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The Faithful Outdoorsman.

By Rev. Joe Classen.

As a “man of the cloth” my life revolves around, and is rooted in, faith. From the moment I get up in the morning, till I hit the hay at night, faith in the Lord and living a life in response to it is the focus of all I do in my ministry. From leading others in prayer and worship, preaching, teaching, caring for the sick and homebound, to counseling folks, leading retreats and sitting through hours upon hours of meetings to plan a never ending multitude of church events, faith is, and has to be, at the center of it all.

Spiritually speaking, faith can be defined as a supernatural gift from God. It involves the ability to believe (with the aid of Divine assistance) and then to constructively transform one’s life according to the will of that Higher Power. Living out one’s faith becomes an act of virtue, that is, a habit of goodness. Faith is a gift that one must ask (pray) for and then continue to exercise in order to grow stronger and produce good fruit in one’s life. Generically speaking though, one can simply define faith as believing in something without absolute proof or evidence. But make no mistake, faith is put to the test often. It is at times weakened or even lost. Faith grows slowly, but this is for the best. In taking it’s time to develop, it develops strong, like the branches of a mighty Missouri oak, able to withstand even the most violent of storms!

As a passionate, avid outdoorsman, author of several hunting and fishing themed books and the host of a Christian outdoors radio show, faith is also at the heart and soul of my pursuits with rod & reel, bow & arrow, rifle and shotgun. Whether you are a person of religious/spiritual belief or not, I would wager that if you are an outdoors man or woman, you are by default a person who’s life is rooted heavily in faith.

After a deer hunter has put in hours of diligent scouting, carefully positioned tree stands, has strategically designed the perfect game plan and has exhausted every possible avenue of preparation for a potentially successful hunt, all that’s left on opening morning is faith. One is simply left with the hopeful belief that all the parts of the puzzle will

come together, that all one's preparation will pay off, that one will indeed create their own luck through intense hard work and almost superhuman attention to detail.

In the same way, when a fisherman takes to a new body of water, he or she no doubt will spend a fair amount of time studying the water, taking into account the structure, temperature, clarity, etc. After careful evaluation has been made, again, one is only left with the faith that their assumptions, made by means of their reasoning, education and skill, will ultimately put some fish in the boat.

In all scenarios of outdoor pursuit, exercising an active faith is at the core of what we do. If one did not strongly believe in the possibility for success, one would be a complete fool to ever take to the woods or water in hopes of filling a tag or a stringer. Even in the age of peeping trail cameras, enticing food plots, scent elimination hoopla, delicious attractants and all the rest, one cannot absolutely prove that the monster ten pointer who has been in the same place at the same time for days on end will make an appearance during the hunt. We hunt on and with faith.

Faith is not necessarily "blind" though. As shown in the previous examples, faith and reason certainly compliment and build upon each other. The ability to reason can establish tremendous grounds for believing in something, as well as fostering a deeper understanding for things there is no absolute, unanimous evidence for. When questioned on the relationship between religion and science, I often reply that the two work beautifully together. Science has, and continues, to validate things such as the authenticity of sacred texts and the existence of many places and objects of religious significance.

Whatever the case, sacred or secular, faith is in many ways based on knowledge, albeit, perhaps incomplete or improvable. And again, the belief in that knowledge is either derived from a Higher Power, from vast amounts of information that one has accumulated by means of the ability to reason, or for many, a combination of the two.

As members of the outdoor community, we have faith in what we do. We believe that hunting, fishing and the like are, in the grand scheme of things, activities that produce good fruit. We believe that involvement in such pursuits can bring about an ongoing, constructive transformation, not just in our own lives, but also in the lives of family, friends, and the world at large. We also believe and have faith that our participation in

outdoor activities can benefit the health and vitality of the natural world and all of creation.

Any hunter or fisherman reading these words most likely possesses a fair to great deal of knowledge as to why we do have faith in what we do as outdoorsmen. We are well aware of the principles of sound conservation, which hunting plays a major role in. Through our experiences, we have all come to reason that spending time in the great outdoors is not just a way to hand's on manage our renewable resources and keep nature in check, but that those activities also became an unparalleled catalyst for things like filling the freezer with healthy, organic meat, providing incredible stress relief, peace of mind, opportunity for personal and spiritual reflection, quality time with loved ones, the development of virtues such as respect and responsibility, becoming a true steward of creation, and a host of other genuinely good dynamics and experiences that no other activity even comes close to matching.

For many outdoors men and women, we also base the validity and blessedness of what we do from sacred sources. The Bible, for example, is loaded with imagery of the great outdoors: fishing, hunting, archery and some of the most beautiful descriptions of wildlife and nature ever written. Sacred Scripture makes it very clear that mankind is the divinely appointed steward of creation and that we are to sustain and respectfully use (not abuse) our natural resources (including animals) for our benefit.

However, although we hold such notions as truths, we cannot prove them with irrefutable certainty until after the fact. Conservation programs cannot claim victory until all the data has been evaluated. The family bonding potential of a hunting or fishing trip will not be realized until the ride home. Truth be told, the relaxation hoped for while watching the skies for ducks may not ever come to pass. Nonetheless, we have faith that all such endeavors can and will bear good fruit.

It's because of our strong, unshaken faith in the immense value and constructive purpose of our outdoor activities of choice that we (should) rise up with a righteous, charitable, but aggressive voice to defend these things we hold so dear, and even sacred. As we are all well aware, hunting, fishing, and other outdoor pursuits, are coming under more and more attack today from "animal rights" extremists groups. By means of tear-jerking commercials and all manner of bleeding heart propaganda in the media, the

uninformed masses of our culture are being swayed to believe, that is, to have faith in the notion that hunters are crazed, camouflage clad murderers who have a sick fascination with destroying life and pillaging nature like a drunken Viking warrior raiding a helpless town of peasants. Outdoorsmen are often portrayed as poachers, criminals with no regard for the wonder and sacredness of creation.

Images of “sportsmen” standing over mutilated game animals and illegally caught fish flash before the eyes of millions of unsuspecting Americans while pitifully depressing music plays in the background. Meanwhile, a hyper-emotional voice asks for donations to stop the horror...and then sweetens the deal by offering a free T-shirt!

As anyone who has found themselves in a discussion, debate, or all out battle with an anti-hunter will attest to, it is rarely sound, scientific knowledge or logical, objective, factual reasoning that fuels the faith of anti-hunters and environmental extremists. It is rather, in most cases, subjective, artificially constructed data, manipulated emotions, personal interpretation of scientific or scriptural facts, and stereotypes that fuel their angst.

I will sadly be the first to admit though; the stereotypes which summon forth the outrage of the antis are grounded in at least some truth. Intelligent people sometimes hold on to very stupid stereotypes, but as with any stereotype, there is always at least a little truth somewhere to be found. The truth is that a minority of people in the outdoors community do show extreme disrespect for the animals they pursue, the fish they catch and the land that produced those creatures. There are, indeed, some hunters and fishermen who leave behind piles of trash, beer cans, cigarette butts and all manner of unsightly refuse in an area they have been, marking their territory like a rut-crazed buck.

There are those in our community who bring us great disgrace by taking ridiculously unethical shots on animals out of pride or selfishness. More than a few camouflaged rotten apples ignore or cheat against game laws, thus destroying essential information for future resource management efforts. There are those among us who think nothing of things like trespassing, paying attention to adequate shooting light, proper field care of game and respectfully displaying their harvest for others. I’m sure we all know of at least one or two fellow hunters who have wasted great amounts of game or fish, have needlessly hacked down enough trees to build a log cabin and ripped massive gouges though the terrain with their magnificent four-wheeler. The list goes on and on. It is a

sad but very true reality. As always, it's the wayward, troubled few that bring disgrace to all...something I know a lot about as a Catholic priest!

So how can we best defend our precious outdoor legacies and combat the surmounting force of emotion and denial based opposition? By being faithful to what we believe in by means of diligent, virtuous action which will, in time, produce good fruit. We must continue to make every effort to educate the public about the personal, communal and global goodness and necessity of what we do, instead of sitting back on the couch and doing nothing while more anti-hunting propaganda sinks its teeth into the minds of irrational souls. We must be proactive in making every effort to let our voices be heard on every level, amongst friends and family all the way up to those sitting in political offices. We must exercise one of our other great freedoms, and that is our freedom of speech. It is necessary to preach and teach from the rooftops, to share the truth, which we base on reason, sound knowledge and even spiritual conviction.

Keep in mind though, we can preach, teach and make every effort to educate others till we are blue in the face. We can cram the truth of our outdoor beliefs down people's throats until they choke, with little or no results. But it is our positive example that speaks far, far louder than words and carries the weight of battleship chains. If we are not genuinely faithful to the ideals and principles that we so passionately promote, if we do not hold ourselves and others accountable for unethical conduct in the woods and waters, then we are truly our greatest enemy. And that is the gospel truth!