

A MATTER OF BELIEF

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ATKINSON MEMORIAL CHURCH
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RESPONSIVE READING:

It Matters What We Believe by Soph-I-a Lyon Fahs

Some beliefs are like walled gardens. They encourage exclusiveness, and the feeling of being especially privileged.

Other beliefs are expansive and lead the way into wider and deeper sympathies.

Some beliefs are like shadows, clouding children's days with fears of unknown calamities.

Other beliefs are like sunshine, blessing children with the warmth of happiness.

Some beliefs are divisive, separating the saved from the unsaved, friends from enemies.

Other beliefs are bonds in a world community, where sincere differences beautify the pattern.

Some beliefs are like blinders, shutting off the power to choose one's own direction.

Other beliefs are like gateways opening wide vistas for exploration.

Some beliefs weaken a person's selfhood. They blight the growth of resourcefulness.

Other beliefs nurture self-confidence and enrich the feeling of personal worth.

Some beliefs are rigid, like the body of death, impotent in a changing world.

Other beliefs are pliable, like the young sapling, ever growing with the upward thrust of life.

SERMON:

A person will worship something – have no doubt about that.

We may think our tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of our hearts – but it will out.

That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and character.

Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship,

for what we are worshipping we are becoming.

– Ralph Waldo Emerson

Both Emerson, the great Unitarian sage of the 19th century and Sophia Fahs, author of our responsive reading and 20th century Unitarian who transformed religious education in our movement, both tell us that it matters what we believe. It matters what we worship. For what we believe and worship frames our lives, forms our character.

Yet Jill and I would posit to you that it matters also *that* we believe and that we consider our belief with great care. Jesus, the teacher, tells us that where our treasure lies, there our hearts will be also. Our treasure is that which is at the center of our lives. It is ultimately what we worship. Worship is one of those words some stumble over. For many, it still implies a hierarchical worship of a deity on high. Yet taking the word back to its old English roots, we find worth-shape. That's what we do here on a Sunday – shaping our lives by engaging in what is most worthy. Indeed, a person will worship something. Humans are meaning making creatures guided by what we believe.

Yet on this very point we can become a little fuzzy. Sometimes our open-hearted, free-thinking faith can make us, well, a little lazy. We love to say that it's the journey, not the destination. That we love the questions more than the answers. Yet those two statements, true as they may well be, can keep us skating on the surface.

Jill thought that her quest for religious Truth meant she must embrace the monastic life. Yet her teacher showed her that the more rigorous spiritual path is to devote yourself to seeking the Truth, inner and outer, as what Buddhists would call a householder. To live in this world with all its distractions and still seek the Truth, the Holy, God's purposes in our lives.

Yet we don't fully engage the challenge. Sometimes it seems we are more comfortable talking about religion than practicing it.

Eugene Pickett, former president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, has written, "The old watchwords of liberalism – freedom, reason and tolerance – worthy though they may be, are simply not catching the imagination of the contemporary world. They describe a process for approaching the religious depths, but they testify to no intimate acquaintance with the depths themselves. If we are ever to speak to a new age, we must supplement our seeking with some profound religious findings."

There is a joke about a group coming to a fork in the road. One sign points toward heaven. The other points toward a discussion on whether there is a heaven. You guessed the punch line. All the Unitarians in the group take the road leading to the discussion. Garrison Keillor has probably even told that joke on *A Prairie Home Companion*, for it does point to one of our foibles. Yet it doesn't speak to the yearning for more, for depth and meaning. I don't think the dispassionate and reasoned discussion quite catches our imagination any longer, if it ever fully did. How do we in fact acquaint ourselves with depth?

I'd like to put in a good word for destinations and answers what Pickett calls "profound religious findings." It can be a relief to land somewhere. To go deeply. To explore something vertically, not horizontally. To try on a belief – to let it affect and shape your life. To see where it takes you. You needn't stay there. Indeed acquaintance with depth will likely carry you along to ever new truths.

Yet we often resist. We fear articulating our beliefs. For all of our diversity of religious thought, for all of our tolerance of many theological perspectives, I have heard both of these statements about this church – more than once.

I don't feel comfortable talking about God here, people are more humanist.

I don't feel comfortable being an atheist in this church, it's really a more theistically oriented congregation.

What is going on here? In a liberal church where we value acceptance and diversity, yet people are uncomfortable voicing what feel like divergent beliefs? It may be that embracing so many different beliefs means everyone really *is* in the minority. But it also means that we are not living up to our mission as a liberal church. The words freedom, reason and tolerance may only be the starting point, but without them we are lost.

We have to grow up a little here. Indeed, it takes some maturity to acquaint ourselves with depth. It takes some security to articulate beliefs and still be open to those who disagree. If it is true that we need not think alike to love alike, then we must be able not to simply tolerate one another, but to be truly curious about one another's beliefs. We must be able to state our beliefs positively and affirmatively.

One reason Garrison Keillor can nail us so adroitly with his jokes is that we still fall into the trap of defining ourselves by what we do not believe. We have a much harder time speaking positively about what we do believe. Which opens us to the charge: Oh, those Unitarians, they don't believe in anything.

This gives us low self-esteem as a faith and it gets in the way of exploring our faith with the depth we yearn for – atheist, agnostic, Buddhist, Christian, God-talker and cross-cringer alike. For it keeps us from articulating our beliefs out loud, in the very community that claims to welcome diversity of belief.

We too easily forget that we stand in a long tradition of positive, liberating, radical and world-changing beliefs. Two of the best expressions of that belief are in the hymns before and after this sermon.

It Came Upon the Midnight Clear is one of the first true Christmas Carols from the 19th century. It was written in 1849 by Unitarian minister Edmund Hamilton Sears, in response to the Mexican American War.

At that time, writes Ken Sawyer, "people didn't sing carols in church, where they were thought inappropriately childish or secular, as opposed to old hymns like 'O Come, All Ye Faithful,' and not many carols had been written.... Sears' song is remarkable for its focus not on Bethlehem, but on his own time, and on the ever-contemporary issue of war and peace.... [This carol] carol remains, repeated all over the world every year. Probably more than any other Christmas carol, it talks about today — his day, our day. It says that the call to peace and goodwill to all is as loud on any other day as it was on that midnight of old, if we would but listen 'in solemn stillness.'"

What is the "It" that came on that clear midnight? "It" is an incarnate and indwelling God, the Holy, bending near the near the earth on angel wings. "It" brings a message of peace to a weary world. It is the love song that seeks to hush the battle strife. It offers us depth and connection.

The hymn we will sing in just a few minutes was written later in the century by Unitarian minister William Channing Gannett. *It Sounds Along the Ages* is a wildly transcendental hymn, heralding the Holy Word spoken throughout time and human experience, that echoed from the cliffs of Sinai, that breathed beneath the Buddha's tree, that Hallowed Galilee. It is the Holy Call bringing forth new truth, new justice, resounding throughout all ages.

Gannett is also known for writing "The Things Most Commonly Believed To-Day Among Us" in 1887, a summation of Unitarian beliefs at the end of the 19th century. You may well find it surprisingly modern. It reads in part:

We believe that to love the good and live the good is the supreme thing in religion:

We hold reason and conscience to be final authorities in matters of religious belief:

We honor the Bible and all inspiring scripture, old or new:

We revere Jesus and all holy souls that have taught [us] truth and righteousness and love, as prophets of religion:

We believe in the growing nobility of Man:

We trust the unfolding Universe as beautiful, beneficent, unchanging Order....

We believe that good and evil inevitably carry their own recompense..... that heaven and hell are states of being....;

We believe that we ought to join hands and work to make the good things better and the worst good, counting nothing good for self that is not good for all:

We worship One-in-All, – that Life whence suns and stars derive their orbits and the soul of man....

– that Light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world, giving us power to become the sons of God,

– that Love with whom our souls commune. This One we name, - the Eternal God.....

Gannett composed this at a time of controversy that threatened to tear apart the denomination. Broadly speaking it was between those Unitarians who were institutionalists and more specifically Christian, and those who sought more freedom in religious expression and forms of worship. Gannett hoped to bridge that divide. And he succeeded, so much so that provided the vehicle that carried Unitarianism into the 20th century.

Except a tweak here or there and for the specifically theistic language, which we would need to broaden, this statement could stand well today. (Although "that Love with whom our souls commune" is as good a description of God as I have ever heard.)

So how might we acquaint ourselves with depth? How might we learn to speak of our faith and belief positively and without fear – in this community and in the world? How can we come to a place where my belief in what I call God does not threaten your non-belief and vice versa?

Partly we need to put down some of our baggage – especially around religious language and expression. Partly we need to pay attention to our own beliefs so that we are not making them into walled gardens of a liberal variety. And partly we need to explore our beliefs and articulate them positively.

We ask our Coming of age Youth to write a credo statement. Not to state what they believe for all time, but what they believe at this significant time in their lives and only after a time of considered reflection. And we don't ask them to do this alone – they have mentors and each other.

You might find others in a Covenant Group where people do explore their beliefs. And Annie and I will be leading an adult credo class in February and March.

I encourage you to do your own reading and exploring. I encourage you to engage your beliefs in this community. I challenge you all to make this a safe place to declare with pride the certainty of your atheism, the name of your God, your passionate agnosticism, and all the moments when all certainties have flown out the window and you journey on in search of a new destination.

We don't transform our lives or the world by skating on the surface. You needn't enter the cloister to become acquainted with depth, but you must land somewhere long enough to reach some answers, "some profound religious findings."

If we cannot articulate positively what we believe we risk becoming merely reactive to those who can. And we miss out on the sweetness of depth that can answer the yearning within. The yearning for connection to one another, connection to the Holy. From a place of truth depth we can shape our own lives, understand our own worth and power.

Blessed be.
Amen