

This morning I want to explore the subject of faith with you. I suspect there are those among us who feel quite sure they know exactly what faith is. And I'd guess, some of us, maybe many of us, aren't at all sure. In either case, I suspect, none of us knows exactly how to define faith. If I'm wrong about that, see me after the service and I promise to take notes.

Faith is one of those words that everybody knows or recognizes, but whose meaning seems incredibly elusive. The words nature, love, intuition, good, and bad, all seem to fall in the same category. We know what they mean, kinda. The difficulty is they're complicated words, they seem to have meaning only in context, in reference to someone or something else. They are dependent, correlated with another word or idea.

We know good only in reference to bad, love in reference to somebody or some thing. We know intuition as different from reason, from known fact; nature, as something different from man-made. In the same way, we know faith as something different from rational thought or something that's scientifically provable.

Yet, we live our lives based on faith. We have faith that the sun will rise in the morning. We can't prove it, yet, we trust it, we believe it. We live our lives based on the "fact" of it. We have children based on faith in the future, that there will be a tomorrow, and many tomorrows. And we have faith that our children will turn out ok, sometimes despite proof of what we see in front of us at the kitchen table.

In largest measure, we live our lives based on faith. And we treat our faith as if it were fact. In other words, there are things that we know, without really knowing them—at least not like we know things that we can "prove". So faith is about trust, and belief in something or someone that can not be proven. Saint Paul says, "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen". (repeat)

We as Unitarian Universalists tend to have considerable difficulty with the word faith. We seem to have some airy notion of faith being associated with "ever lasting life in heaven". We seem to confine faith to a belief in an supernatural, interventionist God. That's the traditional view of faith and as far as it goes, there's nothing wrong with it. But that's not what St Paul says, and its not the kind of faith I'm talking about. I believe that's too limited a definition of faith.

I want to talk about a faith that is more here and now, a faith that is more grounded, a faith that we can get our teeth into. I'm talking about a faith built on beliefs that we trust, and treat as unequivocal fact. This is a faith that undergirds and drives behavior.

We've seen this kind of faith in action. We've seen this kind of faith in the news. There are those, who because of their particular faith, their unswerving belief in their version of truth, act boldly and sometimes viscerally.

The people who stand outside of Planned Parenthood and verbally abuse the women entering those clinics, are driven by a particular set of beliefs, an absolute faith in the correctness of their actions. The people who become suicide bombers are acting out of a powerful commitment to faith.

The astronauts, who are blasted into space, could only climb onto those rockets because they have a profound faith in science and technology. The kid in the inner-city who strives to go to college is driven by strong beliefs, and faith in the future.

These are not the only kinds of behavior that are driven by faith, even if we wouldn't call a particular belief system, faith. But faith is about beliefs that are trusted and treated as fact, but are not "provable".

The financial crisis that almost sunk the world economy was driven by unrestrained capitalism, a faith that has a particular set of beliefs. It was driven by an absolute commitment to maximize profit. A commitment to place profit above all else is faith in the centrality of money. Such a faith certainly drives behavior.

But there are other faiths, other belief systems that drive behavior. We Unitarian Universalists know about a faith-based belief system, but somehow, have a hard time calling it faith.

We are a faith community after all. We have a long tradition of faith. William Ellery Channing, said to be the father of Unitarianism, described himself as being a "living member of the great family of all souls". This sounds like a profession of faith. This sounds like the expression of a profound connection to humanity, a belief in the basic goodness of humankind.

Our Unitarian and Universalist tradition is one of an optimistic view of human kind. There is a long standing belief in the power of thought, the ability to reason, and the right to come to an independent conclusion of our own. We have a long tradition of love. We believe we can all find salvation, however we might define the term. We have a love for the truth, nature and scientific discovery. None of us believe Jesus, Mohamed, money or education is the only path to happiness and well-being.

We have faith in the future, in progress. We have a belief in egalitarianism and democracy. We have faith in the goodness of these concepts, faith in the behaviors and outcomes that derive from these beliefs.

These things all come out of our tradition. The modern, updated version is reflected in our UU Principles. Our Principles talk about the inherent worth and dignity of EVERY person; Justice, equity and compassion in human relations. Our Unitarian Universalist principles reflect a particular set of beliefs. It is faith that undergirds these beliefs.

Faith drives behavior. We've seen it in the abolitionist and the suffrage movements. We've seen it during the Viet Nam war and the civil rights movement. Today, in short-hand, we say we Stand On The Side Of Love. Many of us believe we need to manifest our faith, our love, by fighting against inhumane immigration laws and against the dangerous widening of the income gap.

Some UUs, {like these women from Vassar,} have chosen to manifest their faith by participating in the "Occupy" movement. I hope this movement grows. I hope it grows into a mighty force. Such coalescing of so many voices is the surest way I see, at the moment, to break the destructive cycle of ineffective government, driven by moneyed interests who seem to place maximized profit about all else.

It's time for us to harness the power of our faith. Its time for our faith to impact the Occupy movement. But don't be constrained, if the Occupy movement is not your cup of tea, manifest your faith in whatever way you are willing to demonstrate that "we stand on the side of love".

Our faith, what we can do with our faith, is so needed in the world today. We have a message the world needs to hear. "You and I are living members of the great family of all souls." We are all connected. We do not require you to think, look or act as we do. Our belief in your worth is not contingent.

These are the values that hold us together, that bind us into a faith group. Its time we claim the truth of our faith.

Imagine, if we, as Unitarian Universalists, can coalesce our collective educational backgrounds, our professional standing, our wealth, and our social position with our faith in the power of rational thought, our quest for truth and justice and the power of our love. Imagine, how powerful we can be. Imagine, what a difference we can make in this needy world of ours.

There are people out there who would like to have what we have who would like to have the faith that we've got. The world needs what we have. What we have, as a faith community, is too good to keep to ourselves, it's too good to keep under a bushel basket. We need to be the beacon that our faith is. We need to let our light shine. It's time. Let the world be brightened. Let US brighten this world of ours.

May it be so,

Amen