

“Are We People of Faith?”

by Rev. Dr. Tony Larsen

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Today’s sermon is a request topic. A couple of you asked me to speak about the word “faith.” You asked, “Is Unitarian Universalism a faith? If so, what is our faith in?”

It’s a very interesting question. I remember some years ago going to a conference of the International Association for Religious Freedom, or I.A.R.F. The I.A.R.F. is an organization of liberal religions around the world, which our denomination is a part of, along with a number of Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, Animist, Shinto, Jewish, Sikh, and other traditions.

And at the conference I attended, at Stanford, the question was raised about whether the word “faith” really applied to all these religions. And a number of their representatives said no. Faith has been something important in the history of Christianity, of course, but if you asked a lot of other religious people, they’d say it’s fairly minor.

For example, in Judaism, it’s not so important what you believe as how you act. To be a Jew, religiously, means to follow the Torah, or law – what you actually believe about it is pretty secondary. (In fact, I remember when I was doing my chaplaincy training in the seminary, and one of our groups had an orthodox Jewish rabbi in it who was an atheist. Now, Orthodox is the most conservative of the Jewish denominations – and he did follow the Torah very strictly – but he did not believe in God.)

Likewise, if you asked a Zen Buddhist or a Hindu what he or she believed, you might get a quizzical look – religion for many of these people is a way of life, not a set of beliefs. Creeds are not all that important in many of the world’s religions. So when people refer to the Jewish faith or the Hindu faith – Jews and Hindus of course know what they mean, but they might say, “That’s not the best word to describe what we are.”

Even our word “interfaith,” which is intended to be inclusive, has a bias written into it, as you can see. And it can be somewhat misleading when people are trying to understand religions that are different from their own and assume that beliefs are important in all of them.

And actually, even in the Christian community there has been a lot of debate about whether we are saved by faith or by works. Historically, the Catholic Church has tended to emphasize salvation by good works; Protestants, on the other hand, beginning with Martin Luther, have usually emphasized salvation by faith. In fact, there’s a little story I like about a Lutheran minister who died, and when he woke up he saw flames all around him. He wondered where he had ended up. He saw another Lutheran there and said, “How do you explain this?” And she said, “I don’t know. Let’s go ask Martin Luther. He’s here, and he’s the one who started our religion.” So they looked for Martin Luther and finally found him and he sighed, “It was works.”

Well, I’m not going to settle the debate about faith and works, but I will say I don’t think they are always that far apart. That is, every work we do implies a faith in something and every faith we have entails certain works that will proceed from it. It’s sort of like being and doing: If you want to be a particular kind of person, certain actions will flow from that; and if you decide to do particular actions, you will come to be a certain kind of person.

So likewise with faith and works: Every faith entails a particular kind of works; and every work implies a certain faith. Only, we often don't see that because we tend to think of faith as a series of beliefs about various propositions. Like: Do you believe that God exists? Do you believe the Universe is 15 billion years old or 10,000? Do you believe in free will or determination?

But I would say those are intellectual propositions that may – or may not – have anything to do with faith.

And what I'd like to do today is make a distinction between faith and, for want of a better word, opinion. I know the words are sometimes used interchangeably, but, for today I'd like to draw a distinction between them that I hope will be helpful. As I'm using the words today, faith means belief **in**; opinion means belief **that**.

For example, I might say "I believe that the earth revolves around the sun." Or "I believe that it'll snow tomorrow." Or "I believe Spanish is easier than English." These beliefs are intellectual propositions. And while they may or may not be true, they are not necessarily very important to the way I live my life. But if I say "I believe **in** honesty" or "I believe **in** peace" – those aren't merely intellectual propositions; they are statements about my values, about what I believe is important – and what I am committed to. A belief **in** is much more than a belief **that**.

"I believe **that** you exist." "I believe **in** you." Do you hear the difference? One is about facts; the other is about values.

"I believe (that) love exists." "I believe **in** love." One says I think something **is**; the other says I want to live my life in accordance with that something.

Our word "faith," by the way, comes from the Latin verb "fidere," which means "to trust." It's also related to the word "fidelity," which brings to mind an insurance company. Also when "hi-fi" came out – short for high-fidelity – it meant sound that was faithful to the original, or sound you could trust. That's what faith originally meant: to trust something or someone. And also to be committed to it. To trust and to be trustworthy where it's concerned, or to have faith in and be faithful to.

Now, sometimes people mix up these uses. For example, when people say "Do you believe in God?" what they often really mean is "Do you believe **that** there is a God?" But believing **that** God exists is not the same as believing **in** God. To believe **in** God means that God makes a difference in your life – that the way you live is different because of your commitment to this Reality, however you conceive it to be.

There's a passage from the New Testament that I especially like, from the Epistle of James. Martin Luther didn't like it much, but I do, and it goes like this: *What does it profit you, my brothers and sister, if you say you have faith but not works? Can your faith save you? If a brother or sister is ill-clad and you say to them, "[Oh,] go in peace, be warmed and filled, without giving them what they need, what good is that? Faith, if it has no works, is dead."*

And then the letter continues: *But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works! Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith."* And then he adds the coup de grace, I think. He says, *You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe – and shudder.* [James 2:14-19]

In other words, “So you believe in God – whoop-de-doo. The devils believe in God, too – and that doesn’t save them.”

Another way to put this distinction between intellectual assent and giving your heart to something is to use the words creed and credo. Now, “creed” and “credo” both come from the same Latin word meaning “I believe.” But a creed is usually a set of propositions that one holds to be true, while a credo is something you live by; it’s your mission statement, if you will. (In fact, the word “credo” actually comes from two words which together mean “I give my heart to.”)

So, a belief that is a creed. A belief in is a credo. A belief that is a theology. A believe in is a faith.

And by the way, you can’t always tell what someone’s faith is in by just asking them. What people say they believe in and what their lives show they believe in are not always the same thing.

For example, our UU principles, or covenant, which we recited earlier in the service says we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person and in justice and compassion and the goal of world community and respect for the interdependent web of all existence – but do our lives and our deeds actually show this faith in action? Not always. Not by a long shot. I’m reminded of something the poet Maya Angelou once said. She said she was talking to someone about religion and they said, “I’m a Christian.” And Maya Angelou said, “Already?” Her point was that we are always in a process of becoming, and we never actually get there. So the next time someone tells me, “I’m a Unitarian” – I may be tempted to say, “Already?” (I mean, I know I’m not anywhere near that yet.)

Someone once said we all have two religions: the one we say we believe in and the one we actually live. And our goal should be to make the difference between the two as small as possible.

There’s one other thing I want to mention and that is, believing in God. As I said earlier, there are a lot of people who believe there is a God but whose life doesn’t show any perceptible difference as a result. They have intellectual assent, but not faith, as I’m defining those words. They have a creed, but not a credo.

By the same token, there are people who say they don’t believe God exists, but whose life exemplifies the values that God would want if God does exist. They don’t have the creed – but they do seem to have the credo. So which group are people of faith? As far as I’m concerned people who have different beliefs about God but have similar beliefs in Godly values ... may have different theologies but they have a very similar faith. Not exactly the same, maybe – but if “God is love and whoever abides in love abides in God” [I John 4] then they may not all use the same words in describing their faith, but they both believe in and trust and are committed to a similar truth – call it a higher power, call it love, call it God – but they share a fairly common faith, despite their differences in creed.

There’s a parable in the Gospel of Matthew that I think speaks to this. Jesus said, *A man had two sons. And he went to the first one and said, “Son, go and work in the vineyard today.” And the son said, “No, I won’t!” but later changed his mind and went. And the father went to the second son and said the same thing. And that son answered, “I will go, sir.” – but did not. Which of the two did the will of the father?* [Mt. 21:28-31] (The one who said no, but did, yes – or the one who said yes but did not?)

As I see it, the doers show the faith, despite the words they use; and the non-doers demonstrate faithlessness, no matter how much their words may speak to the contrary.

Let me close with something Bob and Eileen Teska e-mailed out to our church's discussion board recently, which some of you may have read. They mentioned that when their daughter Courtenay was interning at the State Department in Washington, D.C., she joined the humanist group at the Arlington, Virginia UU Church and another member there gave her this little treatise from the Southern Baptists on how to convert UUs. It's very interesting for showing how we are perceived by outsiders and what a challenge they think we are! It's actually sort of flattering in parts. And it shows what we've been talking about, I think. Here are some excerpts.

By Cky J. Carrigan, Ph.D. (Feb 2000)

If Southern Baptists are serious about winning North America to Jesus, then Southern Baptists will get more serious about interfaith evangelism. And if Southern Baptists get more serious about interfaith evangelism, then Southern Baptists will have to learn to unpack the complex suitcase of Unitarian Universalism. (We're very complex!)

Who are Unitarian Universalists? Individual members of the UUA are a loose confederation of self-described heretics. (Heretic, by the way, comes from the Greek "heretikos," meaning "able to choose," so it's not a bad moniker for us.) They are an extremely liberal religion that champions the cause of extreme religious tolerance. (Apparently, that's a bad thing!)

Then it goes on to describe our principles and some other facts about our religion, and then gives these suggestions for converting us: *Be patient and take time to find out exactly what your particular UUA friends believe before charting a particular course... They may be atheistic or theistic, or have a Christian or Jewish background. They might even be Wiccan or Buddhist. You can not challenge a set of beliefs unknown to you, and it is very difficult to advance someone's thinking if you do not know where to begin.*

2) Be especially gentle, humble, and non-judgmental. A confrontational or super-direct approach will almost certainly be met with a great deal of unnecessary resistance. Remember, Unitarian Universalists highly value religious diversity. Listen carefully to their beliefs, look for some common ground, and gently suggest the Christian alternative. ... (And I like this part.) You may want to soften your presentation by sprinkling your conversation with phrases like, "It seems to me," or "Perhaps," or "Have you ever considered?" This kind of approach does not compromise your conviction. It merely demonstrates subtly that you value them as a person ...

What I find interesting here is that they suggest phrases like "it seems to me," and "perhaps" as a strategy to win us over. They don't actually feel all that tentative – they just think that's the only way to get us to listen to them.

Whereas, most of us, would probably describe our beliefs in those open-ended ways.

In fact, there's a story that is told on us that goes like this: *There were a number of religious leaders on a panel discussing theological views and when they were asked a particular question the Jewish rabbi said, "Well, in Torah we read..." And the Catholic priest said, "Well, the church teaches..." And the Baptist minister said, "The Bible says..." And the UU minister said, "Well, it seems to me..."*

So in our tradition it would be natural to use words like "perhaps" and "it seems to me" – not as a strategy to catch people off their guard, but as the way we think about and question things.

Here are some more suggestions from the Southern Baptists on how to deal with us:

3) Be prepared to use reason. Unitarian Universalists are generally well-educated or at least well-read. They value reason. They will not be easily moved from their positions merely on the basis of your appeal to an unsubstantiated faith. Emphasize the reasonable aspects of Christian truths...

4) Be conscious of gender and racial equality issues. Be careful not to create any unnecessary stumbling blocks. Unitarian Universalists highly value racial and gender equality. Any subtle sign of racial or gender superiority by you will be met with extreme resistance.

I think that's kind of complimentary. I'm not sure it's intended to be, but I'm glad we have that reputation. And here's another:

5) Be sensitive to environmental issues. Be careful not to offend unnecessarily the environmental sensibilities of Unitarian Universalists. They are generally very environmentally conscious and nature friendly. Make sure to emphasize the biblical model of caring responsibly for God's creation ...

And finally the article concludes: *By any standard, Unitarian Universalists are a hard people to win to Jesus. You might even say that they are impossible to win, but with God all things are indeed possible. Therefore, pray very hard, prepare very hard, persuade very hard and persevere to the end with your UUA friends. Never give up. Never surrender. Someday they may become disillusioned with their Christ-less program... Southern Baptists need to be there and be ready on that someday.*

I read this to you for a couple reasons. One is that it gives us a view of ourselves as seen by outsiders, and that's always very interesting. But the other is that while Southern Baptists certainly think we're wrong, they do implicitly recognize that we are a faith – and a tough one to crack, at that. Although we may not always think of ourselves in terms of faith, Southern Baptists seem to have no doubt about it. And although we sometimes joke about having nothing in common, the Southern Baptists spell it out quite well: We believe in religious tolerance (extreme tolerance, from their point of view). We value religious diversity; we believe in “perhaps”; and we are not willing to say there's one way for everybody. We believe in reason. We care about gender equality and racial equality. We care about the environment; we are, as they say, nature-friendly.

They've been describing a faith – a faith with a lot of different theologies, maybe, but a uniting faith nonetheless. And even if we can't see it at times, the Southern Baptists surely can.

And so to the question – “Are we a people of faith?” – the answer is “Yes, we are.” We may have a lot of different beliefs that – that is, opinions – but that is made possible by the fact that we believe in diversity to freedom and the worth and dignity of every person. We have a faith, and it is a good one, and I am proud to share it with you.

Keep the faith!