moments, an awareness of being in relationship to something you may not even be able to see or name or understand?

One young woman described such a moment, when, as a teenager, she went out in the middle of the night and looked up at a dark sky full of stars. She had a “once-in-a-lifetime feeling of happiness, of being connected with all of life, with God; a feeling of overwhelming clarity, of being sheltered and carried. She saw the stars as if she had never seen them before. She described the experience in these words, ‘Nothing can happen, I am indestructible, I am one with everything.’”²

I believe we all have had, or are capable of having, moments like this. Sharon Salzberg says it’s these experiences, these holy moments, that open us up to faith. That faith is not about believing, but rather, trusting in these deep and moving experiences that we have.

If you read our September newsletter, you know that this month we’re starting something new here. We’re centering our worship around monthly themes. The expectation is that doing this will help us to engage with big theological and spiritual questions in deeper and more profound ways. We hope our monthly themes will encourage conversations around here about things like faith and death and forgiveness and hope, which happen to be the themes from now through December.

¹ The reading today was from Sharon Salzberg’s book *Faith: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience*.

² This passage is from *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, by Dorothee Soelle.

At the start of the month the preacher will introduce the theme. In subsequent weeks, the sermon will engage it in one way or another. But there's nothing rigid about this. It's like the pirate's code, from the movie, "Pirates of the Caribbean," more of what you'd call guidelines, than actual rules. I hope we will talk about the monthly theme at the Thursday brown bag lunch here. At least once a month, we'll offer an opportunity to gather during coffee hour to share what this theme has stirred up in you. This month, that will happen in two weeks, on September 28.

Some of you might be uncomfortable with the word faith, because too often it's used to mean an irrational belief in something that's physically impossible. We're told to have faith in things that we know can't or didn't happen. Like the virgin birth, or a new crop of congressmen actually changing Washington. This kind of faith requires a willing suspension of disbelief. But that's not what faith is; not what it's supposed to be.

Many of us were taught that faith was synonymous with religious belief--in this understanding, to have faith means you agree with a creed or you accept without question a particular doctrine. No wonder faith has gotten a bad name! Too often these days, "faith" can look like lock-step conformity, voluntary ignorance or self-righteous superiority.

Several years ago I regularly listened to a show on public radio called "Speaking of Faith." It had great interviews with people like Desmond Tutu and Ellie Wiesel. It engaged questions of spirituality and ethics in an openhearted and thoughtful way. Then one day they announced that "Speaking of Faith" was changing its name. The host, Krista Tippett, said the new name, "On Being," would be "a more spacious container for what the program has become."

This change annoyed me, and I wrote to tell them so. This didn't cause them to bring the old name back. It was pretty obvious this was a marketing decision. These days, a certain percentage of people will simply not tune in to a show with the word "faith" in its name. But it made me sad, and annoyed me, that faith had become one of those loaded words that too often is seen as divisive and oppressive. I'm with Sharon Salzberg, who says she wants "to encourage delight in the word, to help reclaim faith as fresh, vibrant, intelligent, and liberating."

Krista Tippett, the host of what used to be called "Speaking of Faith," has the same intent, even though they took that word out of the title. She said the new name "makes room for the ways in which we have in fact opened up the concept of 'speaking of faith.'" It points at questions of 'religion, meaning, ethics and ideas' at the heart of human life."

I hope that we don't have to give up on the word faith around here. If you struggle with it, I hope you can find ways to translate it, so it has meaning for you. Because isn't that why you are here--to do this work of finding ways to live a more openhearted, more loving, more courageous life?

One of the great joys of my spiritual life these past years has been engaging with those religious words and concepts that at one point were lost to me, and in doing so, discovering that there were deeper and richer meanings behind the ones on the surface. One of my companions and heroes in this work is the writer Kathleen Norris. Her story is one of struggling with the Christian tradition, its words and concepts, engaging head and heart and eventually coming back to faith. She says

“Like many people of my ‘baby boomer’ generation, I drifted away from religion when catechism came to the fore, and the well-meaning adults who taught Sunday school and confirmation class seemed intent on putting the vastness of ‘God’ into small boxes of their own devising. Theirs was a scary vocabulary, not an inviting one. And religion came to seem just one more childhood folly that I had to set aside as an adult. In my mid-thirties, however, it became necessary to reclaim my faith, scary vocabulary and all.”³

Kathleen Norris wrote a book in which she wrestles with these words, like “salvation,” “incarnation,” “prayer,” “repentance.” About the word “faith,” she writes, “Faith is still a surprise to me, as I lived without it for so long. Now I believe that it was merely dormant in the years I was not conscious of its presence. And I have become better at trusting that it is there, even when I can’t feel it, or when God seems absent from the world. No small part of my religious conversion has been coming to know that faith is best thought of as a verb, not a ‘thing’ that you either have or you don’t. Faith is not discussed as an abstraction in the gospels. Jesus does not talk about it so much as respond to it in other people, for example, saying to a woman who has sought him for a healing, ‘Your faith has made you whole’ (Matt. 9:22). And faith is not presented as a sure thing.”⁴

The trouble with a lot of religion these days, and especially the examples of religion that show up on TV or the internet, is that these versions tend toward the extremes--a pastor burning the Koran, people selectively quoting the Bible to oppress others and protect their own privilege, terrorists of any tradition who say they are doing God’s will. These sensational images obscure the fact that there are millions of people of faith, from a diversity of traditions, trying to live good and decent lives. News headlines to the contrary, we’re increasingly living in a time when religious difference is seen as less of a threat, and more, something to be cherished; when interfaith understanding and appreciation and cooperation are on the rise.

My hope is that we are entering an era in which there will be a renaissance of faith. By this I mean a time when we will move beyond the false dichotomies that separate us. That divide body and soul, spiritual and religious, sacred and secular; that promote either/or thinking and paint the world as black or white. So that we can move into a richer, more nuanced, more expansive understanding of life.

Now is the time, isn’t it, to lift up this inclusive understanding of faith as something that we all have. That we inhabit in diverse ways, as we strive to become more fully human, each of us becoming who we were born to be. Isn’t that what it means to be a person of faith? Trusting in your own worth and dignity, using your gifts to help heal and bless our world?

Faith is not about being certain. It’s not about throwing around religious language. Faith is not something you can buy or possess; rather, it’s an attitude and a posture, it’s a way of being in the world. “Faith is not making religious-sounding noises in the daytime,” Mary Jean Irion said. “It is asking your inmost self questions at night and then getting up and going to work.”

³ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998) p. 2.

⁴ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace*, p.169.

One of the great blessings of being your pastor is that sometimes I get to hear about your faith, whether you use that word or not. And I get to see you doing the work: living your faith in this congregation and in the world. And you can see it too, all around, if you look for it. A simple act of kindness, a willingness to serve, a effort to make a heartfelt human connection. This is the life of faith, and it is beautiful to behold.

Can we, in this community, speak of faith? Can we share the stories of our longings and our epiphanies, our doubts and our struggles? Can we trust that, when it comes to faith, we have what we need? That our own deepest experiences will lead us to a holy place; that this faith will lead us home.

Amen.