

**Faith in Change**  
**Rev. Rita Capezzi—UUFM**  
**March 13, 2022**

**Homily—Faith in Change**

Our Soul Matters theme for the month of March is “Renewing Faith.” And so, we continue our exploration today, gaining wisdom for our journey from the words and songs of civil rights activists, from Christian Scripture and the Hebrew Bible, from the field of ethical philosophy, and from our own experience.

Some of you know that part of my daily spiritual practice involves taking a photo out a certain window, at a certain view, about the same time each day. And I post the photo on Facebook with no comment except for the number of days I am marking. I started this practice in the early days of the pandemic, not at the very beginning, when I thought this might all end in a few weeks. I began the practice several weeks after that, when I realized that I had to strengthen myself for a long journey.

I have now taken the photo over a span of 718 days. When you look at the photos over time, it is very easy to observe the changing seasons. You can almost watch the winter come, and the spring in its turn. That longer timescale. But on a daily basis, a comment from a friend captures much of what the daily practice can look like: So much sameness. So much sameness, my dear friend Alice notes, when operating on the scale of a mere 24 hours.

How might we have faith in change when we witness sameness? How might we have faith that the world can become a better place, that we ourselves can make the world better, when we see such repetition of misery, when so little progress seems to be made? How can we who believe in freedom stay ourselves from rest, from giving up, until it comes? How long will we watch while our own prophets are murdered or jailed? Do we find that we are, in fact, willing to work for our own values—for democratic process, for truth, for justice, equity, and liberation? Are we each and is this community one in the number that moves against tyranny? What will sustain us when the anxiety and worry about world events, about our everyday lives, threaten to overwhelm and overpower our understanding that we are on the web together, and that which affects some of us affects all of us?

Both the Hebrew Bible, in Deuteronomy, and in the Christian Scriptures, echoes in the Gospels of both Matthew and John—these texts all make mention of the perennial poor. The poor are always with us. The words put me to mind of an unhoused person I met when I served in the Connections Shelter Ministry before the pandemic. I see them walking on Riverfront occasionally, still unhoused, two years later. I think of the team of cyclists the Fellowship raised a few weeks back, cyclists who joined cyclists from other parts of the Mankato community, who joined a line of UUFM cyclists moving back in time—the group from 2021, from 2019, in my first year in the area, the groups extending back still further in time. All these cyclists peddling for affordable housing, which is still in such short supply, despite all the labor expended and money committed, despite the persistence of Partners for Housing and the School

sisters of Notre Dame, and the efforts of developers and City officials. Somehow, even still, there is not enough affordable housing.

I think of our current Second Collection recipient—another long-time recipient of the generosity of this congregation—ECHO Food Shelf. And the need for supplemental food sources—when people simply cannot earn enough to feed their families—this need just never seems to decrease. Our long-standing work with The REACH—in support of LGBTQ teens—and of CADA—for those escaping domestic abuse—and of the Greater Mankato Diversity Council—educating children about the beauty and value of our human differences. And new, developing partnerships, with the children needing companionship at MyPlace and with food reclamation at The Wooden Spoon. We in this religious community, we have faithfully volunteered our time as individuals and in groups, we have raised considerable sums of money to make our immediate world better. And still the work is not done.

These words of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. remind us that “Faith is taking the first step even when you can’t see the whole staircase.” We, as individuals and as a religious community, we have been taking steps, and we have seen some of the staircase. Long years working on the steps persuades us of that staircase as nothing else will. But oh, don’t we witness so much sameness? Don’t we long for the end to the staircase, that time when the injustices of poverty and ill-treatment, of oppression and violence have come to an end and we can rest on a landing opening up to a whole new world? I have longed for that, I do long for that. I want to sit under the shading tree planted by the great grandparents, I want to worship in the completed cathedral, the works begun long ago by the faithful and yet not completed. I imagine that you do as well. But where is that tree? Where is that cathedral? Where is the arc bent in justice? Where is the end? Where does the staircase lead?

Philosopher and ethicist Martha Nussbaum offers us some perspective on the meaning of staying on the staircase, even when it seems to have no end, even when lasting or ultimate change seems to elude us. If we are to be good and to do good, we have to prepare ourselves to be wounded by things we cannot prevent, by the reality that what we intend and what actually happens may not at all match up. She writes, “To be a good human being is to have a kind of openness to the world, an ability to trust uncertain things beyond your own control, that can lead you to be shattered in very extreme circumstances for which you were not to blame.” To live ethically, trying to make the world a better place, requires that we have faith: that we trust uncertainty and be willing to be vulnerable. That we accept our own hurt hearts and devastated feelings. Nussbaum says that living ethically means “being more like a plant than like a jewel, something rather fragile, but whose very particular beauty is inseparable from its fragility.” To stay on the staircase, we need to be willing to put our comfort, our certainty, our tranquility on the line.

Of course, that is harder to do when you are less impacted by the conditions of injustice and oppression. Those most affected, well, they do not have the luxury of retreating from the work, of resting. Here, Nussbaum says, when the work becomes “too much to bear, it is always possible to retreat into the thought, ‘I’ll live for my own comfort, for my own revenge, for my own anger, and I just won’t be a member of society anymore.’” Those of us who can get off the steps, get off the staircase, we might

decide that the effort to stay on is just not worth it. The work of justice is simply too difficult and too empty of immediate reward. But, Nussbaum says, that really amounts to saying “I won’t be a human being anymore.” When we retreat into our own satisfaction, we lose our faith in human life itself. We are, at our root, social and communal beings. We need each other. Nussbaum says, “the life that no longer trusts another human being and no longer forms ties to the political community is not a human life any longer.” We can retreat from the unending work of justice-making, live only for ourselves, but by breaking faith with living and working for humanity, we risk making ourselves less than human.

Now, Nussbaum is not suggesting we go out of our way to wound ourselves, to martyr ourselves for causes, even in the interest of making our world better. In her words, “the lesson certainly is not to try to maximize conflict or to romanticize struggle and suffering, but it’s rather that you should care about things in a way that makes it a possibility that tragedy will happen to you.” In other words, we must be vulnerably open to the pain of the world. I know many of us are feeling this now with the situation in Ukraine. If not Ukraine, any of the other hideous conflicts in Africa and in Mexico and in the Middle East. And sometimes that grief, that anxiety, that fear, it is overwhelming, and we want to push it away. For Nussbaum, we have a choice: “If you hold your commitments lightly, in such a way that you can always divest yourself from one or the other of them if they conflict, then it doesn’t hurt you when things go badly.” But there is a grave risk to this self-protection, especially if we want to live our lives “with a deep seriousness of commitment.” To live with commitment to our values, we must adjust our “desires to the way the world actually goes,” and not be satisfied simply with our own satisfaction. Seeking to live a good life by trying to make the world a better place, we do risk tragedy, we risk entanglement with the mess of the world, never seeming to advance up that staircase. But acceptance to that reality, that is, in fact, to live faithful, believing that change can happen, that what looks like so much sameness is really a gradual but entirely real change for the good.

“Faith is taking the first step even when you can’t see the whole staircase.” Change happens that we cannot see, operating at a subtle level beyond our individual knowing. Part of the change we make in the world is when we change ourselves, when we commit to faithfulness, when we find a way to give up our fear and our anxiety, our expectations and requirements. “What’s going to happen?” “Will everything be ok?” “What can I do?” “As if life had ever made any promises of making sense or turning out the way we’d thought. As if we are not also actors in this still unfolding story.” Most everything about living means embracing “uncertain things beyond our own control, that can lead us to be shattered in very extreme circumstances.” Yet, change is visible, if you look. A changed heart. A changed attitude toward life, any of us, each of us, all of us more fully living out our values of interdependence and interconnection. In this religious community, in “this hour, we gather to surrender to the mystery, to release ourselves from the needing to know.” And we lean into the truth that we are all connected, and we all deserve liberation. Change does come, even if it happens outside the frame of the photo, even if it takes until the end of time.

### **Reflection—May We Change Together**

It can feel like an unbearable weight upon us, this world that seems not to change, with its pain, its ugly violence and war, its refusal to recognize, honor, and protect the beautiful diversity of our ways of being

human. Between the cacophony of distractions pulling us towards untruth and falsehood, the shrill cries of desperation of “we’ve-had-enough,” of “when will they stop killing my people,” of “how much more will the waters rise,” of “when will it be safe to return to my home,” of “how much longer can I hang on,” between all of that and more, “we listen for the maybe still breathing, perhaps still whispering, faintest sign of the Universal Good.” In that breath, in that whisper we hear the call—there is more love, more hope, more peace, more joy somewhere. And I am going to keep on ‘til I find it. But I am not going to do that alone. You are not going to do that alone. Together, we will help to sing the songs of freedom—in ourselves, within our communities. Together, we will honor the gifts we, an expansive and inclusive “we,” that we bring to the joy of our work for each other. We, together, stay firm to our own commitments and our own promises to foster and cultivate the bonds of our common humanity, helping us to know each other as beloved. “We beckon Love and Justice and Mercy with our own whispers, with our shouts, with our cries.” We share redemption songs, we free our minds from the false belief that our words mean nothing and our actions are useless. We free our minds and together work for the liberation that completely frees us all. May we have faith in the stairs, have faith in the staircase, have faith that change is possible even when the way seems long, as you remember, today and every day, that you are loved, you are worthy, you are welcome, and you are needed. May you feel it so. May it be so, and may we say together, “Amen.”