

TALKING ABOUT GOD

A sermon preached by the Rev John Nichols

Over the last several years I have served many Unitarian Universalist congregations as an interim minister. One of them was the congregation in Newton. Several years ago a member of the Newton Unitarian congregation introduced me to a friend saying “We’ve heard the word, “God” out of this young fellow more times in one year than perhaps in the entire history of the church.” Mind you I understood that I was being affectionately teased. Still I became curious as to whether what he said might be true. Might I be the only minister of Newton to use the word “God” appreciatively or in prayer in such a long time?

I have known all of their ministers for the past forty years, known them well enough to know something about their religious beliefs. Clyde Dodder and Clarke Wells were both theists. Clyde had been a Christian and Clarke was a Christian. Gerry Krick who they thought was a strong Humanist was actually a theist, strongly influenced by the liberal Christianity of Boston University at the time he attended. So it turns out that their next to last minister, James Ford, is the only Humanist who has served that congregation in forty years, perhaps more. How could I have been the only minister of The Unitarian Society in Newton to use the word “God” more than a few times?

In case you’re wondering why I even mention this here’s the point that interests me. I think the observation that Clyde, Clarke and Gerry did not talk like Theists, although they were theists, is probably true. They were probably very cautious about using the religious language that was closest to their hearts because they knew that such language is in many congregations a liberal religious land mine. It is the third rail that has fried many a ministry in our denomination. In fact a Newton parishioner told me that he asked Gerry once why he did not tell people what he really believed, and Gerry responded he was afraid it would blow the church apart.

This issue of God-talk has been with us for a long time. This morning’s first hymn, “It Sounds along the Ages” was written in 1894. If you look closely at the words, you will discover that they give no hint what “it” is that “sounds along the ages.” This was deliberate. The poem was written by William Channing Gannett who was serving growing Middle Western congregations at the middle of the Nineteenth century. The poem from which the hymn is taken was originally titled “The Word of God” but you won’t find that anywhere on the hymn.

These congregations for which Gannet wrote loved the freedom of Unitarianism, but they were very wary of God-talk. Raised in strict Lutheran, Baptist or Presbyterian households, they rejected their parents’ God and assumed, wrongly, that any other understanding of God would be as objectionable to them as the old Baptist or Lutheran God with whom they grew

up. So Gannett worked around their religious understandings as best he could and wrote a hymn everyone can sing.

We have other hymns that do that. "Spirit of Life" comes to mind. Our "second hymn today, #77, originally had the verse, "We look for God and fancy him concealed" but the line was rewritten and "Truth" replaced " God making part of the hymn totally incomprehensible. Many of our newer hymns carefully bridge the gulf between Humanists and Theists.

Selecting hymns is not a problem I had here, and I thank you for that, but it exists in some congregations., For the most part, talking openly about God is difficult for many people. It places the same invisible barrier between many us that used to exist between gentiles and Jews, between Caucasian people and people of color, between gays and straights. One side feels it has been as tolerant as it needs to be, while the other constantly feels that the tolerance they've been assured of doesn't seem to run very deep.

This morning I want to provide some thoughts as to how we can eliminate that barrier when expressing our deepest feelings about God. I know that you place a high value on being a religious community, and one part of being a community is being accepting of the differences that are truly here. – not just insisting as is true in some Unitarian Universalist congregations -- that differences be kept silent. I hope this will become – if it isn't already -- a congregation where your minister could always preach all that he/ she really believes as many of my other colleagues cannot.

First let's get rid of a working definition that creates a lot of misunderstanding. When people want to explain why they don't believe in God they often say, "I can't possibly believe in an old man with a white beard who stomps around heaven making judgments and casting lightning bolts here and there." To which I want to respond, "Congratulations. You have just reached agreement with the vast majority of people in the world. Virtually no one – not even fundamentalists of any stripe – really believe in this cartoon God of an old man with a white beard that you have also rejected. Even people who speak casually about "the man upstairs" know they are using metaphorical speech."

The first principle of understanding one another is to remember that God is a metaphor for what we know we do not understand. The religious scriptures that you are familiar with were written in metaphorical language by a pre-scientific people who understood metaphor much better than we do. They understood God was not a person, not a man, not seeable or quantifiable. When Moses asked God whose name he should invoke to get the Israelites to follow him, God answered, "I am". The God of the Bible was every bit as much a mystery to those who wrote it as God is to many of us.

So, in opening up a dialogue about God with a Theist, don't assume you know what he/she means by God. Ask first. God is not something that is "proven" for most of us. God is, first of all, a word, a word that attempts to encompass a feeling that our lives are contingent on something that is greater than all of us and something that is fundamentally inexpressible.

God is a word that hovers over our conversations about why bad things happen and what is right or wrong and where do we go for extra strength and how do we account for the unexpected goodness in the world. God is a word we use at times when we are not being analytical or rational but we hope that somehow some grace or goodness or wisdom will visit our lives even when we don't believe in it.

God is that word that accompanies expressions of strong distaste like "God damn" and "God awful" and "God Forsaken" which imply that if there were standards, what we are condemning would fall short of them. God is also used in expressions of praise like "Thank God" or "God's country", "God bless" or "Good bye," which is a contraction of "God be with you."

God is the word we use to describe a power or creative force that touches our lives from behind a veil of mystery that we can never entirely penetrate. God is a word, which describes what is incomprehensible. If we believe there is a power that can reach and affect us – even strengthen us or provide us with a measure of peace – though we will never understand how, then we believe in God.

God is a word that we use to encompass a mystery to the best of our ability. Anyone who believes that he/she knows exactly who God is or what God wants does not understand the God of the Judaic, Christian or Islamic scriptures.

On the other hand, anyone who believes there is nothing either in the world we sense or in the world we can reason about; that there is nothing that is beyond the realm of our eventual understanding – anyone who believes that does not believe in God. God, for those of us who value the thought, is the mystery that hovers around the edges of our lives making us wonder if there is more to this living than we will ever entirely understand.

There is a story from the Death of God literature, which asks the question how much mystery we can tolerate. In it, two anthropologists are cruising through the jungle when they came upon an elaborate and perfectly tended garden. One anthropologist whom we will call "The Believer" said, "There is a gardener who comes here and tends this plot, but the other anthropologist who we will call "The Skeptic" said, "There is no gardener here. Do you see a gardener? No the garden just grows. And it tends itself."

So they decided to set up a test. They surrounded the garden with every kind of advanced detection device – sensors, lights, sirens, cameras and even dogs – and then they hid and waited to see if the invisible gardener would be caught. But no lights flashed, no sirens went off, no dogs barked, no blood curdling screams of pain were heard, no infrared photographs were taken. Throughout this entire time, a period of many weeks and months the gardens continued to be immaculately tended though no gardener was ever seen on the property.

The Believer finally concluded, “There is a gardener, but the gardener is invisible, intangible, insensible to electric shocks or to photography, but he still comes and tends the garden which he loves. And the skeptic asks, “Just how does an invisible, intangible, insensible, indescribable gardener differ from no actual gardener at all.

Well we are all standing out there in that jungle trying to figure out what’s happening. Each of us gets to answer that question – as “Believer” or as “Skeptic” or as someone who could still be inclined either way. What tips the balance one way or another is not something I presume to question. It is a fundamental precept of religious liberalism that we do not stand in judgment over one another’s theological choices. There is room here for all of us.

Why have I made the choices I made? One day, back when I was a lot younger, I was backpacking up in the high mountains for the first time in my life. Things had not gone well for me on that trip and I was feeling very poorly about myself, feeling that I would probably never come up into the mountains again. I had run out of good things to say to myself. I wanted to go home and make the misery stop.

I was in a personal dilemma of my own making for which I could think of no solutions nor had I any hope of finding one. At the end of a rather long day of hiking, I went out on a broad flat rock, overlooking the lower peaks and valleys near Lake Champlain and I became hypnotized by the majesty of what was in front of me. Then time stopped. I have no idea how long I was there. I had no sense of any present reality. And when I became aware of it again I knew that something had spoken to me though no words were ever said. I knew I would be all right, and I knew that coming back to the mountains would be an important part of my life, which it has been.

I told a longer story of what happened many years ago in a sermon. One of my listeners responded somewhat sourly I thought “Well that was very nice for you.” He was right, of course. Both that it was very nice for me and that it probably did nothing for him. But sometimes the only way for us theists to talk of God is on very personal terms. And that, of course, can be a little bit dangerous.

I’ve had two or three other similar experiences, not distinct enough to get

on television, but enough to convince me that something we cannot begin to understand is there for all of us. When I was growing up it was fairly customary to hear skeptics, particularly in the Unitarian congregation my parents attended, say “Well, there are so many religions, so many gods, how can they call be right.” And having said that they decided they had said something conclusive.

Yes, there are many different human expressions of religion. And no they cannot all be right. I cannot imagine handling rattlesnakes as a proof of my faith or believing that mistreating women and children is divinely empowered. But those are human attempts to understand a sacred mystery. They cannot all be right, but that doesn't diminish the mystery.

Good people can disagree about this, but you deserve to know at least what this minister really thinks about God. My faith is that there is a healing power behind that mystery. It reaches out to us, and sometimes, if we allow it, it finds us. It is in this sense that the sacred power within the mystery that surrounds us and borders our lives has sounded throughout the ages though we imagine it in many different ways and call it by different names.

Let me say one thing more. You have heard others defending their belief or their disbelief in God and implying or saying directly that those who don't agree with them are bad people. You did not hear me say that. I am not saying that. I am not here this morning to debate the existence of God. There's no point to that debate since we can never know anything more except in the depths of our own spiritual lives, where it does matter. I am here this morning in the hopes that something I say or represent will make it possible for your minister or any minister preaching from this pulpit to preach everything that he/she really believes and for you to listen.

In many ways we respond to what sounds along the ages without acknowledging or needing to acknowledge a power beyond our observation or control. Atheists, agnostics, theists, Christians, Jews and Buddhists often do good work together with respect for their differences but without ever feeling they have to renounce their particular faith or deliberately keep quiet about it. We have to hope that will always be true here. We have to work to keep it so.