

“A Question of Trust”

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Meditation

Let there be a quiet time among us.

Spirit of life, in us and around us, here is our chance—once again—to live like we wish the world would live. May we find within ourselves the courage to be who we are. May we know when it is time to listen and when it is time to speak. May we trust ourselves to be the ones to find the words that need to be said or to do what needs to be done. May we trust one another and know there are many ways to go through life. May we know that though we cannot change some of what life gives to us, we can choose how we deal with what we are given.

We are coming into our power, and together we can make possible justice and love. We are all connected; we depend upon one another more than we know. We are one body. So be it. Blessed be. Amen.

Reading “They” by Dana Dwinell-Yardley

They.

They’re cutting down trees
and they’re raising taxes.
They’re making our children violent and fat.
They’re blowing us up
and they’re remaking bad decisions.
They’re destroying the world
one by one.

They.

It's what we say,
hiding behind a word
full of blame and disassociation—
an ignorant, irresponsible nation.

But

they
do not exist.
There is only
we.

We cut down the trees
and We raise the taxes.
We make our children violent and fat.
We blow ourselves up
and We make bad decisions.
We destroy the world
as one.

We
are a world
community.
We
must take responsibility.

Homily: “A Question of Trust”

To my amazement, I have been thinking a lot this week
about something Ronald Reagan used to say.

(I can assure you that this almost never happens...!)

When meeting with his Soviet counter-part,
just after signing some arms accord, he was fond of saying,
and especially when the cameras were rolling,
that it is necessary to “trust but verify.”

“Trust but verify.”

The first time he said it to the press gathered round,
Mikhail Gorbachev, standing at his side,
jokingly pointed out that Reagan had an irritating habit
of repeating that phrase every single time they met.

Reagan didn't actually originate the saying.
Ironically enough, it was an old Russian proverb—
one frequently quoted by Vladimir Lenin himself.

Now, I have found myself thinking about this phrase this week
because it captures so well what has been
a proud history of skepticism in Unitarianism.

Trust but verify.
It has all the makings of a freethinker's creed.

Over our faith's storied past, we have put most everything—
be it outdated doctrines, rituals, or religious leadership—
under the bright light of reason to see
just how well any of it holds up under scrutiny.

For centuries, we've championed freedom of inquiry
as a central tenant of our faith.

Led by doubt, we've taken, at times, the scientific method
as our spiritual guide—rightly questioning and testing every claim—
dispelling miracles left and right,
and dispensing with whatever no longer served.

But, while I deeply cherish our free-thinking tradition,
there are times when it seems we've become a bit more attached
to the part about verifying than the part about trusting.

Now, we are, of course, products of the age in which we live.

Trust is in increasingly short supply in our society—
and sometimes for very good reason.

Scandals and bald-face lies shake our confidence in political leaders,
from City Hall to Queen's Park to Parliament Hill.

Appalling stories of abuse ripple through our civic, academic, and religious institutions, from Penn State to Scouts Canada to the RCMP, just to name the three that made headlines this past week alone.

Due to the often unseen and unseemly influence of money, there is a justifiable and growing distrust of the information we receive, from the media, the academy, or the government.

Trust but verify can seem as wise a guideline as any for surviving in the face of all of this.

But, is it any way to live—
when our need for proof shows that trust has lost all of its meaning?

Might there be, instead, some sure and certain place we might dwell between blind faith and a nagging skepticism?

I'm frankly not so sure;
being awake to the world, after all, sometimes comes at a terrible cost.

But I do know that I desperately want for there to be some middle ground.

I long for trust to be restored to its rightful place in our lives and in the world around us.

And, I pray that trust will be revitalised to serve out its highest and most sacred purpose: of holding us together with and in the great web of life itself.

Now, just admitting that feels a bit naïve—
like confessing a nostalgic tug
to return to the kinder, gentler ways of another time.

But, trust is absolutely fundamental to our experience of being alive. It is key to our living in human community. And it is the very foundation of any faith worth having.

Our capacity for trust enables us to face the challenges of this life with confidence and hope, where mistrust can leave us, in the face of adversity, with feelings of utter despair and hopelessness.

Indeed, the tug-of-war between trust and mistrust is what the great psychologist Erik Erikson described as being our central task, as infants, in the development of our personality, as we learn whether those who care for us can truly be depended upon.

If, as infants, we find the answer to be ‘yes,’ if we find the world to be trustworthy, we come to believe the world to be a safe place and ourselves a valued part of it.

Now, because Erikson said this testing of our environment and those around us plays out primarily during the first year of life, it seems clear enough to me that Erikson didn’t actually have any Unitarian babies as subjects in his study...!

Because, if he had, he would have surely observed that the struggle between trust and mistrust persists well into late-adulthood for so many of us!

Seriously, though, it’s not just Unitarians, of course, who contend with this ongoing struggle between trust and mistrust.

People the world over, for good reason, live in doubt that life on this earth is good and that people can genuinely be trusted.

As people of faith, even one as skeptical as ours, we are called to wrestle with what our faith has to say in response to all of that doubt and distrust.

What does the faith you hold have to say to one who can trust no more?

With doubts and disappointments of your own, do you carry within you some spark of hope to share? A word of consolation, or some flicker of faith that keeps you going?

In his collection of short stories, *Where the Rainbow Ends*, Jameson Currier writes:

What is the meaning of life when life disappoints you?
Where does faith come from when you are all out of strength?

How could I accept the false romanticism of religion
when faced with the harsh disappointment of facts?

I had always believed that the search for truth
would be the best way to live my life.

But the night I heard that [my friend] Hank had died,
my body went into shock, a tension invaded my shoulders
and locked my muscles like a straightjacket.

What could I learn from this except that grief comes
as periodically as the waves of the ocean?

Was truth now only to disappoint me?
Make me afraid to go on living?

A few days later, still worried and confused,
I had stopped at a church... on the way home from work.
I don't know what I had expected to find
within that dank, musty air or that dark, hollowed out room.
Certainly not God. Certainly not the truth.

All I know is that I started to cry,
my anger and anguish directed at some force far beyond myself.

Was that from faith, or from the lack of it?

Was it fear that made me reach out to something beyond myself
or the belief that faith could provide me with a sense of strength?

Who heard me that night I do not know.
Faith, I decided, does not save you from life.
And life, I learned over the years,
takes you through too, too many changes.

Currier is right, life is full of more change than we can often manage,
and faith doesn't spare any of us from the realities of this life.

But, as his own story shows, the human heart seeks constantly
for that which can be trusted, for that on which it can depend,
for that upon which it can rely when life reaches its breaking point.

I can't presume to know what your own heart has found to trust.

But what one trusts does have a great deal to say about one's faith.

For me, I find my answers in the ever-unfolding cycles of the natural world
and in the glorious mysteries of life itself.

As fragile as the precious thread of life is on this planet,
I find within me an abiding peace
that the story of the universe that began so long ago
will continue on with or without us,
from stardust to stardust and beyond.

I trust that epic story more than I trust the details of my own.

In the meantime, my faith calls me to deepen my trust in the here and now,
to learn and to lean on others as though my life depends on it,
because it does.

Friends, our journey though this life,
beginning with those faltering first baby-steps as infants
and continuing on through the stages of our lives,
is nothing less than an adventure in trust.

Along the way are countless opportunities for disappointment,
moments when trust is sorely tested or outright betrayed.

Moments when we are given to choose
whether or how we will step back out in faith toward others,
or maybe even ourselves.

In this community, in what you've heard me call
this little loving laboratory of the human spirit,
may we find time and again the shared strength to trust—
ourselves, each other, and those well beyond these walls,
that we might verify our faith in each other,
and make real the promise of our hearts.

Amen.