



# The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC  
Aurora Illinois

LESSONS IN FAITH AND FICTION

July 31, 2016

## Christianity

Hebrews 11.1-3; 8-28 (abbreviated)

*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. 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. 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. 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. By faith, Moses was hidden by his parents for three months after his birth because they saw that the child was beautiful, and they were not afraid of the king's edict. By faith, Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called a son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. By faith, he left Egypt unafraid of the king's anger, for he persevered as though he saw him who is invisible.*

## Hinduism

Bhagavad Gita 17.3, 17, 28

*Everyone's faith conforms  
with their inborn nature.  
Faith is a person's core;  
whatever is their faith, so are they.*

What do you bet your life on? Do you bet that there is a God? Are there days when you bet there may not be a God? Do you bet that the events of your life determine whether you bet there is a God or not? Before last year's Super Bowl, a cross section of people were asked if they thought God had anything to do with the outcome. Twenty-five percent said they believed God determined the winners before the game started. That's quite a (precarious) bet.

What we bet our lives on shapes the way we live and the values by which we live. We may bet one way with our lips and our minds and another way with our feet or our checkbook and credit cards. But we all bet, and it's our lives we're betting with because what we bet on determines the way we live. Is it from God? Is it coincidence? The evidence both ways is fragmentary and ambiguous. We

can never be sure we've bet right, of course. But either way we bet, it's a matter of faith.

By faith the Biblical characters like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, David, Rahab, Joseph and Mary and even Jesus gave themselves over to something that didn't make sense but which seemed right in the pit of their stomach. How could they know? They couldn't. But their betting on it made all the difference. The bet they made with their lives has given us a story we call the Bible that is the catalyst for our own betting on things, on our own faith.

Frederick Buechner, in his book *Secrets in the Dark*, reminds us that faith is distinctly different from other aspects of religious life even though we sometimes use the word to mean religious belief in general when perhaps we talk about the Christian faith or the faith of Islam. Faith is less a position *on something* than a movement *toward something*, less a *sure thing* than a *hunch*, he says. Faith is waiting. Faith is journeying through space and through time without knowing when, if ever, we reach the goal or what that goal even is.

Faith, Buechner says, is like fiction, like story, like the unknown that is crafted out of the events that present themselves. The word fiction comes from a Latin verb meaning "to shape, to fashion." This is what fiction and faith do. We fashion our story as we fashion our faith out of the great hodgepodge of life, the things that have happened to us and the things we had dreamed of happening. This is the raw material of faith and fiction. And if we let the shape of whatever emerges come forth, we will find life. Forcing meaning or purpose, or trying to shape our story into something it is not, undermines the journey; it is a shortcut we are tempted to take in order to put **our** spin on life. But ultimately betting our life on the mystery of God to shape it is by far the wiser decision.

What are we betting our life on? The writer of the Hebrews seems to think that faith is in the betting as much as what we're betting on. It is the journey that becomes faith. It is the lifetime of betting on finding meaning and purpose and doing the best we can with what we know in any given moment that creates the story of our faith. And that story is the best kind of fiction, a story that is shaped and fashioned by an unknown Mystery that is at the heart of life. We build the bridge while we walk on it. We don't know where the bridge will touch down on the other side, or where the pylons will be placed, or how big or what shape it will be. Faith is building a space big enough for the next step; after we take that step, we build enough space for the next step. And by doing so, we go forward into the mystery. Real bridges can't be built this way; bridges of faith must be built this way.

As the Bhagavad Gita says, faith is inseparable from the journey of life, part and parcel of the story of our lives, for it is by faith that we have gotten where we are. Faith is about the ups and downs, the dreams, the intuitions, the unusual bends and curves that have taken us in directions we hadn't planned to go and didn't know about. Faith is as much about what we would label failures as much as it is about what we would call successes, for it is in failing that our egos are diminished to the point that we must live by some other attachment as we journey through uncharted territory. Whatever our faith is in, it is inseparable from the story of what has happened to us which is why faith is so related to fiction.

Jesus, knowing the invaluable connection between faith and fiction, told stories. He relied upon fiction to tell the truth. Once upon a time there was a man going down to Jericho when he fell among robbers and was beaten up. Many walked past him without helping until an enemy, a Samaritan,

came by and cared for him.

Once upon a time there was a father who had two sons, one who stayed home and a prodigal who spent his inheritance foolishly. But the father loved both of them equally. Once upon a time there was a woman who lost a coin and turned the house upside down to find it and when she found it she rejoiced. Once upon a time there was a lost sheep for whom a shepherd left the 99 to find.

We, too, have fashioned our lives after story. The story of the bible, the story of our ancestors, the story of people whose lives we admire. We have learned life's lessons from stories, some of them rooted in history and some of them rooted in the vivid imagination of Aesop's fables or Disney cartoons. There are a lot of good lessons for living to be learned in *Finding Dory* and *The BFG*, which stands for The Big Friendly Giant, if you haven't seen the movie or read the book.

The future is written by faith with our lives. We may not even be aware of it. What may seem like a disappointment to us is part of the fabric of faith that is woven with the threads of daily routine. What may seem like an insignificant activity on the daily pathway may be part of a plot that will unfold in the years ahead to create a story with the power to nurture faith. By faith, Noah built an ark before it started to rain. By faith, Abraham and Sarah, when they were too old to have children, had a son. By faith, Rahab, a prostitute who hid spies in her home; was ultimately the umpteenth grandmother of Jesus. By faith, the congregation of New England Church in days gone by, when they thought the challenge of keeping this church alive was more than they could do, kept going. And we are the beneficiaries.

By faith, school teachers go into the classroom each day believing that their efforts will inspire their students. By faith, police officers and firefighters put themselves in dangerous situations believing that their sacrifice will provide a better community to live in. By faith, doctors go to the examining room each day believing that their medical knowledge will help people live healthier lives. By faith, neighbors are neighborly believing that such relationships will strengthen the community.

Martin Luther said: even if I knew the world would go to pieces tomorrow, I'd still plant my apple tree. By faith, we, through the routine activities of each day, are part of a story that is being told on the face of history. We are part of God's holy fiction, part of God's story. What are you betting your life on? World peace? A stable economy? A safer world for our great grandchildren? We must invest diligently in the things we believe are critical for the well-being of our world, believing that we are part of a story that may never get finished in our lifetime but which is nevertheless counting on us to play our part until the curtain falls, on us or the play, whichever comes first. We are here to write the story that will be read by generations to come. We are here to play the part of good Samaritans and prodigal-loving fathers and hunters of lost coins and seekers of lost sheep.

Will you bet your life on your story, God's story? Will you bet your life that the details of your average day are part of a story line that the divine author is using for the ongoing fiction of faith? Will you bet your life that you are the poetry of God's joy; that you are the characters in the drama that unfolds with each new dawn; that every person is part of the divine comedy of God who loves the whole world? Will you bet your life on that? Amen.

--Gary L. McCann

(This sermon is based heavily on, and quotes significantly from, Frederick Buechner's book *Secrets in the Dark*, pages 169-183. I am indebted to this book for its insights and thoughts for my own faith journey.)

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal God, whose ways are not our ways and whose being is beyond our understanding, we come in the community of faith to seek light upon our ways and strength within our hearts. Like creatures in the sea who feel the tide even though they cannot identify it, so are we amid the ebbing and flowing of life around us.

Yet you are also deep inside us, so close that we can't define ourselves without your presence. Our eyes observe beauty; our hearts feel love; our minds discover truth; our wills have found purpose; and deep within our souls you have created a thirst for living that forges through the valleys of despair and over the mountains of time.

We turn from the perplexities of life to this hour of renewal. We are tempted by petty annoyances and great griefs, by anxiety for the future and fear of the unknown. We are sidetracked by anger that wells up within us like a raging ocean and by dreams that become nightmares in midday. We are caught up in a presidential election that boggles our minds and gives us serious concern for the future that is before us. Overpower these distractions with a calming faith that trusts life even as birds on the wing trust the air beneath them.

We pray once again for those especially in need of a holy strength: for those unemployed, those who face homelessness, for those whose health undermines their freedom, for those whose joy is weighed down in depression and for those whose hope has been destroyed by circumstances beyond their control. Inspire faith for the present and hope for the future that they go forward renewed and revitalized.

We pray for our nation. Use our power for purposes of justice and peace. Save us from racial prejudice and sexist discrimination. Keep us from selfish nationalism. May our strength be the humble servant of all who are oppressed, and hope for those stricken with poverty.

Hope of the world, guide us that we may guide; love us that we may love; empower us that we may empower. In the name of the one who calls us to be a force for peace, amen.