



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“What it Means to be Faithful,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on May 22, 2011

This Friday I wondered, “Am I wasting my time?” Do I really need to write this sermon?” This wasn’t the usual angst that plagues preachers when it’s time to write yet another sermon. No, I wondered, was I going to be here today? And were you? Because, you know, the rapture was coming! Some of us, certainly, would be among those vacuumed up into heaven. You know about this, right? This time, the end of the world was really going to happen--guaranteed!

To those true believers who must be feeling a little dejected today, that they’re still here, with the rest of us, I would say, “Take heart, friends. You’re in good company. Jesus himself thought the world was coming to an end, and he was wrong too.” But he was smart enough to not give a specific date. He just said, “Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place” (Mark 13:30).

This belief, that the world will come to an end on a day when God will judge who gets into heaven and who doesn’t, has been around for over two thousand years. What amazes me is that people still believe it. I mean, seriously--the Enlightenment was several hundred years ago, and with what we understand from science and what we know about the physical world, the fact that people in our day try to predict current and future events using texts that were written in a pre-scientific era, is amazing to me. I shouldn’t be surprised, I guess. It’s not that different from all those conspiracy theories that people fall for, and get so worked up over.

The problem I have with all this, which mostly I find entertaining and amusing and kind of sad, is that it gives faith a bad name. It makes it so easy for skeptics and critics of religion to point to these extreme examples and say, “See! Religion really is a crock!” I know some of you, particular the more rational, scientifically-minded ones, shudder a bit when you hear the word ‘faith,’ because faith so often looks like craziness. We live in a culture where faith can get mixed up with superstition, excess piety, and silliness. And faith can be used as a weapon to exclude and oppress.

The public face of religion these days is dominated by extremists. They are the ones who get attention in the media. On the one hand we have religious fundamentalists, whatever their tradition, who want to impose their particular beliefs on everyone. On the other hand we have the secular fundamentalists, whose narrow view of faith leads them to believe that if they could just abolish religion altogether, as if that were possible, then our problems would magically disappear.

In this polarized environment, faith becomes a loaded word. Too often faith gets defined as belief in the unbelievable. Or as something only the ignorant or the irrational could ascribe to. But that's not what faith is.

Some people ask, "Can you be a thinking person and a person of faith?" Hmm. Can you walk and chew gum at the same time? I don't think it's that hard--to access your rational mind and still feel awe and wonder at the mysteries of life that surround us. And that is where the life of faith begins—with awe and wonder. You don't have to give up your thinking mind for that—but you do need to be able to make room for mystery, for paradox, for wonder. And you have to be willing to let go, at least a little; to give up trying to control everything. To acknowledge you're not in charge; to let go and be led by the Spirit, however you understand that.

When we talk about taking a leap of faith, we're talking about sticking your neck out, taking a risk, doing something without any guarantee of how it's going to work out. And that is something people do all the time. Deciding to adopt a child or trying to get pregnant is a leap of faith. So is changing careers or changing religions or for most of the last century, being a Red Sox fan.

I am glad to be a UU minister. I am grateful for this liberal religious tradition, which gives me the room for both my beliefs and my doubts, which early on encouraged me to ask the deep questions, to really struggle with them. Doing that led me to new understandings of what it means to be a religious person. But, you may have noticed, I don't use the name of our denomination, that long name, very much. I don't tend to say, "As Unitarian Universalists we..." I want to use language that is broad, not narrow. I want to focus on what we have in common with people of other traditions, rather than what separates us. So when talking about our church, I tend to say something like, "As people of faith..."

But you may not think of yourself as a person of faith, because of the connotations that word 'faith' has in our culture. But I hope you will try it on. Because no matter what your theology, that is what we are called to do, as individuals and as church community—we are called to be faithful.

There is a difference between being a believer—subscribing to a certain set of beliefs, and being faithful—which is about how one acts in the world. This focus on belief is an unfortunate aspect of Christianity. At least some parts of Christianity, which only ask that you say the right words, and "believe on his name" in order to be saved. It's like there's this contract you have to sign. And if you do, then you're all set. And that makes no religious or spiritual sense to me at all. Religion isn't supposed to be that simple.

This focus on belief is not something you find in either Judaism or Islam, which are much more interested in how people live, in how they act, rather than what they think. This emphasis on what you believe has given faith a bad name. It makes religion seem less and less relevant in the modern world. But it's a fundamental misunderstanding of what faith is.

Look at the quote at the top of the order of service: "Faith is not making religious-sounding noises in the daytime. It is asking your inmost self questions at night and then getting up and going to

work.”¹ To be a person of faith is not about putting on religious airs, or saying what you believe; no, it’s about how you live, day in and day out.

For those of you who are married, I have a question. Do you remember your wedding vows? In saying them, how many of you promised to be faithful? And what do you think that meant? In a committed relationship, “being unfaithful” is a euphemism for sexual infidelity. When someone says, “That marriage ended because he was unfaithful,” we all know what that means. But I would say there are lots of ways we can be unfaithful to our partners. Keeping an unhealthy secret, not telling the truth, withholding love, being disrespectful—these are ways to be unfaithful too.

For a relationship to prosper, partners need to have faith in one another. This does not mean it is easy—sometimes being faithful means hanging in there when it would be easier to leave. Sometimes when my wife and I are in the middle of an argument, I realize I need to reassure her that we can disagree without threatening our marriage. “I’m not going anywhere,” I’ll say. And sometimes being faithful does mean making the difficult choice to split up, to acknowledge the hard truth that a relationship has ended, and trying to do that with as much integrity and care as possible.

As a community, we keep faith with one another by showing up, by assuming that others are acting with good intentions, by listening to one another, even when what they say is hard for us to hear. We keep faith by making a commitment, and by doing our part.

A couple of years ago I conducted a memorial service at the UU church in Portsmouth for a friend of mine who died in her early 50s of pancreatic cancer. Her husband Jim and I are at different ends of the theological spectrum—he’s someone who doesn’t find God-talk useful at all, and he’s told me so. But we love one another, and he asked me to lead the service when his wife died. I saw him recently, and he reminded me of something I said in the eulogy. I said,

“You might not choose this word, Jim, but you have been faithful. You and Donna have been faithful member of this church for over twenty years, through thick and thin, when things worked for you and when they didn’t. You have been faithful friends to so many. And you and Donna were faithful to each other in these past, most difficult, months, so that when it came time for her to die, you were ready, as ready as one can be; you were at peace with each other and with her death—and it was beautiful to witness.”

That’s what it means to be faithful—to be steadfast in a world that is constantly changing. To do the right thing, even when it’s not the easy thing. To do the right thing, especially when it’s hard to do, when it would be easier to cut corners, or look away, or run away. To be faithful requires a certain level of maturity, and it requires an ability to both be in the present moment and to take the long view.

In his inaugural address, President Obama called our country to “a new era of responsibility.” Quoting scripture, he said, “The time has come to set aside childish things.” In other words, as

¹ Quote by Mary Jean Irion.

individuals and as a country we need to grow up—to realize that our actions do have consequences; that our choices are like ripples that radiate out from us, with the power to heal or to harm.

We aren't going to be able to do this alone. We need companions--to support us, to keep us honest, to help us to be faithful on the way. My colleague Mark Morrison Reed reminds us that "alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done." None of us are strong enough or wise enough to go it alone. We need one another.

What it means to be faithful is to put your trust in something larger than yourself, whether that is a relationship, a community, a dream, or God. What it means to be faithful is to do the right thing, even when no one is looking. To practice this— to make mistakes, to fall down, to dust yourself off and try again. To face your deepest questions in the dark of night, and then to get up in the morning and get to work, doing what you are called to do. That's what it means to be faithful.

Amen.