

Faith or reason? Pick one. Choose. You can't have both as your primary reference point. That's what Kierkegaard, the 19th century philosopher, theologian and poet says. He goes even further and says lets not be fooled, you can't reason your way to faith. Faith is wholly other.

I heard an interview with Maya Angelou this week, a very special woman, I can't imagine we'll see the likes of her again. Powerful, elegant, graceful, erudite, insightful. An amazing woman. Maya was talking about being sent by train across country, at the age of 5 or 6, with her sibling, to live with her grandmother. She had some conversation with the grandmother shortly after their arrival. The gist of which was "so now what grandma, how are we going to live?"

The grandmother's response stopped me in my tracks. I could not get out of the car, I had to think about what she said. The grandmother said, "I'll step out on the word". It took me a moment before I understood she was talking about logos, The Word, the word was God.

I was taken aback by the power and simplicity of the answer. "I'm going to step out on the Word." There is certainty in that answer, there is security in that answer, there is trust and comfort in those words. Maya herself was comforted by those words.

Those are the words of faith that Kierkegaard talked about. There is nothing rational in that statement. One can't reason their way to that statement. It's a manifestation of pure faith as a primary reference point.

Our reading this morning... is it too, a bold statement of faith OR some form of insanity? Or maybe just a bad dream. The story of Abraham being commanded to sacrifice his only son raises some pretty deep questions. What kind of God would tell a man to kill his only son? What kind of a man, with no apparent discomfort, would sacrifice or kill his son? Is there a difference between sacrificing and killing his son? Is there not grave danger in accepting such a story?

These questions have been debated it seems for forever. And the consensus opinion is...it depends. This is the kind of story that gives God and religious belief a bad name. It's a story of how people are duped. It demonstrates how evil is done in the name of God and religion.

On the other hand, this is the kind of story that reflects a sacred covenant, a profound relationship between God and believers. Remember how the story ends. Abraham names a mountain "The Lord will Provide". And God says, "by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves". It sounds like a made for TV happy ending.

Not intending to tip the balance in the argument, we should note that this is the same Abraham of the Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. But before I go any further, I want not to loose the non-believers in the house. I want to be explicit in broading the concept of faith beyond just applying to God.

Remember, Paul Tillich, the twentieth century theologian and philosopher says that we all have a foundational "ground of being". In other words we all have faith in something. We all have a primary orientation upon which we build our lives. We know one by one's deeds.

We recognize those who dedicate their lives to teaching, for the good of the future; those who dedicate their lives to stopping abortions, of any kind, in any place. And those who are committed to migrant worker rights and fair labor practices. Others seem committed to the pursuit of wealth and power, above all else. Still others are pacifist or committed to saving the earth. They all have a deep faith in their beliefs.

During the time that Kierkegaard wrote, the mid 1800's, the philosopher Hegel, was very popular. Kierkegaard was not. He didn't become popular until the 20th century; after his death when he was seen as the forbearer of existentialism. Kierkegaard was in stark disagreement with Hegel.

Hegel developed a philosophical approach designed to reach ultimate truth. He theorized that only the rational is real. He believed that the highest good of any individual was to do what is best for the whole of society. And what is best for society is that which is ethical. He deduced that the ethical is universal.

Hegel focused a lot of attention to the individual's role, duty in fact, within and to society. He felt that the individual should subsume individual wants to those of the greater good. The greater good being that which was ethical and universal.

For Hegel, faith is lower than reason since it is immediate and requires no reflection at all. According to him, faith is something that we must move beyond.

Kierkegaard used the Abraham and Isaac story to be in extended argument with Hegel, in a book titled "Fear and Trembling". He didn't write so much in defense of Abraham but in defense of the individual, separate and apart from society at large. He argued for freedom of the individual.

He agreed with Hegel that the universal is the highest aspiration for rational thought, highest aspiration for reason. But he says that human beings are more than merely rational beings. Humanity goes beyond the rational. At the very core of being human is something that is non-rational.

He argues that there is something higher than the ethical, something higher than the universal. He says, it's that which is religious, that which is faith. But Kierkegaard is clear, this higher he talks about is ineffable, hard to define, hard to understand.

An example is death. We all know about death. We accept it as real. We all have some concept of death, but for most of us, our notion of death is theoretical. It's little more than an idea. But for those on death's door or who've had a near death experience, death takes on a very different meaning. Kierkegaard argues that experience, not thought is what makes the difference.

He says that we can't really understand Abraham in this story. Abraham is being driven by faith, by a personal relationship with God. In order to understand Abraham, we would have to find something we could wrap our rational minds around. We would need to see some anguish in Abraham, second thoughts, fear, sadness, something we could relate to.

Kierkegaard says that faith is different from rational thought. Faith requires passion. One doesn't think their way to passion, it's not something that can be taught. The only way to know passion is to experience it, first hand. It's only by knowing passion that one can understand it.

He sees the fundamental difference as one of reflection verse passion. He thinks the rationalists delude themselves by thinking they can reason their way through issues of faith and doubt in the same way they reason through other issues. He believes faith and doubt have no meaning if they do not include passion.

Faith or Reason. You choose. One or the other, but ultimately, not both. Both can go hand in hand for some distance, but at some point they diverge. Reason can be seen as head work, an analytical enterprise. Faith can be seen as heart work, whole body work. Work that involves the experience of passion.

I want to argue today that we all have a fundamental ground of being, which we have deep belief in, a commitment to...even if it changes over time. We all have a particular orientation through which we interact with the world around us and inside us.

If true, we would do well to pay close attention to just what that something is. However we refer to it, it seems important that we have some understanding, some clarity about what drives us, what motivates us. What are the set of glasses that we view the world through? Then, based on what we see, how do we engage the world?

Whatever our orientation, whatever set of glasses we use, it seems to me, we each need to do deep personal work in order to have clarity about what drives us. It's not easy, cursory work. Its work that needs to be done over time, and repeatedly. We need to regularly come back to that work because our experience with life may change us.

This is the work of a faith community I think. To hold the space, to support and encourage our doing that work. To remind us of the need to do that work. And to accept what we each find is true for us as an individual.

As Kierkegaard argues, we, as individuals, but especially as a faith community, we must know in advance, we may not understand the other and their foundational reference point. As Francis David, the court preacher to the kingdom of the only Unitarian king, John Sigismund, said, “we do not need to think alike in order to love alike”.

How else can a pro-lifer be in community with a pro-choice person? How else, can a deist be in community with an atheist? A corporate geek with a green-earther? How else can gay and straight, white and black, the wealthy and the poor be in community together?

We in Unitarian Universalism, have a leg up on so many other people. We don't have to figure these things out on our own. Our collective history, our experiences, our values and principles have laid this all out for us. I want to say, all we have to do is believe in Unitarian Universalism, but that's not true.

To live what our faith teaches, to embody it, to have passion for it, takes work. It takes support, it takes time. It takes commitment and it takes a community. Like so much in life, it's not about “what to”, or “how to”, it's about “want to”.

As Kierkegaard argues on behalf of the individual separate and apart from the larger whole, as he argues on behalf of personal freedom, Unitarian Universalism supports the individual to seek their own truth. As do I.

Whether anyone else knows or understands your ground of being, you get to choose. It's your work to do. As a faith community, our collective work is to hang in together, to support each other as we live our lives. Our work as a faith community is to be true to Unitarian Universalism. Our work is to keep the faith. Amen