

Years ago, there was a group of young clergy from Quebec who were in Vermont studying with William Sloane Coffin, the preacher, activist and personal hero of mine. Coffin listened to these ministers express their despair over declining church attendance, budgets, and influence in their communities. They complained of how difficult it had become for their congregations to remain vital in their context. He took it all in, and then he made the following comment: “As Christians, our ultimate call is to be faithful. The call to be successful is penultimate.” In other words, faithfulness is a first-order priority, and success is secondary.

His listeners felt convicted by his words. He had cut to the heart of a frustration and despair they were feeling—they were so concerned with success that they had lost sight of faithfulness. Success is a wonderful thing, but if we lose sight of higher priorities we cannot know what real success might mean. Coffin’s words serve as an example of one of the great traps in life—the raising of a partial good to ultimate status, and the lowering of an ultimate good to a secondary place.

On my first Sunday as a called pastor, I asked that a poem be read from the lectern before our first service began. On my last Sunday, I used the poem again to close out my time at that wonderful “little church that could.” It is called, “i am a little church,” by e. e. cummings, and it reflects a kind of faith found in being simple and steadfast in one’s needs, desires and conviction. It goes like this:

i am a little church (no great cathedral)  
far from the splendor and squalor of hurrying cities  
-i do not worry if briefer days grow briefest,  
i am not sorry when sun and rain make april

my life is the life of the reaper and the sower;  
my prayers are prayers of earth’s own clumsily striving  
(finding and losing and laughing and crying) children  
whose any sadness or joy is my grief or my gladness

around me surges a miracle of unceasing  
birth and glory and death and resurrection:  
over my sleeping self float flaming symbols  
of hope, and i wake to a perfect patience of mountains

i am a little church (far from the frantic  
world with its rapture and anguish) at peace with nature  
-i do not worry if longer nights grow longest;  
i am not sorry when silence becomes singing

winter by spring, i lift my diminutive spire to  
merciful Him Whose only now is forever:  
standing erect in the deathless truth of His presence  
(welcoming humbly His light and proudly His darkness)

There is power even in the “small,” if real faith resides within.

This is one of the places where my own faith has deepened. Not because I sat down and memorized a creed, or decided to accept as true that which runs too far counter to my reason. Perhaps you share this feeling—of being in a community where over time the sense of the genuine in which you find yourself is so palpable that it trumps all of the doctrine and religiosity you could never fully ingest, and the truth about what it means to be a Christian is reflected instead, in how that community chooses to live out its mission and its witness, particularly with each other.

I cannot tell you at what specific times this happened, who said what to whom, what straightforward, emotion filled, searching, doubting, believing voice lifted itself in what one transcendent moment amongst many across this palpably sensitive room.

How did we become such creatures of privilege that we can share in a new birth, a birthday, a baptism, an anniversary, as well as a death, a gathering to lift up one of our own in memory, and share in the grief? Whose tears feel so free to flow from eyes that can be seen so effortlessly in this very particular morning light? This is the place, more than any other, where people tell me that for whatever the cause, they enter, sit down, and begin crying for reasons they don't fully understand.

Maybe you can identify, when I say that I don't know how many issues I have wrestled with, when I had to admit that I was stubborn or wrong, how I was aware that my joy in what I do is as transparent as the smallness I can so readily descend to...and then there is the occasional insight that comes like dawn; all of it so much on display, so open, and so baring that it forces me to look to what drives, motivate, fills and propels me, and the answer is summed up in the word, "faith."

"Faith," says the writer of *Hebrews*, "is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

This week is the observation of the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. There were 90,000 buildings in Hiroshima before the bomb was dropped; only 28,000 remained after the bombing. Of the city's 200 doctors before the explosion; only 20 were left alive or capable of working. There were 1,780 nurses before the blast, and afterwards, only 150 remained who were able to tend to the sick and dying.

According to John Hersey's work, *Hiroshima*, the city government had put hundreds of schoolgirls to work clearing fire lanes in the event of incendiary bomb attacks. They were out in the open when the Enola Gay dropped its load.

There were so many spontaneous fires set as a result of the bomb that a crewman of the Enola Gay stopped trying to count them.

A medium-size progressive church in Hollywood understood their faith to mean that they had an obligation to act upon it in ways that could be a healing balm for their community and their world. They looked after a Japanese-American church in their neighborhood, watching over their property and belongings while the church's members were incarcerated in camps. They sent supplies to citizens in Germany and Japan that were left with nothing as their way of witnessing to Jesus' great commandment to love their neighbors as themselves. Actually following Jesus turns out to be an unpopular thing to do. Their stained-glass windows were broken over the years.

Christians in Japan responded by giving them some charred wood from a tree next to the bombed and burned Methodist church, and a cross was made as a symbol of forgiveness. It is on the altar of the church today. I have with me a gift the church gave to me when I left, and it contains a piece of the charred wood from Hiroshima, and a piece of stained glass broken by ideological vandals and carefully stored away.

Not too many years ago, two other medium-size progressive UCC churches got together and decided to write a letter to our Conference. First Congregational Church of Long Beach, and the Irvine Church asked that there be a resolution put before our annual gathering that Marriage Equality be recognized by our entire Conference. After the resolution passed, our Conference sent it to the United Church of Christ at the 2005 General Synod, and on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, five years ago, we became the first Christian denomination anywhere to endorse Marriage Equality.

I was thinking of this last week, when we gathered across from the courthouse in Santa Ana to celebrate the decision by Judge Vaughn Walker to overturn Prop 8 as being unconstitutional. There had to be voices that went before in order for that to have happened. There needed to be brave voices from every corner—businesses that gave domestic partnership benefits and supported Pride events, such as I hope some of you, particularly those of you who are vested in this issue, will do next Saturday at Hidden Valley. We have tickets here today. <http://prideoc.com/>

There had to be politicians who were willing to be supportive, knowing that it might come at some cost to their chances for election or re-election.

And there absolutely needed to be the moral voice, normally supplied by religious institutions, which in this case, went so noticeably absent. Except for some, few progressive voices who decided that their understanding of what it meant to be followers of Jesus demanded of them that they place being faithful to their mission before any thought of being successful. Who really trusted that the one would insure the other.

In the end, a church community may have different desires and needs, but if it doesn't discover what it demands of itself and what it stands for, it will live passively and unfulfilled.

I would much rather be in a thoughtful and active community and receive crank phone calls and e-mails than exist within a community that constantly asks itself ten years after the fact why they weren't more involved when the world needed them most, or worse, doesn't have the consciousness to raise the question at all. "Pass the jell-o salad and let's talk about the color of the new rug for the parlor."

Jesus said, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." He is saying, Be here now." Don't be complacent with the culture as it is. Don't accept injustice, poverty and war as the norm. It is a totally different way of operating than what is seen as economically sound in our culture with its emphasis on accumulation and consumerism. And...it works. We have seen it work right here.

This is the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of the Americans With Disabilities Act. It was UCC Pastor Harold Wilke, born without arms, who worked with others to ensure that the world and the church, celebrate ways to include everyone, stating that unless all people were invited to the table, the church, and by further implication, the culture, was handicapped. When George H. Bush handed him the pen after the signing, he received it between his toes. I was fortunate enough to have lunch with him at Pilgrim Place before he died, and as he ate his meal with his foot, no-one raised an eyebrow. <http://www.ucc.org/make-a-gift/the-lcm-harold-h-wilke-fund.html>

Who would have thought that relatively powerless persons could bring shifts in history? Gandhi, an unsuccessful lawyer, adapted the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount and the writings of Tolstoy and became the key to bringing independence to India, because he was ready.

Rosa Parks, in refusing to move to the back of the bus in Montgomery, sparked the beginning of the civil rights movement of the '50s and '60s. She was a rather inauspicious person to take such a critical action, but she was ready.

Nelson Mandela was sentenced to life in prison. He was released to bring a shift in the politics of South Africa at a critical juncture when many thought either that change would never come or if it did, it would be accompanied by a vast bloodbath. The transition to a more just

society came relatively peacefully under his leadership after he was unexpectedly released from prison. Prison had prepared him, made him ready.

Mother Teresa, an unpretentious nun, is being considered for sainthood for her simple act of trying to rescue people from the streets who might otherwise die. She was ready!<sup>1</sup>

This community is important—in fact, there are people hungry to find such a place as this. Bring this unique understanding of faith, this assurance of things hoped for, to open the next chapter. To step forward in faith is to live in the victorious peace of a war already won – whether or not the particular injustice we are fighting feels like it is being “won” or “lost” at the time. Let’s be ready for what is next.

I am sure we will be successful, but above all, let’s be faithful to our vision. AMEN.

### ***Sermon Resources***

1. This illustration is by William E. Keeney, *Preaching the Parables*, CSS Publishing

## **Scripture for Sunday, August 8, 2010**

### **Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16**

1 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. 2 Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. 3 By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible. ---- 8 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. 10 For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. 11 By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. 12 Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, “as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.” 13 All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, 14 for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. 15 If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

### **Luke 12:32-40**

32 “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. 33 Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. 34 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. 35 “Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; 36 be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. 37 Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. 38 If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves. 39 “But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. 40 You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”