

Faith and Belief

22nd November 2020

Prelude

Whether this is your first time join with this community, or whether you've been with us forever welcome to our time of celebration, reflection and community.

Let's take a few moments of quietness to invite the Spirit of Life and of Love – God of Grace – to be present among us and to awaken within us

Opening Words ~ *Lindsay Bates*

Come, let us worship together.

Let us open our minds to the challenge of reason,
open our hearts to the healing of love,
open our lives to the calling of conscience,
open our souls to the comfort of joy.

Astonished by the miracle of life,
grateful for the gift of fellowship,
confident in the power of living faith,
we are here gathered:

Come, let us worship together.

Chalice Lighting ~ *Katie Gelfand*

We call forth the life of our faith by igniting our chalice.

This spark of new beginnings invites us into a sacred space
to reflect where we have been and where we are going.

Even knowing that this particular flame will intentionally end
with our ritual extinguishing, we fear not its end...

For we know, with brave hearts,
that from every ending of our lives,

We are sent forth to make a new beginning.

1st Hymn Purple Book No. 215 Where There is Faith ~ *Traditional Transylvanian*

Hol hit ott szeretet;
 hol szeretet ott béke.
 Hol béke ott áldás;
 Hol áldás ott Isten.
 Hol Isten ott szükség nincsen.

Where there is faith there is love;
 where there is love there is peace.
 Where there is peace there is blessing;
 where there is blessing there is God.
 Where there is God, there, there is no need.

Reading from: Faith – Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience ~ *Sharon Salzberg*

With their assumptions of correctness, beliefs try to make a known out of the unknown... Faith, on the other hand... doesn't decide how we are going to perceive something but rather is the ability to move forward even without knowing. Faith, in contrast to belief, is not a definition of reality, not a received answer, but an active, open state that makes us willing to explore. While beliefs come to us from outside – from another person or a tradition or heritage – faith comes from within, from our alive participation in the process of discovery.

2nd Hymn Green Book No. 35 Down the Ages We Have Trod ~ *John Storey*

Down the ages we have trod
 Many paths in search of God,
 Seeking ever to define
 The Eternal and Divine.

Some have seen eternal good
 Pictured best in Parenthood,
 And a Being throned above
 Ruling over us in love.

There are others who proclaim
 God and Nature are the same,
 And the present Godhead own
 Where Creation's laws are known.

There are eyes which best can see

Spirit of earth, root, stone and tree,
 water of life, flowing in me,
 keeping me stable, nourishing me,
 O fill me with living energy!
 Spirit of nature, healing and free,
 spirit of love, expanding in me,
 spirit of life, breathe deeply in me,
 inspire me with living energy!

Spirit of love, softly draw near,
 open my heart, lessen my fear,
 sing of compassion, help me to hear,
 O fill me with loving energy!
 Spirit of nature, healing and free,
 spirit of love, expanding in me,
 spirit of life, breathe deeply in me,
 inspire me with living energy!

Spirit of life, you are my song,
 sing in my soul, all my life long,
 gladden and guide me, keep me from wrong,
 O fill me with sacred energy!
 Spirit of nature, healing and free,
 spirit of love, expanding in me,
 spirit of life, breathe deeply in me,
 inspire me with living energy!

Sermon Faith and Belief – What’s the Difference?

Deep *faith* doesn’t have to have anything to do with what one’s *belief* is about the nature of the universe or the existence or otherwise of supernatural beings. So what’s the difference?

Looking up both words in Chambers Dictionary the definition of belief contains a lot about faith; and the definition of faith contains a lot about belief; and indeed many people tend to take the two words as synonymous. However it’s the first part of each of the dictionary definitions that gives us the clue as to their essential difference.

The definition of belief starts: “*persuasion of the truth of anything*”

The definition of faith starts: “*trust or confidence*”

There’s the nub of it:

Belief is about acceptance of a *'thing'*

– a concept – a doctrine – a statement about the nature of the universe

Faith is about *trust or confidence* in one's experience of the world

– and maybe this experience can't be articulated in a neat intellectual formulation

I spent a considerable amount of time in the past strenuously wrestling with belief in religious doctrines. I was so very deeply drawn toward the life of the spirit and the only place I could find at the time for the exploration of that life was within dogmatically rigid religious institutions. I later came to realise that it wasn't necessary to hold rigid beliefs in order to travel deeply and authentically along the spiritual path. But it was only later that I really began to grasp the essential difference between faith and belief.

I took a course in 'Pastoral Care and Counselling' at the Harvard Divinity School. The course instructor Prof Cheryl Giles was a remarkable woman – a gay black woman brought up Catholic and now a practicing Buddhist, who drew deeply on her own personal experience of being marginalised and of searching for an authentic spiritual path for herself. She wanted us to explore what faith meant to each of us and what it might mean to those whom we were called to work with in a pastoral capacity. This was a course for ministers of all denominations, and we broke into small groups for practical work and discussion.

My group consisted of a Korean Presbyterian minister and an African American Evangelical ministry student, two people with very strong beliefs as well as deep faith. We had great discussions and learned a lot about each other's perspectives. I became good friends with Yo Han the Korean minister. It was very moving to witness his experience of being challenged by some very different beliefs from those he had held fast to all his life; and to see him rising to the challenge. His faith remained strong but, as he was inspired by our gay Buddhist instructor, and found that God was speaking to him through her, he questioned himself deeply about the beliefs he had held deeply since childhood about other religions and sexual orientations. This wasn't anything to do with intellectual disputation about beliefs; it was about his faith in God and his experience of finding God in the people he was being exposed to.

Yo Han held quite specific *beliefs* about what or who God is, but I contend that his *experience* of God and therefore his *faith* in God was probably not that different from my experience of the divine or the life force of the Universe – about which I would struggle to give you any cogent intellectual belief statements.

Another important signpost along my journey towards understanding of belief and faith came to me in a set text from that course, a book by Sharon Salzberg, called *Faith: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience*.

It was at near the beginning of my time in Massachusetts, it was the day after my first sermon at First Parish in Bedford. I had been battered and bruised by the talk-back session following my sermon in which I said I hoped to spend my year with them exploring how we might look afresh at words like God and prayer which many Unitarians recoil from. This very vociferously Humanist congregation wanted no truck with all this God stuff. Suddenly I wasn't sure what I was doing there; what was I going to do for the next year? They took a dim view of everything that I held dear.

The following day I took myself off to Walden Pond, a site of pilgrimage for lovers of the work of Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. I lay down under a tree, beside the lake in the autumn sunshine and I allowed the deep power of the earth to permeate my body and to begin to soothe and heal my battered and bruised spirit. After a while I took out the Sharon Salzberg book called *Faith* which I was supposed to read for my class during the week. I began to read voraciously. This book spoke to my soul as my discussion partners at First Parish the previous day had not. I should note here that I came to love the community of First Parish dearly and we learned a lot from each other in my year there.

In her introduction Salzberg relates a conversation with a friend. The friend asked "How can you possibly be writing a book on faith without focussing on God?" Salzberg's response was that:

"whether faith is connected to a deity or not, its essence lies in trusting ourselves to discover the deepest truths on which we can rely."

I was able to articulate the deepest truths that I have experienced by using the language of God and prayer, this doesn't mean that I have rigid beliefs about the meaning of those slippery words. In a strange way I found myself, for a time, more at ease with my evangelical fellow ministry students than I did with my humanist Unitarian congregation, it was a very enlightening part of my journey of faith, it was all about the power of language and perception.

As I sat beneath the trees at Walden Pond I continued to read

"Often it is the journey itself, not the destination, that is the real point of setting forth...
With faith we move into the unknown, openly meeting whatever the next moment brings."

My journey of faith had led me along this path of ministry, and to this place where I was struggling to make sense of my experience of and reactions to people quite different from me in their understanding of the world. However this experience would eventually help me to come to new understandings about myself, other people and the nature of human relationship. It has been an important part of my journey of faith and of ministry.

What I'm describing here is not some notion of destiny or belief that everything unfolds exactly as it is supposed to unfold – this I do not believe. I believe that I took a leap of faith with little idea of where it would lead me, and it led me to new possibilities, new opportunities to grow and to deepen my understanding of the world and the human spirit. At many places along the path I could have taken different turnings, which would have opened up different opportunities. The journey of faith is about experiencing a deep conviction that one should take a certain turn in the path and having the courage to follow that conviction without knowing where it will lead.

But following convictions derived from deeply felt experience is just the first flush of faith. Salzberg goes on to talk about how to proceed from there. She writes

For our faith to mature, we need to weigh what others tell us against our own experience of the truth... faith is strengthened by doubt when doubt is a sincere critical questioning combined with deep trust in our own right and ability to discern the truth.

This can be the more difficult and less exhilarating part of the journey, where we have to weigh and question and deeply consider both what we learn from others as well as our own experience of the world. Where we have to guard against, on the one hand, just walking away and forgetting about our deep experiences of the world, or, on the other hand, clinging to one experience and building a static belief structure around it which is not open to consideration of new experience and understanding. Faith is a journey that is ongoing. If we are sincere in our exploration our faith will continue to develop and to produce new fruit for as long as we continue to move forward along the path.

Salzberg writes:

While beliefs come to us from outside – from another person or a tradition or heritage – faith comes from within, from our alive participation in the process of discovery.

I once saw a theatre production of James Hogg's 1824 novel "The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner." It probes the nature of religious fanaticism and in particular the Calvinist doctrine of predestination. This is a great illustration of the difference between belief and faith. In the play the protagonist is brought up by zealous and rigid Calvinists to believe that he is one of the elect, that he is predestined for salvation and as a result any sin that he commits will be

wiped clean, this leads him, under the influence of a shadowy figure variously seen as the devil or a delusion, to commit heinous crimes. Again and again he falters and questions the evil that he does, and again and again his belief that he is one of the elect wins out over his experienced understanding that what he is doing is wrong. This is the potentially dangerous outcome of the premise that humanity is basically flawed or sinful and therefore needs to submit obediently to the will of an external deity. We can of course get to this state of depravity all by ourselves, but I have deep faith – despite, sometimes, considerable evidence to the contrary – that human persons have the intrinsic potential to experience the world as wonderful, astonishing and worthwhile and to act with faith on that experience.

My journey of faith has led me to be part of this remarkable community. I have faith that we can continue to journey together and to grow, to reach out and welcome more people into our community, but more importantly to grow in faith, in compassion and in how we perceive and interact with the world as individuals and as a body. Part of this growth is lived out in our separate lives in whatever other communities we are part of but part is lived out by our involvement here in our own place – in our corporate gathering to explore, to experience and to appreciate wonder and beauty; in our care and concern for each other, and in our willingness to be part of the less enticing but necessary work of building and sustaining our community and our sacred space.

Faith is about listening to and trusting our deepest experience, it is about living out that faith in our everyday interactions with ourselves, with those we love and with strangers, and so living more deeply and more joyfully. It is also about the nitty-gritty of life.

4th Hymn Purple Book No. 152 Thanks Be for These ~ *Richard S. Gilbert et al*

Thanks be for these, life's holy times,
 moments of grief, days of delight;
 triumph and failure intertwine,
 shaping our vision of the right.

Thanks be for these, for birth and death,
 life in between with meaning full;
 holy becomes the quickened breath;
 we celebrate life's interval.

Thanks be for these, ennobling art,
 images welcome to our sight,

music caressing ear and heart,
inviting us to loftier height.

Thanks be for these, who question why,
who noble motives do obey,
those who know how to live and die,
comrades who share this holy way.

Thanks be for these, we celebrate,
sing and rejoice, our trust declare;
press all our faith into our fate;
bless now the destiny we share.

Closing Words ~ *Norman V Naylor*

Reminded that we are part and participants of the Universe,
let us go forth from the quiet of this hour
encouraged to strive toward faithfulness to the best in ourselves,
in others, and in the whole creation.

Postlude