

Faith, Hope, and Perseverance

Message arranged by Ruth Piccone, November 22, 2009

Portions of this message are adapted from Wikipedia, ““Hope’s Firm Foundation”, by Rev. Robert Hardies, and Lou Tice, founder of the Pacific Institute.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Faith>

<http://www.all-souls.org/sermons/Rob%20Hardies.%202009.2.15.htm>

<http://www.thepacificinstitute.us/v2/>

Faith

My dad, who tried his best to turn his lively passionate band of 5 children into rational thinkers, attended law school just long enough to develop the habit of interjecting a heated argument with, “Define your terms. You must always begin by defining your terms”. Years later a professional mentor of mine told me, “You must always begin with a joke.” Actually, I think there is value in both approaches, so, I’d like to begin my first sermon with both.

Hopefully I won’t offend anyone. I decided it was ok to tell a catholic joke, since I’m ex-catholic myself, and I still have a tremendous amount of respect for them, and the ethical foundation it gave to me while I was growing up. Now that I’ve given my disclaimer...

A little girl walks down the street with a basket of kittens. A priest says, “What cute kittens. What kind are they?” “Catholic kittens, Father.” The next week, the same girl, same kittens, same priest, only this time with the bishop. Priest says “This is really cute, your eminence. Get a load of this. Hello, little girl. Tell the eminence what kind of kittens you have.” “They’re UU kittens, your eminence.” “What! Last week you told me they were Catholic kittens.” “Yes, father, but now their eyes are open.”

Today, with our eyes open, I’d like to talk to you about faith, the role it plays in our lives, and to encourage everyone here to make a conscience choice of holding onto hope.

How do I describe faith? A few days ago, I thought it was handing my 4 year old a stapler. And someday I’ll say, “it’s handing my teenager the car keys”. It’s as simple as this, and yet a lot deeper than this too.

According to Wikipedia, faith is the confident belief or trust in the truth or trustworthiness of a person, idea, or thing. The word “faith” can refer to a religion itself or to religion in general. But religion is not a necessary component to faith, nor is a belief in a all-knowing and all-powerful being.. As with trust, faith involves a concept of future events or outcomes, and is used conversely for a belief not resting on logical proof or material evidence. Informal usage of the word “faith” can be quite broad and may be used in place of “trust” or “belief”.

It is sometimes argued that even scientific knowledge is dependent on “faith”. For example, there is faith that the researcher is competent, and honest. Distinguished chemist and philosopher Michael Polanyi argued that scientific discovery begins with a scientist’s faith that an unknown discovery is possible. Scientific discovery thus requires a passionate commitment to a result that is unknowable at the outset. Scientific progress depends primarily on the scientist’s willingness to commit time and resources to investigation. The scientist begins before for the truth is known, or the benefits of the discovery are imagined, and certainly not completely understood. So, even in rational scientific pursuits, a person needs faith before action. Although a distinction here needs to be made –scientific faith does not see itself as dogmatic. While the scientist must make presuppositions in order to get the enterprise under way, almost everything could be revised and discarded based on some new understanding.

There is a lesson here. While we believe and are sure in our faith, and follow a journey with an intense feeling of certainty and destiny, remember to carry a healthy dose of humility, because we cannot know it all, and at any moment, we may need to change directions.

Hope

Rev. Robert Hardies of All Soul’s Unitarian Church in Washington D.C., asks in his sermon “Hope’s Firm Foundation”, “when you face a great challenge in your life, what gets you through? What sustains you through a death of a loved one, a lost job, a broken or lonely heart? In your darkest hour, what is the source of your hope? Is there any question more important than this? For the Rev Hardies, religion, at its core, is people telling stories of hope. People like us, telling stories that sustain us, that inspire us, stories that give us courage in difficult times.

Homer’s story of the Odyssey inspired me when I woke up on my 36th birthday having lost my job the day before, no children, although I was trying, no friends or family close by, and a marriage that appeared to be crumbling before my eyes. Everything that I had hoped for as a child and young adult, wasn’t there. A line in the 1997 version of the movie Odyssey replayed in my head as I looked

at my puffy eyes in the mirror, “You must reclaim your world”. The line in this movie was telling me, although I’ve had some great things in my life, just like Odysseus, they are gone now, and I’m going to have to put some serious effort into getting them back. I didn’t know how I was going to accomplish this, but I took a leap of faith that it could be done. I started a job search for what I loved to do in the past, in a place I wanted to live, and my husband joined me in this same goal. We sold our newly remodeled house, and moved to Helena. By my 37th birthday, I had my career back, a beautiful healthy and happy baby girl, new friends, old friends and a marriage persevering through the construction of a new home.

That happens to be a true story, but what about other stories we turn to, legends and parables, allegorical stories of faith, and the unsinkable human spirit?

Here’s one of my favorites. Jesus wanted to spend a little time alone after hearing about his cousin’s death, John the Baptizer. But the crowds found out where he was going, and followed him. Jesus saw the mass of people, and was moved with selfless compassion for them. He cured the sick, as the story goes, then told his disciples to feed the crowd of 5000. The disciples exclaimed “We can’t do that, all we have is five loaves of bread and two fish.” Jesus told everyone to sit down, he blessed the food, and passed it out. Somehow, there was enough food to feed all 5000 and still have leftovers. The message is, with faith, everyone can get what they need.

The skeptic, replies, “Well, aren’t those just a tall tales? Fables of wishful thinking? Lies that distract the doomed from their fate? The opiate of the masses? The skeptic, whether it be a friend, enemy or our own questioning mind, challenges us.

Religion is people telling stories of hope. Are stories we tell about hope true? If you place your faith on the facts of the story, the dogma, you will certainly be disappointed. If you place your faith on the truth of the story, the message of the parable, you will be inspired.

I recently tried to explain my faith to my four year old daughter Jessica. If the trees and grass sway in the wind as storm clouds come your way, I asked her, do you have to see the wind to know that it is there? You can see the effects of the wind, even though you can’t see the wind itself. My belief in what I call God is the same. I don’t mean to discuss details about what god is, but I see evidence that faith in a higher purpose, beyond my current circumstances, allows me to transcend the pain or emptiness of the moment, to continue to behave as if there will be a good ending.

Lou Tice, founder of the Pacific Institute, and “Investments in Excellence” would say that it is precisely my belief that brings about a good ending. He doesn’t mean to say that you can walk off a cliff and be caught by angles, or that your bank account will overflow as long as you believe you are rich. He’s talking about a healthy and positive belief in your own worth and ability to accomplish goals. This kind of belief facilitates your ability to utilize your talents and resources to bring about your goals. If we believe there is no way around a problem, we close our minds to possible solutions. But, if we believe we will find a way, then, when we run into obstacles, we become creative. We see things we wouldn’t usually see. What you seek for, you will find. We hang in there and get others to help us until we do find a way. The most powerful thing you can do to change your life is to change your beliefs about life and act accordingly.

In his Winner’s Circle Network emailing - 11/10/09 – He talks about the Wizard of Oz as a story about the power of beliefs. You see, Dorothy and her pals all wanted something. As is often the case, they looked for someone else to give it to them, someone in authority who had “the power.”

When they met the Wizard, they discovered was that each of them already had whatever it was he or she felt was lacking; it was the belief that needed changing. The Lion wasn’t really a coward - he proved that on the journey to Oz - but he believed he was, so most of the time he acted like it. When the Wizard gave him a medal and reminded him of his bravery, he affirmed the truth of a new belief, and that was all it took. Same thing for the Tin Man and the Scarecrow. Dorothy could have gone home any time she wanted, she just didn’t know it. For her, the journey was a risky rite of passage into her own strength and her own heart. Each of them had “the power” all along. Lou Tice goes on to say, “The Wizard of Oz” can be seen as a wonderfully entertaining story about the power of belief and the importance of becoming our own authority. Who is your Wizard of Oz, and do you really need that person to tell you what you already know about yourself in your heart?

Perseverance

Back to Rev. Hardies’ sermon, he says we must ground our hope in the goodness of life that we experience as a reality in the here and now. We can hope for more love, because we have felt love’s clasped hand. We can hope for more compassion because we have shed its tear. We don’t need the prophet to convince us of the land of milk and honey, for we’ve tasted it, if only a sip, with our own lips. And on that authority, on our lived experience, we must ground our hope. Not in an idealistic

future, or past, but on the lived reality of what we know of our world. When I've seen it with my own eyes [like I see the wind] no skeptic, no cynic can take my hope away from me.

Holding on to hope is something of an art. Because, of course, we only experience the goodness of life in our current reality in glimpses. Glimpses of reconciliation, glimpses of peace, glimpses of wholeness. Now, let's test this out for a moment, and go back to the question, "In your darkest hour, what is the source of your hope? Close your eyes for a moment and think back. For me, it was the kindness of a stranger, a hand on my shoulder, the love of a friend, it was me remembering the inner strength I have found to get through the time before. It was the hope grounded in a reality, that gave me the hope that saw me through.

We must pay attention to the glimpses of hope in our lives. And, we must cherish them, keep them alive in our spiritual lives, by making them the objects of our imagination. This is where the prophets and inspiring stories come in. We don't have to take the prophet's word that there is a land of milk and honey. But when they talk of it, it sure does sound beautiful. And, they remind us of the times that we tasted the milk and honey ourselves. I'm willing to bet everyone here has experienced a part of you would describe as heaven. When a choir sings of the deep river that we cross over into Jordan, we can be reminded of a moment of deliverance and of crossing over, and it gives us strength. Later, when we sing, "Touch the Earth, Reach the Sky", we can be reminded of the experience of soaring with courage, with faith, hope and perseverance".

Recently I've been having a lot of conversations with friends and family about my dad's deteriorating condition. He's entered into the next phase of Parkinson's, where he's now depending on Depends, and sees a black cat living with him that isn't really there, and forgets where he is and who I am. I'm compelled to ask, "What cruel twist of fate keeps a man's heart beating when HE is ready to die, and his mind has already left this world? On Veteran's day I called to check up on him and my Mom who is struggling with her own aging body and mind. She tells me he had a good night, and hands the phone to him. I prepare myself for a short conversation with a stranger. He softly, coherently asks how Jessie and John are doing, asks when we'll be coming for another visit, and sends his love our way. My dad's recognition and caring love felt like a warm sustaining embrace. And I thought, "Wow, there is still hope here. My dad's life still has meaning and value –after all, he just made a big difference to me." Who knows what more great things his life will bring?

Finally, it's up to us to be disciples of hope; we must be its instruments. If we want hope to survive in this world today, then every day we've got to create it, taking the glimpses that we find and building

on them, and making them into our firm foundation for the future. We must make a deliberate choice to suspend the cynic with us, be rooted in what we know of the goodness of life, and look hopefully to the future.