

July 8 Faith, Rev. Linda Simmons

A Catholic priest, an evangelist, and a UU minister were in a row boat in the middle of a pond fishing. None of them had caught anything all morning.

Then the evangelist stands up and says he needs to go to the bathroom so he climbs out of the boat and walks on the water to shore. He comes back ten minutes later the same way.

Then the Catholic Priest decides he needs to go to the bathroom, too, so he climbs out of the boat and walks on the water to shore. He, too, comes back the same way ten minutes later.

The UU minister looks at both of them and decides that his faith is just as strong as his fishing buddies and that he can walk on water, too. He stands up and excuses himself. As he steps out, he makes a big splash down into the water.

The evangelist looks at the Catholic Priest and says, "I suppose we should have told him where the rocks were."

Andre Spears was the highest bidder for this sermon at the last auction and has been a mighty conversation partner for me in its preparation.

I read former President Jimmy Carter's book, Faith¹ in preparation for this sermon and I appreciated so much of his wisdom, much of which is solidly based on a faith in humanity that he stands firm in maintaining, and the book was written in 2018! So much of his faith in humanity is also held together by what he calls his strong evangelical Christian faith in God and Jesus as the Christ. Though the book was worth the read through and through, it did not answer for me my most abiding question: What is faith for so many of us whose dance with religion is one that does not offer promises of an afterlife or a clear response to suffering?

Many people have asked, legitimately I think, why bother having a religion that does not offer an afterlife or a clear response to suffering? The answer to that is perhaps the essence of this sermon too.

Andre sent me a Proust quote that was fascinating as we exchanged ideas for this sermon:

Let us be grateful to people who make us happy, they are the charming gardeners who make our souls blossom. But let us be more grateful to nasty, or simply indifferent (people), to cruel friends who've caused us sorrow."²

Andre asked, "What is the nature of the faith that welcomes the grief visited on us by others (or by the gods) over & above the sense of well-being they might otherwise offer?"

¹ Jimmy Carter, Faith: A Journey for All (New York, Simon & Schuster, 2018).

² Marcel Proust, Pleasures and Days

I thought this too a fascinating question. Does religion and faith teach us to welcome suffering, to not only welcome it, but almost demand it as our penance, while then having faith that a god, or gods will make it right again?

Even those who proclaim themselves as atheists, do we not when we are greatly burdened or afraid or when someone we love is hurt, curse god only later to beg for his or her or its help?

When looked at this way, faith seems a mechanism to keep us on the dance floor almost, it is the needle on the turntable that keeps the music of the record audible. It is what allows religion itself to function.

But what of Buddhism? The Buddhist would say they do not have faith; that they have a practice that they engage in and if it works and offers peace they continue it and if not, they throw it out. But I have lived with the Buddhists in India and Nepal and there seems a faith present to me, if only in one another, a faith that others are inherently worthy of love, that even in the greatest suffering, there is beauty.

I know they say this is found by steady practice but it is the invitation to this promise, this faith that others do find it along the way, that the initiate seems invited to let go of all belongings and begin.

And they do love each other so well in the Buddhist communities Gary and I spent time in in India and Nepal. It is a love that sings out from their chants and the walls of their simple, simple monasteries where all have enough.

Faith, can it be something that we lift from religion and proclaim as a love for people, or perhaps even easier to measure than love; a respect for all people? A wise man once said that it is easier to love god than humanity.

Faith is defined as: Complete trust or confidence in someone or something; strong belief in God or in the doctrines of a religion, based on spiritual apprehension rather than proof; a system of religious belief; a strongly held belief.

Complete trust or confidence is a long way to go for Unitarians known to intellectualize everything isn't it? And I wonder, is it necessary to traverse this distance? I wonder if after all the role of faith is not to be the needle on the record player but the music on the sheet itself? What if faith can be that which refers us back to what is best in each other, to the highest good among us? Not that which tells us that this good is there no matter what but that which tells us that no matter what we have to seek it as a religious people?

And atheist or not, Unitarian Universalists are a religious people in that we join together to make decisions in covenanted community where we expect something higher and better than our own egos to rule the day, even if that higher and better thing is the collective wisdom of all of us.

Let me ask this question one more time before I go on: What if faith is that which tells us that no matter what we have to seek the good in all people as a religious people? And then of course for us as Unitarian Universalists and for many other religious people too, the next step is having recognized that good, we must work to create laws and systems that respect it.

Let me explore this further with Jimmy Carter's work in his book *Faith*. In his first chapter, Carter mentions, *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. He mentions it because for Carter, we must, as faithful people, care for one another.

We must protect, respect and build a sustainable, moral universe in which there is room for all people and meanings that offer hope and sustenance to others and the earth. Carter and I share this understanding. Jimmy Carter needs faith in God and Jesus as Christ in order to sustain his belief in humanity and then all leads him toward doing the right things: sustaining equitable, humane laws and precepts and treaties where there is a place for everyone at the table much as our Unitarian Universalist and liberal values lead us to do the same. Though we do not begin at the same place, we arrive at the same goal.

I suggest that we do not need god to have faith in humanity but rather a willingness to look into the heart of every human being, and humanity itself, and choose to see the goodness first with all the skill and compassion and capacity that we have, that indeed faith is enacting this very courage.

Before we go on, let me give you an example of this kind of faith from a conversation I had with a couple I counseled sometime back in another church I where I worked.

They came to me ready to end their marriage. They could not understand what had happened to the love and joy they once had. One partner, call him James, felt it would return. He had faith, he said.

The other, call her Mary, wanted to know what his faith was based on. On you and me, he said. We are good people. We have know love and joy before. We can get there again. Just give us time.

And then Mary said, Okay then, how will we get there. What are the markers on the map we will build?

James had the kind of faith I am referring to. He pointed to the goodness in them as a strategy, as a way forward. It was his ground. And Mary felt it, she had faith too and then she needed the document, the rules, the map, the landscape. Show me how, she asked.

She wanted to know how to negotiate their love into respectful action. For me, that is what a religious people do. I told them so. They were not sure they were ready to be called religious people but they are still together today.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was signed by all the all the countries that were part of the UN in 1948 except 8. The key nations that founded the UN in October 1945 were

called “The Big Four” China, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom and the United States signed it and they were joined by 47 others.

The Declaration consists of 30 articles affirming a person’s rights which, although not legally binding in themselves, have been elaborated in subsequent international treaties. The Declaration was the first step in the process of formulating the International Bill of Human Rights, which was completed in 1966, and came into force in 1976, after a sufficient number of countries, including ours, had ratified them.

It has been translated into over 500 languages.

Here is how The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which Jimmy Carter mentions in the beginning of his book called Faith begins:

Preamble

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world,

Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people...

Whereas the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women and have determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,

Whereas Member States have pledged themselves to achieve, in co-operation with the United Nations, the promotion of universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms,

Now, Therefore THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY proclaims THIS UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance...

The first and second Article are:

Article 1.

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 2.

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status...

This declaration was signed in the darkest of hours after WWII. Faith in humanity was at a low. And yet it proclaims dignity and rights that we have yet to live into fully as nations and individuals.

Just before the Human Rights Commission was signed by many countries who were not Christian and by some who did not believe in a monotheist God or Christ, the Nuremburg trials took place where people were held accountable for their crimes against humanity. I am not suggesting that we are all good but that we must seek the good in each other first before all else as an act of faith in humanity and then work to protect what we find as an act of religious commitment. Perhaps if this is how we were to live, we would not need a god or Christ to resurrect us to an afterworld better than this one. Perhaps then we could realize a world here and now worthy of naming paradise.

Rev. Rebecca Parker in her essay, "On Holy Ground" writes, —Paradise is a name for earth's creative fullness, its life-giving waters, and protective encompassing atmosphere, and its myriad plants and creatures. —Paradise is a name for the inter-connected and interactive Sacred Wholeness that generates and sustains multiple, diverse, life-giving eco-systems and human cultures. —Paradise also names that inter-penetrating realm, of beauty, spiritual and the material.."³

I would add, paradise is a place in which we demand that we reach out first to one another's goodness, wholeness, humanity and experience it with all the complexity that request demands.

There is joy there and grief there and love there and sorrow there and fear there and hope there too. And what is always there is the need to care for one another and this sacred planet we live on. If we can but open our hearts, slow down and open our hearts, and feel what it really means to share this sacred space together here and now, this faith I offer you, this faith that is an action of turning our eyes into seeing the wholeness of one another, of all others and then doing what our religion asks of us, protecting that wholeness, this faith can build the world we dream about, this faith can make us whole, this faith can offer us ourselves back to each other with something to hope about.

This faith can build the world we dream about on this earth.

May it be so.
Amen.

³ Rebecca Parker, "On Holy Ground" Starr King President's Lecture 2012, 5.