

Faithful Over A Few Things
A Sermon for Easter
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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, hm? 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?

Moments later, while pedaling along Fleming Scipio Townline Rd., the sky opened up, releasing a fierce summer shower. Luckily, this being a "Bible Belt" bubble, 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? I wondered. Was it a sign - a cosmic comeuppance?

I sat on a well-worn pew they had been 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 I mean, aren't these the people with outdated, unsophisticated beliefs?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?*

Perhaps. Yet, on that drizzly day in August, on a country road with nowhere else to take cover, those silly scripture lovers pierced my uppity liberal veneer 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 can be downright judgmental and condescending, at times, on the topic of "faith." When the subject arises, the reactions 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 at Beacon and out there in the youtube Universe. 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, and I encouraged them to plunge ahead. I heard snarky comments from some corners, when the invitation went out from 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 Easter 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 or my belief system as a Jewishly-raised UU. But rather, the humanitarian Jesus, the one embraced by early Unitarians who had eschewed the divine Christ in the early 1800s.

Jesus, 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 in Pittsburgh for UU Christians on Sunday mornings. Yeshua, the fully human man who rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, some 2000 plus years ago, to waving palms and pageantry, to fulfill a complex destiny.

This entry scene is one of the most epic in films recounting the Passion story (conjure up the image of “Ben Hur” or “The Greatest Story Ever Told”). These Hollywood classics are eye-popping, but a couple 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 Unitarian Universalist Easter 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 ashram of disciples. Clavius can hardly believe his eyes. How can this be? Now, 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, rather than 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 Syria. A day without death - if only this was possible on our cruel and violent planet, especially amidst this horrific coronavirus pandemic. But yes, a day without death is worth envisioning - for Aleppo and Detroit and the Sudan and here, in Northern Arizona.

"Certainty" is an unlikely wish for us, at least religiously— that's why many of us have chosen to gather in this UU context, one which *intentionally* invites us/ expects us to explore faith *without* certainty. But, don't be mistaken - this 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 folks in the Scipio Community Church who rest in their rock solid beliefs, memorized prayers, 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 nor the journey that most of us UUs 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 way.

The Rev. Peter Freidrich 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."

Back in 1979, then-UUA President Paul Carnes preached that, "Our form of hope accepts the essential tragic character of life, the sin and misery of the world, and then somehow or other sees through this."

"This is more challenging for us," he wrote, "because we cannot, choose not to, begin with the promises of God or notion of predestination about salvation through a Savior. That's the way it is with us liberally religious folk, and so be it." Carnes further suggests that "Life is so great a blessing, that every tomorrow we project, every time we aspire or dream, every time we set our alarm clock in faith that the sun will set to rise again, we bear witness to our optimism."

These words inspire me today, as we hold on to hope and optimism while we shelter at home for safety. We strive to remain faithful to the promises of tomorrow, perhaps with a heightened gratitude for what life offers us in this broken and hurting world, aching for a unique form of resurrection.

Understandably, as religious liberals, we may be grasping for some form of faith right now. Friends, remember and take strength from the notion that "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." (Friedrich) Welcome this exploration of what grounds you, what rounds you, and what confounds you.

The human Jesus clearly practiced an 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 own unbounded faith journeys, we can decide to be patient and faithful over 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 a type of resurrection into our best selves, our highest selves, courageous and joyful with the sense of always becoming. This is the Easter faith of Unitarian Universalism.

In her reflection ("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 Easter morning, ask yourselves, good and faithful servants – what would they be for you?

Create in us a clean heart, Spirit of Life. And help us to watch for the signs.
Blessed be. Blessed we. And Amen.

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