

Saving Faith©
A sermon offered by Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz
Sunday, September 15, 2019
For the Unitarian Universalist Church of Annapolis

Did you ever have the experience of losing your faith? Do you remember the moment clearly – a time in your life when something in you said “No, I just don’t believe this anymore?” The first time it happened to me I was thirteen years old, attending a Missouri Synod Lutheran Church in Akron, Ohio. Although I was by then, the only member of my family still attending church, I really was into it. I liked the hymns, I liked the competitive Bible verse memorizations, I even liked the way church smelled, a combination of old wood and candle wax. But that Wednesday night of confirmation class, it all changed when the pastor was teaching these young teenagers about the importance of baptism and why it was important that everyone get baptized, right away as an infant.

Pastor Beale must have seen my quizzical face because he told a story then, about a young mother who was ambivalent about baptism. She put it off for a more convenient time. I remember he stressed the word ‘convenient.’ I remember the light was fading then - filtering through the stained glass window, casting shadows on the pews. He then said that the child had died suddenly and that in her grief, the mother turned to her pastor for a memorial service. As was part of Missouri Synod Lutheran theology at the time, he said he couldn’t do a memorial service for the infant, because she had not been baptized a Christian. In fact, the child’s immortal soul was actually in jeopardy because of her mother’s failure to baptize.

Something inside of me snapped that day – and I remember sputtering out loud “that’s not right. That’s not right at all!” No one contradicted the pastor, especially during confirmation class. The pastor’s face got red; this was in the early 70’s and pastors authority was still used to being unchallenged. He ended class and before I left, he said “I’m going to speak to your mother about this.” “How did confirmation class go?” my mother said as I got in the car. I could only sit there in silence.

My story is not unique. I have sat in on probably hundreds of stories of people coming to this particular faith, of Unitarian Universalism most often from other religious traditions but sometimes even lifelong UU’s who have moved and are seeking another church. The stories all have a similar thread – the moment or the time in one’s life where you were going along in whatever faith tradition you were raised; Catholic or Church of God in Christ; Episcopalian or Evangelical Brethren; Jehovah’s Witness or Jews for Jesus; Mormon or United Methodist, Jewish or Jehovah’s Witness; Presbyterian and everything was great as long as you didn’t ask questions; as long as you kept the faith exactly as it had been told to you or handed down to you then you were good. And then, something happens – something happens that shakes what you thought was your faith. You realize you’re gay and to be gay in the church of your childhood would mean you’d give up your very identity to be something you’re not to conform to a rigid doctrine that you didn’t believe in the first place. Or you want to marry someone of another faith tradition and are told you can’t or if you can, you have to go through a convoluted process which doesn’t make sense. Or, you’re sitting there in church or synagogue or mosque and you hear things spoken by the religious leader which you find appalling or incongruent with your own values and something happens inside of you – a shift – like a sudden beam of light that filters through those stained glass windows and inspires a shy thirteen year girl to say “no, that’s wrong. I can’t believe that.”

Some of you here this morning were not raised in a church or a synagogue or mosque; you were raised in the church of the New York Times or the Sunday morning tractor pulls or the walk in the woods or the visit to the shopping mall. There are just as many people coming to church today who didn’t have the Pastor Beales in their lives; but were raised in an entirely secular environment. And yet, after the mall is closed and the woods grow dark,

there still exists a longing in our human hearts – to see and to know; to feel and to connect – and, I think this is most important of all, to be reassured that this life we are living is not in vain. That it means something, and that it's worthy of our time, our attention and reflection.

That's why I'm assuming you all are here. Oh sure, there are many reasons why people come to church. You make friends, you want a place for your children to gain knowledge and wisdom and compassion and values; you want to be of service and put your energies to good use; you love an intellectual debate; you want to be part of the work of the world in dismantling racism, confronting homophobia and sexism and ableism and cronyism. You want to challenge the culture that demands more and more of our time, attention and precious dwindling planetary resources. The word faith means that which you can place your confidence and trust; and so - at the core of all these diverse needs, you want to know that that which you have put your faith in – matters; and in a world where so much is easily disposable – you want to know you have a faith that is worth saving.

Each month we explore a different theme; and the theme for September is Faith. Last week I led a UU History class and told the story of our Unitarian Universalist Faith. I mentioned that in many UU churches, even still today, there are certain words which make some folks bristle. For many years I avoided using them knowing that some would hear traditional religious language words – like God – or salvation – or even faith – and it would zoom them back to the pews of their Catholic or Baptist church and with it that whole baggage of childhood theology; you just gotta believe – if you pray hard enough it can come true – a kind of blind faith that is not unlike a parent saying to a child who asks “why” and the parent says “because I said so.”

It's not an unreasonable thing to question the word “faith.” This morning's reading by the Apostle Paul was his attempt to explain this very amorphous, intangible thing called “faith.” Of course Paul can be extremely obtuse, so he begins this long laundry list of faithful people with this very koan or riddle like statement: “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of

things unseen.” That is such a non UU-like statement. Seriously, we like facts, evidence, science. There are few churches in the world who have Darwin – or what will be renamed next February – Science Sunday. I remember the first Sunday before Christmas service I attended at my little local UU church in Kent, Ohio. The members were putting on the service, and one of them let loose of a parody of God Rest Yet Merry Gentleman that said a lot about the church's belief in reason and fact: *God rest ye, Unitarians, let nothing you dismay; Remember there's no evidence there was a Christmas Day; When Christ was born is just not known, no matter what they say, O, Tidings of reason and fact, reason and fact, Glad tidings of reason and fact.*

I like facts. I like reason. In this age of Alternative Facts, of 12,000 lies, of Sharpie gate of fiction masquerading as reality; and reality becoming more bizarre than any reality TV show; I want to know in what I can absolutely place my faith. And yet therein lies the contradiction; if we go back to the Paul's weirdly prophetic phrase, he says: faith is the substance of things hoped for; the evidence of things not seen.” That would seem to counter our historical insistence of fact. And yet, listen to what my colleague, the Reverend Victoria Safford of White Bear UU Church in Minnesota writes about faith and doubt: :

Doubt and faith, like love, are brave and curious and open; the windows are wide to sunlight and to darkness also – all the mystery that transcends our understanding. Faith is open to reality, whatsoever it may bring. We long to give ourselves over to it, but so often we don't because we're too proud or too empirical, too intent on problem-solving, too well-schooled in a humanist philosophy insisting that if you just think hard enough, just work hard enough, apply good process and reason and logic, then everything will unfold as planned. That bootstrap theology is as cold and dangerous as the false piety that claims if you just pray hard enough for what you want, it'll come: new toy, a new partner, a job, a cure, world peace. That's not faith at all. Faith lets go of every outcome, awaits possibilities as yet unseen and unimagined. It seeks the grace to dwell right

*here, right now, breathing in, breathing out,
without or with the thing we think we want.¹*

So faith is different than knowledge or belief; a liberal faith is not built around saying just the secret word so that a little bird will fly down and hand you a hundred dollars. It's not having faith in the inerrancy of a religious text, or in the magic of a ritual or even in the leadership of a particular religious institution. It is, however, an act of faith as a religious and spiritual person, to continue to roll or stand up, show up, and to engage ever more deeply with what it means to be a faithful person. How do we do that?

Again, going back to Paul, he was trying to show the people of his time examples of what it means to be faithful. He called out Noah, who was told "better get ready – there's a big storm a comin'," and when all the neighbors looked at the blue sky and scoffed, Noah built. He called out Sarai, later known as Sarah who is told "you are going to be the mother of a great nation," and what was her response, she laughed, only to give birth to son Isaac; and Moses, whom God kept calling and Moses kept saying "really, can't you find somebody else?" but who led his people through the greatest journey of freedom of their lifetimes. But you don't have to go that far back to find evidence of faithful people; people who exemplify what it means to be a person of faith.

We often go to the most dramatic examples; of the famous scene of Dr. King at his kitchen table, in doubt about his own strength to continue the fight; but there are so many more examples of what it means to be faithful to one's values even when it's hard; even when it seems impossible. But this particular faith tradition of Unitarian Universalism is rich with stories of people who kept the faith, often times in the midst of incredible odds. For example, historian and theologian Rev. Dr. Mark Morrison Reed has written many books about Black Pioneers in a White Denomination; of primarily men, like Egbert Ethelred Brown, who had an experience of losing his faith. He wrote this:

"I was a choirboy of Montego Bay Episcopal Church when the first ray of light broke through my Trinitarianism It was Easter Sunday. We did not as usual sing the Athanasian Creed: it was recited alternately by the priest and the congregation. The strangeness of the Trinitarian arithmetic struck me forcibly - so forcibly that I decided then and there to sever my connection with the church which enunciated so impossible a proposition"²

In 1907 Brown inquired about Unitarianism and seeking financial aid was discouraged by the Association. As Morrison Reed writes: Unitarianism was associated with intellectual culture and many Unitarians feared that their system of belief might be corrupted if embraced by the mass of common men and women, much less by blacks." Nevertheless, he became the first black Jamaican-American to be ordained as a Unitarian minister and went on to found the Harlem Community Church despite inconsistent support.

The stories about Brown and many others who have joined and sometimes left Unitarian and Unitarian Universalism are both tragic and inspiring. Because at some juncture, these stories are a microcosm of our own stories; of how we lose our faith; find a faith; and maybe are discouraged by our faith over and over again. They are inspiring stories however, because when our own personal faith begins to falter; when the cracks of life widen; when we are disappointed with institutions – even ones like the church – or the leaders or the ways in which people can be indifferent or mean-spirited; petty and argumentative; power hungry or terminally unhappy – we can also find our faith again and again and again.

When I found this faith of Unitarian Universalism, I was 21 years old and by the time I was 26, I decided to go into the ministry. I had a rather spotty career as a lay church member, so I didn't get to experience the kind of faith that I see from my role as a minister. The kind of faith that I see in the people of a church who come, dare I say, faithfully, regardless of who is preaching, or if the

¹ You'll Never Know, A Sermon preached by Rev. Victoria Safford, October 8, 2018.
<https://whitebearunitarian.org/you-never-know-10-08-18-sermon/>

² <http://jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20110904/focus/focus11.html>

music is to their liking, or if the weather is too hot or too cold or if they're irritated by the soprano who sings off key on the hymns. But I've seen faithful behavior time and time again; and those stories of people, like you, and your fellows church members, won't be told in history books, but rather in blessed memory for us to notice, to pay attention and to be inspired by.

I think of Connie, this short, grandmotherly-looking long time church member with a British accent, who would say "hello, love" when serving you coffee, and there were some weeks I was so low, I needed to hear her say that while handing me a cup of coffee;

And there was Mike, the blue-collar owner of a HVAC repair business who would call his ministers to ponder theological questions as he was repairing air conditioners; who joined the worship associates' team and gave sermons from a deep well of life wisdom;

And there was Mikayla, the young woman with two rowdy and rambunctious boys who found her way to a UU church from a deeply entrenched Catholic family; she got involved in Cleveland's version of ACT – community organizing, and when Tamir Rice was killed, she was one of the first to organize a die-in on the streets of Cleveland. Despite the freezing cold temperatures, she brought her two young boys with her, and we marched together in silence, and then laid down on the cold streets next to the park where Tamir was killed and made angels with our arms and legs; as if to shoo away the sadness caused by that awful death;

And then there's just last Sunday, with the children of this church running through legs of our members; and those bringing food and those forgetting to bring food, and church members staying to clean up and put the church back in place, and laughing and teasing and knowing that there is something about church that pulls at us, even when the weather's bad, the sermon mediocre or potluck full of carbs.

Remember the beginning of this sermon – I was sitting in the car with my mother and she asked me "how was confirmation class tonight?" Knowing that the pastor would call the next day and my immortal soul would probably be in peril, I told her everything that happened. I told her about the

baptism story and the pastor's response, and what I said. I thought I was trouble, but I didn't know what the consequences would be.

There was a long silence as we rode home. And then, my mom turned and looked me and said "Chatty (her nickname for me) you were right. That was a horrible to say. I don't believe in a God that would condemn an infant to hell. That mother is in hell enough." When the pastor called, she told him so, and this ended my relationship with the Missouri Synod Lutherans. And thus began a new faith – because my mother had saved my faith by speaking her truth, in love and by encouraging me to speak my truth. She wished I had been more nuanced in my response to Pastor Beale, but she also helped me to understand how important it is to be faithful – to one's faith – and that it is worth saving.

We cite 19th century Universalist Olympia Brown as one of our feminist hero's. Brown decided she wanted to be minister, but because women were not permitted to be ministers, she faced hostility and opposition at almost every turn. Yet, she believed in this faith and persisted to become the first fully ordained female Universalist minister and the first female minister of a national religion. She worked tirelessly for women's rights and the right to vote and died in Baltimore in 1926. Using the language of her day and with respect to her theological orientation, I invite you to read responsively with me, her words about a life-giving and life affirming faith:

Stand by this faith. Work for it and sacrifice for it.

There is nothing in all the world so important as to be loyal to this faith which has placed before us the loftiest ideals.

Which has comforted us in sorrow, strengthen us for noble duty and made the world more beautiful.

Do not demand immediate results but rejoice that we are worthy to be entrusted with this great message,

That you are strong enough to work for a great true principle without counting the cost;

Go on finding new applications of these truths and new enjoyments in their contemplation,

*always trusting in the one God which ever lives
and loves.*

May it be so.