

Faithful Over A Few Things
A Sermon for Palm Sunday
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UU Church of the South Hills
March 25, 2018

I spotted the first sign as we crested a small hill on Skillet Road, a rural byway that runs between Owasco, one of the NY Finger Lakes and the rolling farmlands of Cayuga County. The sign was professionally printed and swung on a rod-iron rail alongside an American flag, with this plea: “Create in me a clean heart, O Lord”- Psalm 51. I smirked.

It was August of 2015, on a fine sunny vacation day, perfect for a bike ride. As we cruised right onto Gillings Rd., the second sign came into view, painted in confident letters on a barn-wood sandwich board at the intersection: “Close your Facebook and open your Faith-book” it exhorted us. In a similar vein, the other side of the board promised that “God answers knee-mail.” Clever,eh? Still – *eyeroll*.

We passed an Amish homestead called “God’s Blessing Farm,” with a strapping young man baling hay with his shirt sleeves rolled up, and he waved and we waved back and then, just a bit further, a white-washed church appeared with this enticement for its vacation Bible camp: “Make Jesus your BFF this summer!” *Honestly?*

As we pedaled along Fleming Scipio Townline Rd., the sky opened up, releasing a fierce summer shower. Luckily, this being a bit of a “Bible Belt,” we made it under the covered entryway of the unadorned Scipio Community Church (just up ahead) before getting utterly drenched. And what did the sign in front of this unexpected refuge read? “I was a stranger and you sheltered me.” I audibly gasped.

It wasn’t that we were, in fact, strangers, and they sheltered us. Although, that was notable, and true, and a cool coincidence. Or was it more than a random coincidence? Was it an honest-to-God *sign* - a cosmic comeuppance? I sat on a well-worn pew they had set outside the door, eating my Clif bar with a lump in my throat, admitting to myself that I had been cruising along with a spiritually snooty attitude. I mean, aren’t these the people with outdated, unsophisticated beliefs? The ones we wish would stop clinging to such religious *who-ha?*

But, on that skittish day in August, on a country road with nowhere else to take cover, those silly scripture lovers pierced my uppity liberal bubble with simple kindness. I thought back to the first sign and whispered softly into the rain: “Create in me a clean heart, Spirit of Life” and I meant it.

For folks who claim to be open-minded, progressive, and guardians of our fourth principle, “the free and responsible search for truth and meaning,” we Unitarian Universalists (UUs) can be downright judgmental and condescending, at times, on the topic of “faith.”

When the subject arises, the reaction can be swift and dismissive – “We’re skeptics here.” “We cherish our doubts.” “Faith in what?” “ Faith” – *hosh-posh* – that’s just *unreasonable* – show me something you can *prove*.”

Yet, I can tell you from experience, as both a seeker and as a minister, there are faithful people here. This may not be Grandma’s old-time faith exactly, but it is faith nevertheless - free-form, rich in history, highly personal, and ripe with possibility for spiritual deepening.

During my tenure at First Unitarian Church in Pittsburgh, two congregants approached me to support their effort to plant a chapter of the UU Christian Fellowship there, I encouraged them to plunge ahead. I heard snarky comments from some corners, when the invitation went out for this group, along the lines of “What are *we* doing with a Christian group *here* at a UU church?” A *Christian* group!!! *Egads!*

As gently as I could, I reminded the naysayers of our roots as a liberal Protestant denomination and that one of our six sources draws on “Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbor as ourselves.”

And I added (and underscore the point today) that in order to fulfill our essential calling as a place of sacred purpose, to truly call ourselves “freethinkers,” we need to affirm (not merely tolerate) the presence of a UU Christian Fellowship as readily as we do a Humanist group, a Pagan group, a chapter of the UUs for Jewish Awareness, a Sufi poetry salon, the Atheist league or a Buddhist meditation circle. As expected, their UU Christian Fellowship started small, but it has grown to 12 or more mighty and faithful folk. And they believe they’ve created a space for a particular brand of UU faith to flourish. I salute them.

This being Palm Sunday, I have Jesus on my mind, too. Not Christ, the risen Lord; he is not (nor has he ever been) part of my theology as a Jewishly-raised UU or my belief system. But rather, I’m pondering the humanitarian Jesus, the one embraced by early Unitarians who had eschewed the divine Christ in the early 1800s. The Jesus who was born Joshua Ben Joseph -- the preacher, the prophet, the rebellious Rabbi, the healer, the wise weaver of parables; the Jesus who shows up at First Unitarian for UU Christians on Sunday mornings.

He was called Yeshua, a fully human man, who famously rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, some 2000 years ago. Although all four New Testament Gospels recount the story, only Luke interrupts the narrative to give us something uniquely profound and powerful -- Jesus looking out over Jerusalem and weeping. In Chapter 19, we read: "As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes." (LK 19:41)

Yes, Jesus could have turned back from his perch on Mt. Olivet. He knew trouble was brewing in the city of David. But, of course, he doesn’t turn back. It would have been totally out of character for him to turn back. To a hail of hosannas and the pageantry of waving palms, he rides down from the Mount of

Olives, bravely confronting the jealousy of the Pharisees and the oppression of the Roman Empire. It is his unavoidable date with destiny.

This entry scene is one of the most epic in films recounting the Passion story (take a moment to conjure up a picture of “Ben Hur” or “The Greatest Story Ever Told”). These Hollywood classics are eye-popping, but several years ago during Lent, I was drawn to a slightly different take on the Easter story, playing in a theatre near you; a film called “Risen.”

I arrived in a dark, mostly empty theater on a Tuesday afternoon for a viewing because it was billed as “thriller” in which a Roman Tribune named Clavius is tasked with leading a manhunt for the missing body of Jesus. This same Tribune had overseen his crucifixion. One reviewer called it “ the resurrection story told in the voice of a non-believer.” How could I resist a faith journey told in the voice of a “non-believer,” especially when I had a UU Palm Sunday sermon to write?

Spoiler alert! Pontius Pilate (Clavius’ boss) realizes that if the tale of the risen Jesus spreads, his following will only grow. Find his body and bring it to me. But this proves impossible, of course; the tomb is empty, the ropes holding it closed virtually blown apart, and Clavius is bewildered.

But then, after various twists and turns, the sleuth meets Jesus himself in a small hut, surrounded by his joy-filled disciples. Clavius can hardly believe his eyes. How can this be? He cannot go back. He has failed and this will mean certain death for him. So, he joins Jesus and his disciples on their trek through the desert.

The risen Jesus of this film is a perfect blissed-out Zen master, even sitting cross-legged on a rock, meditating and spouting Buddha-esque aphorism like: Be ye lights unto yourselves.” I found this more authentic than many depictions. We get a Jesus with heart.

And, at least, the actor who portrayed him is olive-skinned and looks like he could have been from Nazareth, not Stockholm. The 12 actors who portrayed his disciples, though, all look like Ashkenazi Jews who had been plucked from a nearby touring company of “Fiddler on the Roof.”

Even so, the film delivers a valuable and memorable message. Clavius actually *sees* Jesus heal a leper, provide fish for his tribe, appear and disappear, and preach love of his neighbor. He even observes Jesus’ resurrection. And he must confront the meaning of faith. It’s unavoidable, though something new and strange for him.

At one point, Jesus asks him: “What do you seek Clavius – Certainty, Peace, a Day without Death?” He is not sure. In the end, Clavius, on his own, after the disciples have scattered to spread the gospel, tells his tale to a shepherd he encounters in a desert hut. The shepherd asks: “And you believe all this?” to which the former Tribune responds: “I believe I will never be the same.”

We live in a strikingly different context than these characters, but we, too, can be transformed by experience, and we can ask ourselves what we seek in our faith journeys: “Certainty? Peace? a Day without Death?” Peace, yes. We

seek peace for ourselves and for the world; for Standing Rock and Ferguson and for the marching activists who bravely bear their banners. A day without death - if only this was possible on our cruel and violent planet. But yes, for Aleppo and Chicago and the Sudan and Florida.

Certainty is an unlikely wish – that’s why we choose to gather in this UU context, one which intentionally invites us/expects us to explore faith *without* certainty. But ours is not the easy route. It’s difficult and exacting to craft a deep and authentic faith without certainty.

There are days when I struggle and am nearly envious of those folk in the Scipio Community Church, who rest in rock solid beliefs and clear doctrines. They’ve embraced certainty and that looks mighty appealing some days. It would be one less thing to worry about, right? – just pick up a *Faithbook* and send some *knee-mail*?

But, the anxiety passes (usually quite quickly), as this is not my journey or the journey that most of us here have chosen to take; and regardless of the rigor, this liberally religious road of open vistas is worth travelling, as we become good and faithful servants in our own unique ways.

The Rev. Peter Freidrichs has preached that, “We all believe in something. It may even be the conviction that there is nothing to believe in, but that is a faith statement itself. There is blind faith. And there is another kind of faith that comes from experience. The kind that doesn’t just accept what we’re told, but says, “show me.” The faith that grows OUT of our doubts and our questioning.” A UU faith. A living faith. A hopeful faith grounded in the real world.

I agree. Because , as Friedrichs reminds us, “when our childhood faith lets us down, to still believe in something is a hard-won victory. Our life experiences can shake us to the core, and they are bound to mold and shape and inform our faith. Perhaps the ultimate statement of Christian faith is found in the writings of apostle Paul, in his letter to the Hebrews. There he says, that “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

“But this is not a statement about blind faith. If we look at it closely we find an argument for experiential faith (one likes ours), the faith of the doubter and the questioner as well. We must experience longing and lack and uncertainty in order to shape our beliefs.”

And we must fuel our faith with courage. Yesterday at the March for Our Lives in Columbus, OH, I wore this button inscribed “Be Brave.” I wore it as much for myself as for those surrounding me. Yes, there were UUs aplenty, with 2 large SOTSOL banners. Yet, we were surely outnumbered by thousands of dedicated marchers of faiths different from ours. In order for our progressive faith to really make a difference in this demoralized and hurting world, we must drop the spiritual snootiness and bend into *intersectionality*, enabling us to hold faithful space and witness with integrity. We can and we must. Be brave and be faithful.

The human Jesus clearly practiced a courageous and examined faith because we hear him question it on the cross: “Father, why have you forsaken

me.” And remember that in the film “Risen,” Clavius actually *sees* the evidence, a resurrected Christ, and is still struggling with his faith.

To focus our faith journeys, we can be patient and faithful to a few carefully curated worthy things. As a result, we can gain a sense of mastery and depth, and we, too, can receive a crown of Life. And, if we choose well, we may experience resurrection on a daily basis into our best selves, our highest selves, joyful with the sense of always becoming. This is the Easter faith of Unitarian Universalism.

In her reading entitled, *Set in Stone*,” the Rev. Victoria Safford tells the tale of one such woman who attended well and faithfully to a few worthy things. It was the epitaph on her tombstone, which seemed a bit stingy and meager to Safford at first, until she came to view it as a satisfying legacy.

This quote about being “faithful over a few things,” drawn from Matthew 25, stirs Safford up, and she laments that, “Every day I stand in danger of being struck by lightning and having the obituary in the local paper say, for all the world to see, “She attended frantically and ineffectually to a great many unimportant, meaningless details.”

She goes on to enumerate these – answering emails, balancing her checkbook, while missing lots of love and glorious sunsets. Listening to voicemail rather than the calling of her heart. Considering her own epitaph, she muses: “How will it read, how does it read, and if you had to name a few worthy things to which you attend well and faithfully, what, I wonder, would they be?”

On this Palm Sunday morning, ask yourselves, good and faithful servants – what would they be? Create in us a clean heart, Spirit of Life. And help us to watch for the signs.

May we be brave. Amen and Blessed be.

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