



Olympia
Unitarian
Universalist
Congregation

January 28, 2024

“What Does Faith Mean?” with Rev. Mary Gear

Opening words: “In Faith” by Rev. Sunshine Jeremiah Wolfe

This is a congregation that gathers in faith. Not faith in one religion or one god or any one way. We gather in faith of the power of diversity, the power of love, and the hope of a world transformed by our care.

We gather in faith in ourselves and those around us. Not a faith that requires perfection or rightness in one another.

Rather, a faith that in our shared imperfection we may learn to stumble and fall together.

Faith that we will help one another to rise and to try again and again.

We are Unitarian Universalists.

Come, let us worship together.

Reading I: Excerpt from *Faith Without Certainty: Liberal Theology in the 21st Century* by Rev. Paul Rasor.

Liberal theology is not for the faint of heart. It points us in a general direction without telling us the specific destination. It refuses to make our commitments for us but holds us accountable for the commitments we make. The liberal religious tradition is an invitation, not a mandate. It invites

us to live with ambiguity without giving in to facile compromise; to engage in dialogue without trying to control the conversation; to be open to change without accepting change too casually; to take commitment seriously but not blindly; and to be engaged in the culture without succumbing to the culture's values. Liberal religion calls us to strength without rigidity, conviction without ideology, openness without laziness. It asks us to pay attention. It is an eyes-wide-open faith, a faith without certainty.

Part I: Faith without Certainty

This is a question that someone here asked me a while ago: "Rev. Mary, what do you mean when you say that we are a faith community? I get the community part, it's the faith part that I'm asking about."

Now, faith is one of those churchy words, part of religious language that some of us might be uncomfortable with. The person who asked me the question was struggling with what faith is in a congregation and denomination that does not have a creed. What do we have faith in if we don't believe in God or a prescribed set of beliefs?

The most common way to define faith is just that—as belief in God or a deity, or belief in a set of ideas or tenets, a creed. That is one form of faith—faith as belief.

In his book, Heretics Faith: Vocabulary for Religious Liberals, Unitarian Universalist minister, Fredric John Muir, writes that some religious leaders suggest we must have faith despite any evidence, that faith is acceptance of the hard-to-believe, faith is blind obedience to authority. That some believe that with faith we can find certainty, perhaps even strength. This definition of faith suggests that we just open our hearts and bypass our heads. That puts faith and reason in competition with each other, as opposing forces.

Faith and reason are a hot topic for theologians because both define ways to know God, the Divine, that which is greater however you name it. Some theologians say that faith and reason are a paradox or contradiction, with

one more important than the other. Some say we can only know God with an open heart and faith. Others say we can only know God with our reason. From our Unitarian heritage, we have tended to place reason above faith, with the head as more important. In more recent years, we have embraced the heart of our Universalist heritage of love, dignity, and the worthiness of all.

I think it's interesting that neither word, faith nor reason, is used in the current Unitarian Universalist 7 principles or the proposed UU core values. Instead, we tend to speak of spirituality, searching for truth and meaning, support, democracy, and justice.

Yet, in Unitarian Universalism, there is a recognition that the head and the heart are both important. Faith and reason are complementary, not in competition. They are connected in one body, after all. And it's not just in our bodies--the strands of our heritage and of our theology also connect our heads and our hearts.

In fact, UU minister, Paul Rasor, author of today's reading, writes that doubt is an important part of faith, that faith should never be free from doubt. Rasor asserts that "religious liberalism has always to some extent involved faith without certainty."

Now, I want to be clear about the term "liberal" in this context, especially in this election year. When we say "liberal" neither Rev. Rasor nor I are talking about politics, not democrats or republicans or any other political construct. When we say "liberal" we are referring to the pure meaning of the word: liberal as in open to new ideas and acknowledging that things change as times and people change. This is in contrast with conservative, which means based on tradition, interpreted through the past, and averse to change. So, a liberal religion is one that is open to new ideas and expects to change. A conservative religion is one that is based on tradition and resists change.

A practical example of the difference between liberal and conservative religion is the use and interpretation of sacred texts like the Bible. A conservative religion says that the Bible is the literal word of God and

needs no interpretation from humans. It should be read in concrete terms and the message is clear.

Liberal religion says that sacred texts like the Bible are to be read and interpreted in the context of the times, and that we can expect our interpretation of the text to change as we humans change. Liberal religion questions the source of the Biblical writings, investigates and interrogates how it was created and by who, as in whose writings were included in the Bible and whose were left out. And liberal religion reads sacred text as story and metaphor, rather than literally.

Unitarian Universalism is a liberal religion with a liberal theology. And faith in a liberal religion is inherently uncertain, because of openness, change, and doubt. So, questioning and doubt are simply part of our theology and practice, part of our faith. We embrace the idea so nicely written by Liberation Theologist, Dorothee Solle: "Faith without doubt is not stronger, it is simply more ideological." We do not hold tight to ideology; we hold tight to each other as we journey together.

A second definition of faith is having trust or confidence in someone or something. Faith comes from the Latin "fidere" which means trust. We hear faith in the music that the choir sung so beautifully today: faith is a bird that feels the light and sings when the dawn is dark. Faith is waiting in the heart of a seed that promises the miracle of life. We hear faith in Rev. Sara's story of the redbird waiting for the return of the sun.

When faith is approached this way, I think it's fair to say that everyone has faith, faith in something or someone. Despite the uncertainty and doubt, we all have beliefs and trust. It might be trusting ourselves or a loved one. It might be belief in a higher power, by whatever name you call it. It might be trusting the universe or the power of community.

I have faith in the power of community, in the resiliency of nature, the strength of the human heart, and the presence of Love.

What do you have faith in?

Reading II: Nada te Turbe (Don't Despair) by Rev. Susan Manker-Seale from *Voices from the Margins*

Faith doesn't mean believing in god. Faith means having trust in your sense of rightness of the universe. Hope is clinging to that trust in the direst of circumstances. Love is deciding to care for this world no matter what horrors come our way. Thus we keep despair at bay. And when we add a daily dose of laughter, we are on the road to healing.

Part II: Faith, Hope, and Love

This month, within our spiritual theme of “love,” I’ve invited us to reflect on the three gifts of the spirit identified by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians: faith, hope, and love, and the greatest of these is love.

Earlier this month I spoke about how the proposed Unitarian Universalist core values put Love at the center, the capital L Love that transcends our individual and collective identities. I said that love is a spiritual practice that we regularly fail at and continue to believe in so that we try again.

I spoke of the spiritual practice of hope and how it comes from uncertainty and the promise of possibility.

Faith is also a spiritual practice; like love, something that we fail at, and like hope, grounded in uncertainty.

So, what does it mean to be a faith community? I think it’s important to regularly ask questions about our purpose, and especially now that we are in the midst of incredible change on a global level.

In typical UU fashion, it can be easier to say what we are not. Even though we have sermons or reflections, we are not a Ted Talk stage. Even though we have music, we are not a performance center. Even though we offer classes, we are not a school or community college. Even though we feed people, we are not a diner. Even though we help people, we are not a social services agency. Even though we work for justice, we are not the

ACLU or Southern Poverty Law Center or the National Center for Transgender Equality. So, what does it mean to be a faith community?

This wisdom is from Rev. Sarah Gibb Millspaugh, a Unitarian Universalist minister with the Pacific Western Region.

Religion is as much about faith in humanity as it is about faith in deity. And many of us will find that, over and over, our faith in humanity gets tested. We are immersed in a culture that's deeply corrupted by selfishness, greed, and oppression-borne privilege and fear. It's all too easy for us to devalue some humans' lives, and feel, somehow, like we're still good upstanding moral people.

Religion at its best asks us to do better: to rise above the selfishness and status-seeking, the othering and xenophobia that come so easily to us. Religion at its best — and our Unitarian Universalist faith — calls us to honor that which is sacred in each person, even those we might hate, even those who we find disgusting. It impels us to accept, on faith, that there is a sacred spark in every person. This can sound mundane but it's very radical — revolutionary even.

Accepting this, on faith, changes how we live.

This suggests that faith is a continual invitation to practice, to be our best selves, even in a culture that offers a different invitation. We will be tested and we will fail, and we will try again. When we have faith in our core values and principles, it changes us and how we live. This connection of our values and actions is a radical, counter-cultural way to live.

Another controversy related to faith has to do with the debate about faith and works. Among theologians, this debate is even more heated because it was a foundation of the Protestant Reformation. Traditional Catholicism said that salvation, that is being saved from sin, is earned by faith and the things we do. One must both believe in God and the teaching of Jesus, and do things like being baptized, attending mass, taking communion, tithing to the church, and charitable work. Salvation is earned from faith and works. The Protestant Reformation challenged this theology suggesting that

salvation comes from faith alone. The United States and Unitarian Universalism both have a lineage from the Protestant Reformation.

Now, Unitarian Universalists don't talk a lot about sin and salvation. We tend to hold the view that we create heaven and hell here on Earth and that salvation means working together to make this world better. Although we have a Protestant lineage, we tend to say that salvation comes from making the world more just by walking our talk.

In Heretics' Faith: Vocabulary for Religious Liberals, Fredric John Muir writes that faith is not complete without works, faith is both walk and talk. He says that faith as "talk" is what we believe—we explore, discern, and say what we believe. Faith as "walk" is how we act—we express our faith in how we behave.

Muir notes that some people don't see that what they believe affects how they behave; they are all talk and no walk. Some people who act, even acting for justice, don't seem grounded in their beliefs; they are all walk and no talk.

To me, being a Unitarian Universalist faith community means that we connect action and beliefs, and I would call that faith. After all, our justice programs here are called Faith in Action. We discern our deepest held values and beliefs, then we act from a place of spiritual grounding.

Being part of a liberal religious community means being open to what is in front of us and being willing to change what we believe and how we act based on new ideas and information as we learn and grow. Writer, Doris Betts said, faith is "not synonymous with certainty ... [but] is the decision to keep your eyes open." I would say open eyes, open hands, open hearts; open to change, open to growth, open to each other.

In her essay, "The Most Courageous Act," former UUA president Rev. Dr. Susan Fredrick-Gray wrote this:

When we look at faith not as a set of beliefs, but rather as a source of strength that keeps us holding on to our values when it gets difficult, or a source of hope when we feel lost, we are also talking about courage.

Courage. As Rasor said in our reading today, liberal religion is not for the faint of heart. We may be pointed in a direction, but we are not shown the way, and we must take the steps ourselves. Unitarian Universalism does not guarantee heaven, or salvation, or eternal life. What we are offered is a story of how to approach the world and each other, and we are invited to place our individual stories in a larger story. Does this faith tradition help me make sense of my story? Does it give me roots for grounding and wings to fly? Does it offer a way to approach mystery and spirit? Does this faith tradition fit my story and does my story fit in this faith tradition? When it does, oh, it's powerful, for then we have faith; we have belief, trust, and belonging.

So, we gather here, learning and inviting each other to the courageous and radical practices of faith, hope, and love. In this way, we are here because we are people of faith, together creating a faith community.

Closing Words: From theologian Reinhold Niebuhr.

Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime;
Therefore, we are saved by hope.

Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history;
Therefore, we are saved by faith.

Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone;
Therefore, we are saved by love.