

## “What Is Faith?”

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October 7, 2007

My sermon today is a response to a question—  
what is faith?

Faith is one of those words that comes up a lot in religion,  
and we’re not always sure what it means,  
but we know it feels very loaded.

In the current political climate, with an evangelical Christian in the  
White House, the word *faith* has almost become a shorthand for  
conservative Christian faith—  
as in the well-known White House Office of Faith-Based Initiatives, for  
example.

In that context *faith* has a connotation of exclusive, dogmatic.

Yet we also belong to *interfaith* groups.

We speak of the broader religious community as *people of faith*.  
I think these phrases have mostly positive connotations for us.  
They imply a sense of moral commitment,  
an interest in justice and peace,  
a sense that money and material things  
are not the most important things in this world.

You’ve also heard me call this church a *community of faith*.

And you might reasonably wonder, what do I mean by that?

In what sense are we a community of *faith*?

In a community where we celebrate freedom and diversity of belief,  
what does it mean to say we have a common faith?

Let me first suggest to you a two-part definition of *faith*  
that comes from Christian theology.

I’m starting here for a reason.

Our congregation and the larger Unitarian Universalist movement no longer identify as Christian, at least not exclusively. Yet the basic ideas and thought patterns of Christianity shaped our own ideas for many generations. They continue to shape our conversations even when we're not aware of it. And in this case we're in danger of getting trapped in a very limited idea of what faith means. It's very easy to make the mistake that *faith* is the same thing as *belief*, and belief in a particular set of doctrines at that. We've gotten this idea from a certain version of Christianity that gets a lot of air time in our culture right at the moment. But it's a mistake, or at the very least an extreme oversimplification.

In traditional Christian theology, the word *faith* has always had *two* meanings. It's true, the first meaning of faith *has* been about belief—belief in, or agreement with, certain propositions about the nature of the world. In the Christian tradition, the central proposition is God. The Nicene Creed, the classic statement of belief for many Christians, begins, “I believe in one God.” At least that's how it's usually translated in English. I'll come back to *that* in a minute.

For many of us, faith as belief is the kind of faith that doesn't make sense. As a young person, I considered the propositions of Christianity as I had absorbed them from the culture around me, and I found I simply couldn't believe them. I didn't believe that Jesus was the uniquely divine Son of God. I didn't believe he came back to life after he died. I didn't believe Christianity was the only true religion. I would never have found my way into religion if *belief* had been the only path.

But let me take you back to the very first line,  
in fact the first *word*, of the Nicene creed.  
This is the word that's usually translated as "I believe"—  
in Latin, *credo*.  
This word *credo* is very interesting.  
It *can* mean "I believe" in the sense of, yes, I think something is true,  
like you might say,  
"I believe the supermarket has a sale on tomatoes this week,"  
or "I believe you are a good person,"  
or "I believe there is a being called God who exists  
and rules the world."  
But there is also an older meaning of *credo*.  
If we go all the way back to the Indo-European,  
we find the root word *kerd*, which means "heart,"  
like the French *coeur* or the Spanish *corazon*.  
So *credo*, this "I believe, I have faith,"  
has something to do with the heart, not just the intellect.  
And indeed the oldest meaning of this word  
is "I give my heart."  
I give my heart.

The second of the traditional meanings of "faith"  
is all about giving your heart.  
Think of how it feels when you tell your friend  
or your spouse or your child,  
"I have faith in you."  
Those words mean so much more than a simple statement of belief  
that the person is trustworthy.  
If faith were *only* a matter of belief,  
you could convey the full meaning of the word by saying to your friend,  
"To the best of my knowledge, you are a trustworthy person."  
Sounds a little bland, doesn't it, a little detached?  
Kind of like something you'd read in a personnel review.

Now think again of how it feels to say, or to *hear*,  
“I have faith in you.”  
You *trust* that person.  
You trust them to do what they say they’re going to do.  
You trust they aren’t going to let you down.  
You *care* about them.  
You allow yourself to be vulnerable with them.  
You are loyal to them, committed to the relationship between you.  
You give them your heart.

So too when we turn back to religion.  
This is the part of religious faith I think we can all affirm and share—  
a basic attitude of trust,  
a giving of the heart,  
to life itself,  
to the unfathomable, unknowable power behind all life.

Once a great scholar traveled to see a mystic in Jerusalem.  
The mystic asked the scholar, “What does...faith...mean to you?”  
The scholar described various theories of faith proposed by theologians  
from the middle ages to the present day.  
The mystic listened and then said,  
“It is so much simpler than that.  
[Faith] is the feeling that the baby has  
that his mother will not drop him.”<sup>1</sup>  
The feeling the baby has that his mother will not drop him.  
Trust, confidence, love,  
the feeling that it’s safe to be alive  
and we don’t have to be on guard at every moment,  
because we are cared for.  
I suggest this is also the core of religious faith—  
a basic trust that life is worth living,  
that the nature of things is basically good.  
A love of the world and the source of life,

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<sup>1</sup> Marc Gafni, “Faith: Is It Real, or Am I Real?” *Parabola* Spring 2007, p. 75.

the force that lives in the heart of a tiny seed  
and in our own heart.

A basic trust,  
a giving of our heart to the whole and the mystery.

Now you would be absolutely right to be suspicious  
and ask, which comes first?

Could it be that the dimly remembered experience of being a baby  
has led us to project the same kind of feelings onto an imaginary God  
or religious ideal?

Have our human experiences and needs led us to invent religion?  
It may be so.

Many religious humanists answer “yes” with integrity  
and go on to affirm a deep and reverent faith  
in the goodness of human connection  
and the possibility of peace and justice in this world.

Or could it be that the relationship of trust between parent and child,  
which we wish for every person,  
is only one example of a larger pattern of trust and care  
inherent in the very nature of reality?

Is the idea of God *true* in some important way?

Again, it may be so.

Theists from many religious traditions answer “yes” with integrity.  
They affirm a deep and reverent faith in a power beyond humanity,  
*and* in humanity itself.

This is where we come up against a mystery.

In this life we will never be able to answer these questions for sure.

This life may be all we get.

Or not. We don't know.

But in the face of so many deep questions,  
there is still so much that unites us.

I believe we share a basic *attitude of faith*.

We've found something good to believe in,

or if we haven't found it, we are searching,  
and the very act of searching implies there is something to be found—  
something to trust  
and to build our lives around.

Let me try to make this a little more concrete.  
I can only speak for myself.  
But I'd like to tell you about *my* faith—  
what I believe, and what I give my heart to.  
I believe there is a deep and a profound reality  
that exists beyond all the things we see  
and know in the world, even ourselves.  
I believe there is something there, underneath everything—  
a reality which is more real than anything we can see with our eyes  
or hold in our hands,  
where everything comes from,  
everything in the world, and everyone—  
you and me and everything.  
I believe there is something more there.

But I also think our brains don't have the ability to comprehend it fully.  
We aren't built in a way that would allow us to understand it  
or have full knowledge in it.  
But we catch glimpses of it—intuitions, dreams, hints.  
We try to put those glimpses into words,  
we try to find human language to express what can never be fully  
expressed in words.  
God is one of the names people give to this reality,  
to try to express in words its nature, its truth and power.  
“God” is a human concept, and as such it can never say all there is to  
be said about the ultimate reality.  
There's a wonderful tradition of Christian mysticism  
that speaks of the God beyond God—

an idea that even the Biblical idea of God is finite, incomplete, and that behind that idea of God is a presence so vast and infinite that it can't ever be named or put into words. It just *is*.

In Hinduism there is a very similar idea.

Hindus worship many, many different gods and goddesses, all with different powers and histories and personalities.

But there is a constant teaching throughout Hinduism

that the many faces of the gods and goddesses,

though they are beautiful,

are merely aspects of the one transcendent reality—

they call it Brahman—

the one reality that is the source of everything that is, was, and will be, world without end.

Gandhi once said,

“I believe in the fundamental truth of all great religions of the world.

I believe that they are all God-given

and I believe that they were necessary

for the people to whom these religions were revealed.

And I believe that if only we could all of us

read the scriptures of the different faiths

from the standpoints of the followers of these faiths,

we should find that they were at bottom all one

and were all helpful to one another.”<sup>2</sup>

That's what I believe too—

I believe that all the religions of the world

catch glimpses of that one reality,

and they try to name it with words, to tell stories about what they see,

because our brains need that to help us see and understand.

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted at [www.worldprayers.org](http://www.worldprayers.org).

My *belief* is important to me.  
But belief is not the whole story.  
Over the years I've come to have faith in this reality.  
I have faith that it is trustworthy,  
that life is worth living,  
that it is good to be alive.

And because I am human,  
and I understand through story and myth and symbol,  
I cast my lot with a particular faith tradition—  
the Unitarian Universalist tradition.  
When I first discovered this religion,  
it told me that my beliefs were worth something—  
that I didn't have to say things I didn't believe  
to be part of a community of people  
who wanted to live lives centered in love and justice.  
As I grew in my faith as a Unitarian Universalist,  
I tried to take Emerson's words to heart.  
Remember what we read together:  
"That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts  
will determine our lives, and character.  
Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship,  
for what we are worshipping we are becoming."<sup>3</sup>

I learned the stories we tell, and they became *my* stories:  
Stories of human goodness, of human potential.  
Stories of courage and perseverance.  
Stories of human and divine love that melted hearts and changed lives.

I began to embrace the symbols we use  
to point toward that which can never be fully named.  
I bought my first chalice necklace, the one I am wearing today,  
and wore it as a bodily marker announcing, this is who I am,  
this is the faith to which I have given my heart.

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I learned our hymns, and I found myself moved to tears one day  
when I heard a Roman Catholic choir sing “Spirit of Life”  
at the funeral of a young woman who had died of cancer.  
This was *our* song, and it moved me beyond words  
that another faith would find it worthy of borrowing  
to express their own grief.  
I began to light a chalice when I was all alone,  
and confused, and in need of direction.  
I would sit in front of it and allow myself to be quiet,  
and the chalice for me became a sign of hope and courage,  
a sign of all the people who had walked this path before me  
and would come after me.

Faith is what we do together.  
This is the faith we share:

an active faith, a faith of verbs:  
to question, explore, experiment, experience,  
walk, run, dance, play, eat, love, learn,<sup>4</sup>

and *live*.

May this faith grow deeper every day of our lives,  
as we grow toward the sun,  
washed by the rain,  
even in the darkest storms  
held whole and firm by this magnificent life.

Amen and blessed be.

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<sup>4</sup> By Terry Tempest Williams.