

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me (Mark 15:34)?”

Imagine the son of God saying that. Most Christians believe that Jesus is the son of God...and most believe that he is also part of one God in three persons: the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So imagine Jesus, the son of God, and God, saying this on the cross. What does this mean? This is Jesus asking, “Why?” This is not the son of God up there on the cross winding his watch and saying “I got this.” This is a struggling, suffering, uncertain, forsaken God; a victim of betrayal, evil, injustice and oppression; a Jew in occupied territory being crucified, being nailed to a cross. No this Jesus doesn’t “got this.”

Earlier in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus says, “Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me (Matthew, 26:39).” This is the son of God, fearful, desperate and uncertain.

Even if you don’t consider yourself to be a Christian, even if you don’t consider Jesus to be the son of God, even if you don’t consider Jesus to be a prophet, most everyone views Jesus, the man described in the New Testament, an exemplar of what a life of faith looks like.

Yet this man says, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” And, “Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.” Has he no faith? Where is his faith? Has he lost his faith?

Many of us today, UUs and non-UUs alike, demand certainty of our faith. It must be locked-up, buttoned-up, wrapped-up, with a ribbon and a bow and placed under the tree. There can’t be room for even the possibility of the slightest falsehood, doubt, or uncertainty. It must have an unchanging answer for all the big questions. Why is there suffering? If there is a creator, or creators, why did they create injustice and disease? Why does evil exist? What happens when we walk through death’s door?

In my opinion, this is the faith that is dead. It doesn’t matter if it’s Christian, Buddhist, Muslim or Unitarian Universalist. Any buttoned-up faith with all the answers, which means any type of change or adjustment is both unnecessary and cause for suspicion, is fundamentalism. Upon reflection, we sometimes have a tendency to package other faith traditions in the wrapping of our choosing. All Christians believe X; all Jews believe Y; all Muslims believe Z. This is a gross and narrow characterization of other traditions – a characterization that refuses to see other

traditions as living. There are people in all traditions doing theology; breathing new life into all religions everywhere.

Any faith though that refuses to say, “we just don’t know,” is no faith at all. It is a faith that is dead, and sometimes dangerous. Run from that. Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel described a faith that was dead for him:

“In the beginning there was faith – which is childish; trust – which is vain; and illusion – which is dangerous. We believed in God, trusted in man, and lived with the illusion that everyone of us had been entrusted with a sacred spark from the Shekinah’s flame; that every one of us carries in his eyes and in his soul a reflection of God’s image. *That* was the source if not the cause of all our ordeals (Elie Wiesel, *Night*, x).”

On one hand, although there is the fundamentalist faith that is dead, many of us don’t allow ourselves to maintain “we just don’t know” within the domain of our faith. Our intellect demands that everything be known up here in our mind. We can’t live with the fear, uncertainty and doubt of “we just don’t know” and as a result, what do many of us do? We leave the field. We refuse to allow ourselves to have any faith. We abandon all faith because the chasm of pain and uncertainty is simply too deep – too much to face. Poet and writer Christian Wiman writes:

When I think of the years when I had no faith, what I am struck by, first of all, is how little this lack disrupted my conscious life. I lived not with God, nor with his absence, but in a mild abeyance of belief, drifting through the days on a tide of tiny vanities - a publication, a flirtation, a strong case made for some weak nihilism - nights all adagios and alcohol as my mind tore luxuriously into itself. I can see now how deeply God's absence affected my unconscious life, how under me always there was this long fall that pride and fear and self-love at once protected me from and subjected me to. Was the fall into belief or into unbelief? Both. For if grace woke me to God's presence in the world and in my heart, it also woke me to his absence. I never truly felt the pain of unbelief until I began to believe (Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss*, 11)

That is a profound statement. Any faith worth anything; any faith that awakens you to God’s presence must also awaken you to God’s absence. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” And feeling God’s absence can be horrifying.

For me, the book that most painfully articulates God's absence is *Night* by Elie Wiesel. This book describes his boyhood experience as a Jew in Auschwitz during World War II. Each succeeding page paints a bleaker picture of God's absence than the preceding. A child witnesses the hanging of another young child who, "had the face of a sad angel, [the witnessing child then] heard someone behind him groan: 'For God's sake, where is God?' And [the child] from within [himself] heard a voice answer: 'Where He is? This is where – hanging here from this gallows' (Elie Wiesel, *Night*, xx)."

God hanging from the gallows. God crucified on a cross.

How would you characterize your faith? Does it provide you with unchanging answers to life's important questions? Does it provide you with unchanging answers to death's important questions?

"The inherent worth and dignity of every person." Have we thought about the implications of that statement? Our first principle sounds a lot like what Elie Wiesel called the cause of all our ordeals, that we "lived with the illusion that everyone of us had been entrusted with a sacred spark from the Shekinah's flame; that every one of us carries in his eyes and in his soul a reflection of God's image."

In your many years or not so many years as a Unitarian Universalist, have you thought about the implications of this principle? It sure sounds nice but could this be a problem for us? What will be your response when non-UUs ask you, "Please show me how Adolf Hitler had inherent worth and dignity? Take your time, I'll wait. And does inherent worth and dignity extend only to persons? Justice, equity and compassion in human relations. Does justice, equity and compassion extend to other non-human relations – the entire animal kingdom, the natural world that we share with an abundance of species?"

Have we thought about our faith, have you thought about your faith deeply enough? Or was it buttoned-up, wrapped-up in an neat package with a nice bow a long time ago? Or, because of the fear, uncertainty and doubt a living faith might bring you, have you refused to allow yourself any faith?

And as Brian alluded, do you have a Unitarian Universalist elevator speech – a 30 second summation of what Unitarian Universalism is all about? Do you have an elevator speech regarding your personal theology, what it is that you believe? When a visitor asks you why you are a member here, what do you say?

Our Faith Forward curriculum, which will begin next month, will begin to delve into the basics of these topics and many others. As we undertake our congregational re-visioning, it might make sense for many of us to re-visit the basics of our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition. Many potential new members will be attending this class and they could benefit from having other

long-time members and mentors in the room. It would be worthwhile for our newest visitors to hear your voice; to hear you express what Unitarian Universalism and UUMAN means to you.

This is faith development. And although gathering the community in worship on Sunday morning is important, I believe faith development is even more important. We, each and every one of us, should always be doing faith development.

For some of you who might be comfortable, deep faith development might expose you to the darkness of uncertainty, to the realization and deep feelings of God's absence and even God's abandonment. And you may ask, "Now why would I want to do that, Dave?" Because, deep down, if you feel unfulfilled, if you feel empty, if you feel nothing, if you feel like you're simply drifting, if you feel stuck, if you feel as if you're being pursued by life and death's deepest questions with no way forward, a new way forward might be found, a new door may be opened to you, waters blocking you may be parted through faith. But to begin, you must take one more step.