



FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF DALLAS
WELCOMES SPECIAL GUEST MINISTER

REV. RUTH MACKENZIE

“Faith=Trust”

Sunday, February 9, 2025
In-person worship at 9:30 and 11 am
Online worship at 9:30 & 11 am and 7 pm CST

What wondrous love is this, such a statement of awe and faith. But how does faith work in such times as these? Seems like we used to know what was going on, or at least we fooled ourselves into thinking so. We knew how to make things work. Nowadays, every discovery seems to tell us we have totally misunderstood just about everything. Then we got this newfangled amplifier system that makes even the most ridiculous ideas loom large in our cultural conscience. How do we make sense of this? How does anything like God or religion or faith and everything that's happening fit together? How do we take what we believe and actually get some traction in this chaos? Could I hear an amen?

Now, though it may sound like a current diatribe of contemporary America, I'm actually giving voice to someone living in the deluge of discovery, innovation, information, and religious upheaval of the 16th century Europe. A person born in 1492 in Poland, for example, could have witnessed in just their lifetime the use of lenses that would lead to the development of the telescope, cracking open the night sky to reveal that we are not the center of the universe. The reverberations of the printing press in the greater culture as the first newspaper is disseminated, and the Bible is read and translated directly by priests, intellectuals, and the merchant class, the traditions and doctrines of the one Holy Catholic Church busted wide open by Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Huldrych Zwingli, all of whom pose game-changing questions.

The world felt more like living in an open field, unsheltered from the meteoric showers of discovery and questions rather than abiding in the protection and comfort of four walls and a roof that made sense. I can imagine the 16th century feeling much like our own, with the unfolding discoveries of quantum sciences, the maturing of AI, the looming climate crisis, the intricacies of biology, our way of perceiving and understanding the world is being turned on its head. "The more we cut things open,

stretch things out, and in general pull things apart, the more the universe appears like a great thought rather than a great machine." That's what the astrophysicist James Jeans writes.

Then we have this amorphous amplifying system called the digital world, the virtual world, and its new currency is our attention. It reverberates through society much like the printing press of the 16th century, only on steroids. All kinds of ideas and movements are swooping around the world. A lot of it is junk, and a lot of it is really important, and it's hard to know what to pay attention to. What is faith in such a world as this?

In the 16th century, Martin Luther, a Monk of the Augustinian Order, and yes, a very problematic theologian made a theological pivot, and it is one that is part of our theological root system as Unitarian Universalists. In his angst and all the chaos, Luther said, in essence, "Faith is more than belief. It is more than intellectual agreements. It is more than saying, I believe in this or that or the other." "Faith" he said, "in essence equals trust." Faith equals trust. Where do you put your absolute reliance and trust? Faith is a matter of the heart, not just the mind. It is what we cling to in the open field.

In all the chaos going on today, I am asking myself, "If faith equals trust, then where do I put my absolute reliance and trust? To what does my heart cling?" While standing outside in the courtyard last Sunday, I was talking to Susan McKay and she taught me the American sign language word for trust, and it looks like this. Faith equals this like clinging to a rope. Here are some of the things that are beginning to coalesce for me. These are things to which I cling in this open field in which we live. Faith has to be tethered to what's real.

As Unitarian Universalists, we place our trust in more than one source of authority. The Bible may be one source of our faith as it is for our Christian cousins, but we also place our trust in the observable world, in our capacity to reason, in our direct experience of the transcending mystery and wonder, a myriad of ancient texts grappling with the intersection of the human and the divine and the sacred scripture of our own lives. My faith is rooted in reason and radiance and what is real.

Fellow grappler in faith, Father Richard Rohr writes this "Pluriformity, multiplicity, and diversity is the only world there is!" It is rather amazing that we can mis-deny or ignore what is in plain sight everywhere. He continues. "Most of organized religion, however, tends to be peopled by folks who have a mania for some ideal order, which is never true, so they are seldom happy or content." In this sandstorm of presidential edicts and hostile takeovers of our governmental systems, we squint trying to make out what's happening, chafing in the flying grit, watching whole trees of our institutions strain at their roots. We try to figure out what to do individually and collectively.

One thing is clear to me in all of this sandstorm, there is a move to try to stuff all of us into some kind of ideal order, which does not exist. Faith must be rooted in what is real. Life, life is tragic. Every faith tradition says this in one way or another. The Buddhists claim this as their first noble truth. Life is suffering. The central symbol of Christianity is the crucifix. From the Muslim perspective, suffering is

in an inherent part of the human experience. Suffering is life. Yes, I trust that life is and will be tragic. There's no getting around it.

Instead of stuffing pain away or running as far away from it as possible, we have to figure out how to endure it, how to work with it, and how to integrate its aftermath in some kind of life-deepening way. Now, some of us in this room are not only dealing with our personal unfoldings of tragedy, we're also dealing with structures of oppression, of racism, trans-targeting, homophobia, misogyny as the substrate of our suffering. No one has a corner on pain, but some of us have the privilege of navigating our personal tragedies without feeling targeted by our culture. We must allow ourselves to weep. We have to weep. We must gather our trusted people and sit in council. We need to sing and move and take naps and invite the natural process of grief to have its way with us.

Philosopher and nature writer Annie Dillard writes this "In the deeps are the violence and terror of which psychology has warned us, but if you ride these monsters down, if you drop with them farther over the world's rim, you find what our sciences cannot locate or name, the substrate, the ocean, or matrix or ether, which buoys the rest, which gives goodness its power for good and evil, its power of evil. The unified field are complex and inexplicable, caring for one another and for our lives together here, this is a given. It cannot be learned."

Life is tragic. God is in life with you or whatever you hold as sacred is in life with you. Theologians and scientists, frankly, all of us are wrestling with long-standing models of religion or cultural constructs that hold humanity outside and or above the deeply related thicket of realities we call the universe. God as King bestowing gifts in answer to my puny prayers seems mighty strange. In light of our unfolding understanding of how the world works, and yet in my heart, mind, mind, body, I cannot fathom the intricacies, the nesting of realities within realities without a sense of awe, without a sense of something is at work that is divine.

As Tom Barrett writes, "I can't talk about God and make any sense, and I cannot not talk about God and make any sense." So we talk about the weather, and we are actually talking about God. At some point in my theological studies, I had to wrestle with my God conceptions, my God relationship. The model of God for my childhood just didn't work anymore, so here's my talking about God without making any sense. God is more verb than noun. God is his self-expending, other affirming community, forming power that moves and has its being in us, among us, beyond us. The universalist faith claim God is love rings true in my soul, and I must add, God is grace. Grace is more than gifts bestowed by a King on high. Grace is a power that breaks into life in surprising ways, spirit altering ways. Grace brings a sense of wholeness in our estrangement.

Theologian, Paul Tillich describes grace like this, "Grace transforms fate into a meaningful destiny. It changes guilt into confidence and courage." There is something triumphant in the word grace. In spite of the abounding of sin, grace abounds much more. Tillich says, "Grace is the deeply felt sense that you are accepted. You are accepted." Feel that as I say this to you. You are accepted. This is my faith statement. It has changed over the years, but that is what a living faith does. Poet and mystic Christian Wiman writes, "Whatever faith you emerge with at the end of your life is going to be not

simply affected by that life, but intimately dependent upon it. For faith in God is in the deepest sense faith in life, which means that even the staunchest life of faith is a life of great change."

Now, this may be way too much God talk for you right now, and I honor that. I really do. And I urge you to ask yourself the question the poet offers. "If you had a temple in the secret spaces of your heart, what would you worship there?" Finally, I trust there are wells of spirit. I can go there and drink and be restored. There are all kinds of wells, spiritual wells scattered across the landscape our lives. These are wells that hold the waters of connection and quench our thirst for wholeness, for happiness, for justice-making, for strength, for courage, confidence, and tenacity, to say what needs to be said when it's important to say it, and to hold our tongue when we need to listen.

One of those wells is right here. It's right here, everybody, gathering in communities of faith and meaning-making of neighborliness and justice-making. I come from Christian rootstock grafted with branches of Taoism and open awareness meditation. These are my wells of spiritual sustenance and coming into some kind of rhythm with that self-expending, other-affirming, community-forming power. This power that I sense and yet can't make any sense of. I find that rhythm most often in nature, in church, in protest, and in my prison work. What are your wells of spiritual nourishment? Centering prayer, meditation, singing prayers into the body, coming to church, journaling, gathering in an AA or Al-Anon meeting, sitting beneath an oak and letting all of nature wash through you?

If you don't have a spiritual practice, I urge you to start. I urge you to experiment. One thing is clear to me, we will need to drink deep from our spiritual wells, not only to find centering and connection, but to gather our strength, to fortify our spirits and harness our courage for the days ahead. We're going to need to make our spirits strong. Faith equals trust. It is tethered to what is real, that life is tragic and God or whatever you name as whole and holy is in life with you, and there are wells of spirit. Go there and drink.

I have faith in this place. It's so good to be in this place with you now. I have faith in you. I have faith that you will do your work that needs to be done here, and I'm going [inaudible 00:21:09] in my place. Life in the open field is not comfortable. In fact, it is downright dangerous, but the open field can be as much an opportunity for unleashing our imaginative capacity and reorienting our direction as it is a time for hunkering down and just getting by. I ask as the poet asks, "If you had a temple in the secret spaces of your heart, what would you worship there?" What would you bring to sacrifice? What would be behind the curtain in the Holy of Holies? What would you trust? Go there now and look behind the curtain. May it be so, my beloveds and amen.

