



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Lessons from Paul, the Corinthians, and Indiana Jones”

a sermon given by Julie Lombard

on September 29, 2013

Is anyone here a fan of Indiana Jones movies? Have you seen “The Last Crusade”? If you’ve seen it, then you may remember the famous “Leap of Faith” scene. If not, then let me set the stage: Indy is running down a tunnel and he arrives at what looks like an endless crevasse, he nearly falls into the deep opening. He catches himself in the nick of time, slightly confused he surveys the setting and rechecks his guide book. If a speech bubble were to pop up, reading his mind, it might say, “What the Blank, there’s no Blanking way!” He needs to get across the opening to the other side, but the crevasse is obviously too wide. Time is ticking and he must move fast. His face is full of panic and sweat drips from his temples. From far away his father urges him to have faith. Doubt consumes Indiana Jones. Indy closes his eyes and takes that terrifying first step. What happens next is that he discovers that all along there was bridge there, a camouflaged one he couldn’t see. Instead of plunging to his death, he cautiously walks across the hidden bridge and reaches the other side safely where he continues his journey. I don’t recall where he was going, most likely to get some treasure, but what I am sure about is that he had the courage to take that first step and that was the biggest treasure he could have found. He ultimately reached his reward. The teaching point of that scene is that the Spirit of Life sometimes calls us to have faith in the unseen, sometimes we need to make a Leap of Faith.

Long before this current age of movies, instant messaging, texting, emailing, and cell phones there was a time where the art of letter writing was known. One would sit down and write out their message out to someone far away and the message would arrive to its destination and it may inspire a responsive letter. This was a way of continuing long distance conversations. Anyone who has evolved past the advent of the letter writing may attest how easy it is to depend on our newer ways of communication. Through email or texting, we’ve experienced the convenience of their lightning speed pace. Let’s face it, if we are communicating, whether it be by letter or some other new fangled way, we are leaving ourselves open to the age old game of tit for tat or verbal table tennis. We may find that we disagree with one another. It’s human to disagree. Some may even say that it’s healthy to disagree. Mere communication with another soul could be seen as a Leap of Faith.

I bring up this topic today to share with you some of what I am learning at Andover Newton Theological School. There, I am taking a course called “Paul and the Corinthian Correspondence.” My professor is a Korean-American scholar, Simon Lee, who must love conflict. Why else would he take an entire semester to explore these two books in the Bible? These books offer us lessons from a community trying to figure out how to be in right relationship

with one another. They are exploring their identity and how that connects to their greater faith community.

The Corinthians offers a fascinating window looking into the struggles of a community that developed into Christianity. The faithful community that Paul spent much of his time writing to was a hub of the Mediterranean in its day. This metropolis was rooted in Hellenistic culture and deeply connected to a larger Roman imperial society. Corinth was the first major urban center to which Paul brought his mission after setting up shop, so to speak, in Antioch, in what we know today as Syria. This Christian community was a guinea pig and the testing ground for the fledgling faith. Serious conflict boiled over in this community and these letters reflect those conflicts. The key issues of their conflicts were; division within the community connected with devotion to wisdom, how to deal with boundary issues within families and with legal issues, they fought about food, they fought about the usage of their own spiritual gifts, where their collection should go- whether to Jerusalem or stay in their community, and if you can believe it- they even fought about hair arrangements when prophesying. They fought over everything and anything and Paul's responding letters were the gentle corrections to keep this community on track.

Do you know a community like this? To me, it sounds a lot like my family of origin and maybe it sounds like a community you've belonged to as well. What to do when life gets sticky? And we know it's bound to get sticky. What's causing this stickiness? Change. I'll be honest with you, change can bring on some serious hardship. Arnold Bennett said it best, "Any change, even a change for the better, is always accompanied by drawbacks and discomforts." I am bringing this all up because today, a leadership team from this church - also called our Leap of Faith Team is in New London, CT to meet our "Leap of Faith" mentors. All Souls of New London, CT is a UUA Breakthrough Congregation. They are who this congregation is corresponding with and learning from much like the correspondence between Paul and the Corinthians. This is an experiment, we are the guinea pigs, but this program has been tested and it's proven to help communities to break out of their old habits and overcome their challenges.

Henry David Thoreau once wrote, "Things do not change; we change." Our participation in the Leap of Faith program is an example of that commitment to change. Charles Darwin wrote, "It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is the most adaptable to change." So, here we are. Waiting, waiting for our Leap of Faith Team to return and knowing that change is coming our way. We don't know what that change is exactly, we have to trust that what we are doing is good and worthy of doing. We have to have faith.

I'm not sure what will unfold in the next couple of years, but I can promise you it will not be boring and there's a good chance disagreements may arise. The cure for conflict or disagreements is not to ignore them or sweep them under some rug. Chances are, I will be the one that will trip on that rug, if we do. The cure for conflict is TLC- tender loving care. We need to frame everything we do as we approach change with tender loving care.

I'm hoping you will humor me... Let's play a little word game with the concept of TLC. My thesaurus tells me that other words for Tender can be loving, caring, kindhearted, gentle, warm, and compassionate. Other words for Loving can be tender, caring, warm, and adoring. Other words for Care can be charge, protection, forethought, thoughtfulness, nurture, tending, and

guardianship. None of these words are self concerning concepts. They are all about what is best for the other or all. TLC is what we offer to others and if it is all we give to one another, then it is the only thing we shall receive from one another.

OK, let's get back to Paul and the Corinthians again. If you didn't know this already, there was fighting going on in Corinth and Paul really wanted it to stop. So, what do you think he did? Did he yell, "Stop it!"? Did he use the use the line my mother would say to us kids in the back seat of the car when we were fighting, "if you don't cut it out right now, I will pull this car over and one of you will walk home." Ever heard that one? Ya, better than that, has anyone ever had to really walk home? These are a couple of non-compassionate response examples to some stressful situations. Paul knew that wouldn't work, but I gather he was frustrated enough and he thought of using them. Instead he chose a very different approach, instead he chose TLC. I know this because anyone who has read the famous love chapter from the Bible knows Paul's approach. Let us hear Paul's wisdom from 1 Cor. 13:4-13,

Love is patient, love is kind, love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Paul is saying the same message we heard the Beatles sing, "All you need is love... Love is all you need, love is all you need." Paul, the Apostle and not McCartney, is saying more than love is all you need, he's telling us that we may not yet clearly see what we are facing and with our heart fully engaged and our aim on love, we will be fully rewarded and we will obtain what we need most; faith, hope, and love. This is my favorite part of the Bible, I cherish these verses. And let us not forget where it came from, it came out of correspondences full of conflict and disagreement. Even behind all the heartache that conflict might unleash or remind us of, we find love. Love is the foundation that everything is firmly built upon. Love is the doctrine of this church. The quest for truth is its sacrament. Truth isn't always beautiful, but it's honest, sincere, and it has fidelity. The Merriam-Webster dictionary says fidelity is the quality or state of being faithful, accuracy in details. Exactness. We need fidelity in order to face the unknown changes ahead of us now, we must face these changes with love.

C. S. Lewis once wrote, "It may be hard for an egg to turn into a bird: it would be a jolly sight harder for it to learn to fly while remaining an egg. We are like eggs at present. And you cannot go on indefinitely being just an ordinary, decent egg. We must be hatched or go bad."

It's our time to hatch, it is not our time to go bad. We will change or hatch or whatever you want to call it and we will discover our wings. Not hatching only leads to rotten eggs and nothing smells worse than rotten eggs. Let's not stink up Haverhill, instead let our love permeate this community like the smell of a rose in a garden. President Barack Obama told us, "Change will

not come if we wait for some other person, or if we wait for some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change that we seek."

Today is a new day, we are here with a purpose. We are here to journey together. Let the Leap of Faith Team return home to this loving faith community to find us waiting to march ahead beside them into the future we face with love. Let them know we support them fully as they have fully supported us. As the youthful Taylor Swift has bravely sung, "This is a new year, a new beginning, and things will change." We face these changes with fidelity and with love because it's the best way to build a strong community. At least that's what I think Paul thought.

All souls, Paul's letters to the Corinthians has shown me that the way to build community is with compassionate communication and with love as our aim. Indiana Jones reminded me that we won't always be able to see what's in front of us, the path we may need to take, but even still- we must leap. Remember the teaching point is that the Spirit of Life sometimes calls us to have faith in the unseen, sometimes we need to make a Leap of Faith much like Indy did. We may disagree, but as we do, let our goal be to inbed TLC into everything we say, hear, and act. Let this be our way of putting "Grace in Action" to be kind to one another, to be gentle, and loving in all actions as we walk forward on this journey. Chances are there will be change, we may disagree. Let us listen to one another's truth with love. I'll leave you this morning with this quote from Alan Watts. He said, "The only way to make sense out of change is to plunge into it, move with it, and join the dance." Kindred souls, as we move forward together, let this be the dance we do and may love be our guide as we do this dance together.

Blessed be and Amen.