

Got Faith?

Rev. Kenneth Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
December 13, 2009

Meditation

Whatever else we do, here, now, in this place made sacred by the love of generations...
Whatever else we do... may we seek to touch and be touched by the spirit of life, by whatever name we call it...
May we pause long enough, slow our breathing and our thinking long enough...
... to renew and deepen our connection to our own pulsing heart...
... to renew and deepen our connection with the pulsing heart of all life.
... that we might live knowing and feeling that we are linked, one with another, and with all life, linked in circles of kindness and compassion, linked in circles of hope and courage... linked... hand holding hand, heart touching heart, life touching life...

Whatever else we do...
may we seek to touch and be touched – and moved – by the spirit of life...

Readings

from *Seasons of Our Joy* by Arthur Waskow – Rick Butterworth reads

By the twenty-fifth of every lunar month, the moon has gone into exile. The nights are dark, and getting darker. And late in Kislev, we are close to the moment of the winter solstice – when the sun is also in exile. The day is at its shortest and the night at its longest, before the sunlight begins to return. It is the darkest moment of the year, the moment when it is easiest to believe that the light will never return, the moment it is easiest to feel despair.

At this dark moment, we celebrate Hanukkah – the Feast of Dedication – by lighting candles for eight nights. Night after night, the candle-light increases. And night after night, we make our way into, through, and out of the darkness of the sun and moon. We experience and feel the turn toward light from the moment of darkness, the turn toward salvation from the moment of despair.

Sermon

I remember so clearly a moment over forty years ago.

A teenager, I was in our living room talking with my mother; and I almost casually spoke what was by no means a casual thought. We had become Unitarian Universalists several years earlier, a change in the direction of intellectual freedom in which I exulted. But this night I wistfully told my mother that sometimes I wished for the certainty of belief that Christians seemed to have.

I also recall realizing even as I spoke that for me this sort of certainty would likely be unattainable.

Now, why would I want such certainty? Well, in the midst of a world full of uncertainties, not to mention as a teenager in the midst of that famously uncertain and often difficult decade of life, certainty sounded like a port in a storm.

But since I sensed that the certainty of a creed or of unwavering belief in a personal God or savior was unlikely to be attained... and maybe even sensed it was not desirable... what then?

Meaning, purpose... or at least a path?

Well, not long after, as a college freshman two closely related directions beckoned the seeker in me: religion and philosophy.

And through my study of religion, among other things I became better acquainted with sages – Jesus and Buddha and Lao-Tzu among them – who seemed to have attained something, maybe or maybe not intellectual certainty, but some state of being and way of living that was deeply satisfying, that seemed to be an answer to the persistent questions of life – even though not in the form of dogmatic certainties.

So I wanted what they had! Call it enlightenment, awakening, call it what you will. So – I hungrily read the ancient texts, I learned some yoga and the rudiments of meditation – lifelong threads in the tapestry of my seeker's path.

And through the study of philosophy? No certainty there either – indeed, if anything more questions than I had had before!

Yet I discovered that in conversation about and in the midst of life's biggest questions – in other words in the *doing* of philosophy – I felt more alive! It was yet another path actually, this one in the footsteps of yet another sage, Socrates.

In short, in surprising ways my teenage desire for certainty *was* answered during those college years – and since... but not as I had vainly once hoped it might be answered, with propositions and assertions to which I could give assent, in which I could believe... with certainty. Rather, this desire for certainty was answered with paths which had been blazed by ancient masters of religion and philosophy

I had asked for certainty. I received meaning... along with invitations to a path, many paths, to experience.

Where, then, does all this leave the question of faith?

First: Bill Moyers in his famous conversations with the scholar of mythology Joseph Campbell, once asked Campbell about his faith. Campbell replied quickly: "I don't have to have faith. I have experience."

Campbell went on to affirm that what we are seeking, truly seeking (whatever we might think we are seeking), is not actually something or someone in which to believe, we're not even seeking meaning he said. Instead, Campbell asserted, we human beings are seeking the experience of aliveness.

In this regard we might do well to recall that Jesus spoke mostly not so much of beliefs, but of the kingdom of heaven spread before us had we but eyes to see.

And the man Siddhartha Gautama, when asked who he was, what he had attained, simply replied that he had awakened – and that's what "Buddha" means, the awakened one – which is perhaps another way of saying a more alive human being.

And in fact all the religious traditions – including those such as Christianity which we may associate primarily with creeds and beliefs – affirm that the truths of religion are not primarily about propositions, but are about experience. Further, certain practices within each religious tradition – whether ritual, prayer, meditation, yoga, t'ai chi, and so on – are meant to *lead to* this experience of awakening or aliveness or deep connectedness we could call religious or spiritual. (For further historical detail on much of this, I invite you to Karen Armstrong's fine new book, *A Case for God*).

So, perhaps – as Campbell affirmed – no need for *faith* if we have *experience*.

But... this is *only* if we equate faith with belief.

And though many have come to equate the two, historically and theologically they are not the same.

Religious *belief* is an assertion that certain propositions, say about the nature of God and the world and our place in the divine plan, are true; and further, for many, that *right* belief is essential to salvation, with salvation understood most often as having to do with heaven, with what happens to us after we die.

Whereas *faith*, properly understood, has to do with naming and experiencing that in which we have confidence and trust. (And historically, as Harvey Cox points out in his book, *The Future of Faith*, in the early centuries Christianity was much more about *faith* than about *belief*; and Cox believes that this may be the trend once again – and some appearances to the contrary, perhaps not only among Christians.)

For example, then, one could say that one believes in Jesus in the sense that one believe certain propositions about Jesus as the son of God and the source of our salvation.

Or one could say that one has faith in Jesus as a sage, guide, and example for one's life.

20th century Unitarian Universalist theologian James Luther Adams wrote that actually just about everyone has faith. The important question is, in what or whom do we have faith?

Hitler? Bin Laden? Violent jihad? Overwhelming military force?

Or love, kindness, compassion?

Millions, some fundamentalist, others liberal, say that they have faith in God.

But then we must ask – also in the spirit of James Luther Adams – in what kind of God do you have faith... how do you understand the word “God”?

Well, at the heart of all the traditions we are reminded that any “God” you can name or define is not God, because God is not another being, just bigger and stronger than the rest of us.

Adams offers this:

The first tenet of the free person's faith is that our ultimate dependence for being and freedom is upon a creative power and upon processes not of our own making.

In other words, we could say, “God” – where (Adam's continues) “God is that reality which works upon us and through us and in accord with which we can achieve truth, beauty, or goodness.”

Of course you don't have to use the word “God” to have this sort of faith. Others have called this power “Tao” or “Spirit” or simply the laws of nature, the way things are. But in the end, as I've suggested, the wise ones say it can't be named – only experienced, perhaps in some sense pointed to.

All this said, then, unless you believe that the world, the universe, is totally without meaning, is chaotic randomness (and some do believe this), it may be just as Adams affirms, that most of us, whether we would put it this way or not, have some sort of faith in more or less such terms as I've just described.

Even – maybe especially! – if we express our faith in the simplest of ways, as faith in the sustaining power of our mutual care for one another: For example, knowing that if we get sick, our family, our friends, this church community, will hold us, embrace us, care for us. Faith enough? Maybe so.

Now, it is of course not accidental that I choose to speak about faith at the time of Hanukkah. Because the fight and victory celebrated at Hanukkah of the Jewish Maccabees against the oppressive Greek King Antiochus was a fight for their right to practice their faith.

So we might well ask: Do we – should we – have a faith for which we would fight not to mention kill or die for?

I'm not so sure. Much might hinge on what we mean be faith.

If you think your faith *is* all about outward creeds and practices, then when someone tells you that you can no longer engage in those practices or recite those creeds... well you might be ready to put up a real fight, even a violent fight. But if you do, you might also discover (as the Maccabees eventually did, which is a story not so often told) that it's not so easy to create peace and tolerance after a violent victory for your point of view, your way, your creed.

But if you experience your faith in a more inward way, something closer to the way James Luther Adams described... well that's quite another thing... for no one can prevent you from experiencing your faith inwardly or from living your faith in the daily deeds of your life – not rituals, but deeds – even in the midst of oppression.

My faith? After all these years since that evening in our living room? Is it a faith I would fight or die or kill for?

I don't know about a personal God or about heaven or hell in some next life, and I surely have no need of a creed in which to believe. I do know that here we are, thrown into life, and whatever our circumstances we can choose to align ourselves with how the world works or not – with the Tao if you will, with the way of nature and the human spirit – with God if you will– or not. And there will be consequences one way or the other.

For example:

If we pay attention to our inner lives, our motivations, our desires, our anger and the sources of our anger... we will gradually know more inner peace. If we don't, we won't.

If we treat others kindly, we will generate more kindness. If we don't, we won't.

You get the idea:

If we are compassionate and generous, we will lead more fulfilled and joyful lives.

If we seek to do our part to alleviate suffering and create justice and peace, we will ourselves suffer less and know greater and more genuine happiness beyond the fleeting pleasures of our lives.

If we simply pay attention more often than we do, we will discover moments of transcendence and joy that are beyond the naming.

And so on. For all this *is* simply how the world seems to work. History's greatest spiritual masters and ethical exemplars teach this, and their teachings have endured because they just might be right.

And of course all this is in complete harmony with our open-minded and open-hearted way in religion and in life, our faith, that we call Unitarian Universalism.

Would I kill for this faith? I don't think so. For me, this would pose too big a contradiction – for physical violence and killing are, in my mind, in almost if not every circumstance antithetical to a faith that seeks to enhance life and grow compassion. This said, I would “fight” for this faith, *if* by “fight” we mean stand up for, work for, live for and in accordance with.

To close... perhaps my entire message this morning can be condensed not into the example of a military victory, but into the light of the Hanukkah candles:

Long ago the rabbis decided that each night of Hanukkah one additional candle would be lit, thus symbolizing our *faith* – or hope at least – that a growing spiritual illumination and ethical maturity is possible for us woebegone imperfect human beings, a possibility rooted in nurturing a deepening sense of connection to one another, to life, to the sustaining source of life and of love, by whatever name All of which is, in my humble estimation, faith enough.

May it be so.