

# “Renewing Faith Continually”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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Renewing faith is our theme for the month of March. Upon first seeing the theme in print, the word “faith” grabbed my attention. It grabbed my attention because the word “faith,” depending on how one defines and uses it, can have some baggage attached to it. When “faith” refers to “unquestioning belief that does not require proof or evidence,” or “unquestioning belief in God, religious tenets, etc.” the word can be problematic for many people. If faith was limited to either or both of these definitions, any person who values science has good reason to feel resistance toward thinking about, let alone using, the word. A third definition of the word is problematic for a growing number of adults in our nation today, those who don’t identify with any religious tradition. The definition I am referring to is “a religion or a system of religious belief.”

Thankfully, the word faith isn’t confined to the definitions I just shared. Another definition of the word is considerably more inclusive and therefore less concerning, or disagreeable, to a wide range of people. The most inclusive definition I found in the dictionary is “anything believed.” This definition makes the word “faith” more palatable for me and hopefully for many of you as well. And as we heard in our reading a few minutes ago, Sharon Daloz Parks would have us consider the word “faith” even more broadly. Parks offers the following understanding of the word.

Faith is more adequately recognized as *the activity of seeking and discovering meaning in the most comprehensive dimensions of our experience*. Faith is a broad, generic human phenomenon. To be human is to dwell in faith, to dwell in the sense one makes out of life—what seems ultimately true and dependable about self, world, and cosmos (whether that meaning be strong or fragile, expressed in religious or secular terms).

Parks’ perspective on what faith involves is something that David DeSteno, professor of psychology at Northeastern University, seems to affirm, at least in part. In his latest book, *How God Works: The Science Behind the Benefits of Religion*, published just last year, DeSteno writes the following.

... even atheism, depends in part on faith. If you choose to be an atheist, it’s a faith in the principles of science—faith that chance favored us in this corner of the cosmos. Even Richard Dawkins, probably the most well-known advocate for the absence of God’s hand in creation, freely admits that he can’t be absolutely certain that God doesn’t exist. As there is no agreed-upon scientific test for God’s fingerprint, it’s a question that no amount of empirical analysis can answer. And so, even for the most strident atheist, belief that God doesn’t exist is a matter of faith, not a provable fact.

I mention DeSteno here because we will hear more from him during our service on March 20th. My sermon that day is titled “Faith in Coping with Uncertainty.”

It is evident that the understanding Parks’ offers about faith is broad. It is even broader than the inclusive definition of “anything believed.” For Parks, faith isn’t confined to things associated with religion or to what one believes. Faith also encompasses the process of coming to believe something. Faith, for Parks, involves “seeking and discovering meaning.” From this perspective, she asserts that faith is something we “dwell in.” We “dwell in faith,” according to Parks, because we strive to make sense out of life. We “dwell in faith” because we seek to discover what is “ultimately true and dependable.”

As I consider the concept of faith that Parks offers, I think of our Fourth Principle, which states, “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” The Fourth Principle doesn’t specifically state that the search for truth and meaning is occurring continually, but the implication is there. It is there in the word “search.” The word “search” is dynamic. It indicates a process that is ongoing. The Fourth Principle would be very

different if the word “search” was replaced with either “affirmation” or “confirmation.” The Principle would then read, “a free and responsible affirmation of truth and meaning,” or “a free and responsible confirmation of truth and meaning.” The substitution of “search” with either of these words would imply that truth and meaning are static.

There have been countless times during the course of my life when I was able to affirm or confirm the truth and meaning that I had previously arrived at. And yet, even to this day, I am certain that my search is not yet finished. My experience has shown me that no matter how confident I am of the truth and meaning I currently hold, there is more truth and meaning for me to discover. Discovery requires that I remain open to the possibility, even the probability, that the truth and meaning I currently feel confidence in will change. Life, it seems, has a way of presenting situations that challenge the truth and meaning I hold.

I am reasonably certain that many, if not all of you can relate to what I am saying here. If you have ever experienced a significant loss in your life, it is very probable that the truth and meaning you held just prior to that loss were shaken. If you have had someone you were very close to die, you know how such a death can have a powerful impact on the sense of meaning you hold about life. And the COVID pandemic we have been contending with for the past two years has presented significant challenges to a static sense of truth and meaning. I know that the truth and meaning I hold today is not the same as the truth and meaning I held prior to COVID’s arrival in Montana in March of 2020. The pandemic is the latest situation that affirms a belief I have held for many years, which is, life continually requires me to reexamine both what I think is true and the meaning I have made. In this sense, I would say that our Fourth Principle aligns with Parks’ claim that we “dwell in faith.” We dwell in faith as we continually engage in the search for truth and meaning.

There is a second of our Principles which aligns well with the meaning of the word “faith” that Parks offers. Our Third Principle states, “acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.” As I mentioned previously, a growing number of people in our nation are not affiliated with any religious tradition. According to research published in December of last year by the Pew Research Center, almost three in ten people in the U.S. are religiously unaffiliated. In 2017 the Pew Research Center found that slightly more than a quarter of U.S. adults indicated that they perceived themselves to be spiritual but not religious. Those who perceive themselves in this way most likely have difficulty with the word “faith” when it is defined in a narrow manner that relates specifically to religion. I would imagine many of these religiously unaffiliated folks would have far less resistance to the word “faith” based on Parks’ perspective. And I believe it is quite possible that a considerable number of those who identify as spiritual but not religious would find our Third Principle appealing and possibly even inviting. That may be one reason that when people respond to research questions about religious affiliation, far more people identify as Unitarian Universalists than are members and friends of UU congregations.

When we consider our Third Principle through the perspective that Parks offers, we see again that our tradition offers us an opportunity to, as she states, “dwell in faith.” And this Principle, like our Fourth Principle, indicates that the faith we dwell in isn’t static. The phrase “encouragement to spiritual growth” clearly indicates a dynamic process. The spiritual growth that is referred to in this Principle has to be a dynamic process, a dynamic process for us as individuals as well as for us collectively. My understanding of this Principle indicates that I am part of a religious community which recognizes that there is more truth and more meaning for each of us, as well as for all of us, to discover.

The dynamic process this Principle recognizes and encourages is something we UU’s may not pay enough attention to. We might assume and even take for granted that faith needs to change over time. As a faith tradition, I would say that the significance we place on faith changing over time is both important and unusual. To elaborate on what I am saying here I would have us consider the concept of God. As I mentioned earlier, one definition of “faith” involves an “unquestioning belief in God...” A significant number of religious faiths in this country and around the world expect their followers to adhere to this definition of faith. These faiths don’t encourage their members to question, let alone change their belief about God. And yet, here is what noted author and religious scholar, Karen Armstrong, has to say about belief in God over time.

The human idea of God has a history, since it has always meant something slightly different to each group of people who have used it at various points of time. The idea of God formed in one generation by one set of human beings could be meaningless in another. Indeed, the statement “I believe in God” has no objective meaning, as such, but like any other statement only means something in context, when proclaimed by a particular community. Consequently there is no one unchanging idea contained in the word “God”; instead, the word contains a whole spectrum of meanings, some of which are contradictory or even mutually exclusive.

Our UU faith doesn't require or even support unquestioning belief. Unitarian Universalism doesn't foster what is commonly referred to as “blind faith.” Instead, our Third and Fourth Principles invite and encourage us to think deeply, to ask questions, to search, and to grow in the area of faith. We support people in using all of their senses and all of their intellect throughout their lifetime. We want people to seek and to find the highest truth and the deepest meaning they are capable of accessing. And in that ongoing process, we strive to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person and to accept one another, not as we would want someone to be, but just as they are. On the journey of continually renewing faith, we recognize that none of us have yet arrived. On this journey of life we are all searching and growing together. I, for one, am very grateful that Unitarian Universalism offers me a place to feel at home with others who are willing to engage in the sometimes very challenging process of exploration and discovery. What an incredible, challenging and wondrous journey it is.

Blessed be.