

Growing up in the church, it always seemed like people treated the idea of Faith as if it were a noun. Faith was a “thing” that a person had or they didn’t have. But if Faith was a thing, what was it? Was it a seed? A Spirit? A moral Compass?

“Faith” is still one of the most debated foundation blocks of Christianity. Some Christians claim you either have faith or you don’t. These brothers and sisters usually have a litmus test based on a set of answers they expect you to give to their questions. “Do you proclaim Jesus as your personal lord and savior?” Do you believe Jesus died on the cross to save you from your sins? Do you believe the goal of life is to get into heaven?

If your answers matches the litmus test you are on the road to heaven. If your answers don’t match their main job becomes trying to save you. They work hard to convert you so that you answer these questions exactly the way they do, because they want you to get into heaven.

A wise Unitarian Pastor once said, “In a world with so many expressions of divinity, some of them many centuries older than Christianity, it seems a little too convenient that the only true expression of God happens to be the one approach to Christianity to which these folks belong.”

In fact, we see a powerful example of faith from the Sikh community as they recognize another anniversary of the horrible and brutal attack upon their temple in Oak Creek. Over the weekend the temple hosted a commemorative Run/Walk which drew hundreds of people from all over the city, and they are honoring each of the lives lost that day in worship this weekend with special, sacred readings. The faith they have displayed in the face of violence has inspired people across religions, beliefs, and those of no belief.

Today the letter of Hebrews provides a definition of faith, The Message version of the bible puts the opening of the passage this way, “The fundamental fact of existence is that this trust in God, this faith, is the firm foundation under everything that makes life worth living. It’s our handle on what we can’t see. The act of faith is what distinguished our ancestors, set them above the crowd. By faith, we see the world called into existence by God’s word, what we see created by what we don’t see.”

In 1981, Rev. James Fowler wrote a groundbreaking book called, The Stages of Faith. This book helped many think about faith in a whole new way. Applying the work of Jean Piaget’s stages of cognitive development and Lawrence Kohlberg’s stages of moral development, Fowler applied similar tools to an understanding of a growing faith.

Fowler, a minister in the United Methodist Church, identified 6 stages of faith development. Beginning with Primal faith, where trust develops as we experience the nurture and love of parents, family, caretakers. This trust leads us to understand we are warm, safe and secure.

Then the most mature level of faith, level 6, is called “universalizing faith.” Here it becomes natural for us to treat each person with compassion, and to view each person friend and foe, neighbor and stranger as part of a universal community deserving of being treated with love and justice.” The 4 stages in between help develop faith from a personal trust, to an innate extension of God’s love and justice to everyone.”

This means faith is also an action, a verb. As disciples we are to “faith” one another. Not because it makes us a good person, nor because it is the “right” thing to do, not because it will get us into heaven, but because we deeply discover how extending love and justice allows all of life to flourish.

Thinking faith is a noun can lead to criticism of the church from the outside. We have all heard it, “Why do you go to church, those people are hypocritical, they say they love everyone but I see them doing horrible things, lying, stealing, prejudice, etc.” This criticism comes from two misunderstandings about the church.

Many who launch this criticism believe the church is divine. This is wrong -- the church is a deeply human institution. The church sins, makes mistakes, listens to bad advice, excludes and hurts people. Despite our most devout attempts to serve a perfect creator the institutional church is a true human mix; caring, corruptible, hopeful, sinful, trying yet sometimes falling short.

A Seminary professor once casually said to me, “When I ask someone if they have faith in God, if they say ‘yes’, then I ask them a second question, ‘what kind of faith do you have?’” He knows the church isn’t perfect, there are people who use Christian faith to prop up prejudice, hatred and fear.

So today we celebrate our AugustFest, you were wondering if I was going to mention it weren’t you?

We hope to have many and diverse people join us from the surrounding community, friends, neighbors, people showing their car, and others who may have never set foot on the grounds of a church where faith means both trust in God and extending God’s love and justice to all. We have this beautiful day to allow the fullness of faith to shine, through word and deed, through welcome and affirmation, through caring and thankfulness.

So let’s let faith shine today. Inviting each person we meet to deeply ingest the wonderful and wondrous Grace of God. Let’s allow God’s love and compassion to sparkle so everyone who enters this church’s grounds and all whom we encounter this week will leave a little happier, a little more satisfied, a little more inspired than when they arrived.

Thanks be to God for the opportunity that awaits us!

Amen