

Faith

Unitarian Universalist Church of Buffalo

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Well, I've been here since August, this is my eighth time to preach in this pulpit, and it has finally happened – word got back to me that someone recently commented, “well, her sermons are OK, but she does say “God” a bit too often!” And I don't think they meant they overheard me cussing out the Xerox machine or tripping on the stairs, though I suppose that is possible. I imagine many of you have heard the joke that the only time Jesus Christ gets mentioned in a UU church is when the janitor falls down the basement stairs.

Every faith tradition has some internal diversity, and congregations and congregants fall along a spectrum from conservative to liberal. The pews of any given church on any given Sunday hold individuals with a wide range of beliefs about faith and reason, God and the ultimate nature of things. But I think that we Unitarian Universalists -- we who celebrate as a core value a faith without doctrine, and who actively support each individual's ongoing search for truth -- we may range somewhat more widely along the diversity spectrum. And wherever there is diversity of any kind, we will also find that someone is uncomfortable with what is going on at least part of the time – perhaps the challenge for a Unitarian Universalist minister is to make sure the discomfort gets spread around more or less evenly across as many of our diversities as possible! Though maybe we can do better than that, really.

Although I may speak lightly about it sometimes, I do take the commitments, the diversities, the discomforts, the joys and the struggles of our complex way of faith very seriously. We all come through the doors of the church with our own experience and context, including our experiences and ideas about religion, about faith, about belief and about the ultimate mystery we may (or may not) name as God. That includes every person in this room, from the youngest to the oldest – no one in our society is immune from some message or impression about what it means to be a person of faith, to be a believer, to be religious.

I have found a tendency in our society for some people to draw a sharp line between what is or is not valid to be classified as a religion. In Texas a few years ago, there was a threat to remove the tax-exempt status of a Unitarian Universalist church because it was not part of a “real” religion, since it did claim a common belief in a transcendent deity. The charge that we are not a religion usually comes from people who insist that a religion must be doctrinal and theistic. On the other hand, I have also encountered Unitarian Universalists themselves who seek to remove religious language and ritual from our practices, turning away from an approach to religion that they find to be counter-rational, or that they believe fails to meet the standard of honoring the worth and dignity of all persons.

I take a different approach. Rather than turning my back on religious language, I feel a strong urge to take back ownership of religious terminology from those who have usurped it to their own purposes. Going back to basics, the word “religion” comes from the Latin re-ligare – to

bind together (like a ligament). The word “faith” means trust or confidence (from the Latin *fides*, the same root as for fiduciary), and “belief” means an opinion, a conviction, a confidence that something is true. None of those terms in its general and historical meaning necessarily implies a transcendent all-powerful personal deity at the center of the picture. Relinquishing the common language of religion or faith to be defined by others constitutes a defeat for liberal religion and our courageous way of faith. In my humble opinion, as they say.

Someone once said, though I do not know who it was, that the reason we are a non-creedal, non-doctrinal faith is not because our beliefs are unimportant; it is rather that our beliefs are too important to allow someone else to define them for us. I refuse to submit to someone else’s narrow definition of religion, of faith or belief, or even to someone else’s definition of God. Instead, I choose to hold the ground of a liberal non-creedal faith in which I can work toward common ground, using common language with other committed people of faith by adopting and living within a definition that is in alignment with my own core values, commitments and understandings of the world – and more historically accurate as well.

Theologian Karen Armstrong, in her book *The Case for God*, speaks about this issue very clearly, and I quote: “Each religious tradition formulates the sacred differently, and this will certainly affect the way people experience it. There are important differences between Brahman, Nirvana, God and Dao, but that does not mean that one is right and the others wrong. On this matter, nobody can have the last word. All faith systems have been at pains to show that the ultimate cannot be adequately expressed in any theoretical system, however august, because it lies beyond words and concepts. But many people today . . . feel that they know exactly what they mean by God. We learned about God at about the same time as we were told about Santa Claus. But while our understanding of the Santa Claus phenomenon evolved and matured, our theology remained somewhat infantile. Not surprisingly, when we attained intellectual maturity, many of us rejected the God we had inherited, and denied that he existed.”

I am no different from most people in allowing myself sometimes to be seduced by the illusion that if something is a certain way now, it has always been that way. That includes, of course, the current idea that the word “God” means an individuated personal God, a being so specific that we can paint a picture of him; sort of a super-person that has human characteristics such as goodness, power, intelligence and will. We are told that is what the term God means, and that is how it has always been, and we just need to get used to it. If I don’t agree with that particular characterization of the divine, I just define myself as an atheist and get on with my life. What that perspective fails to note is that definitions of God have changed radically over time, and continue to change today.

The currently dominant notion of the personal, creator God is fairly new, having moved into prominence less than five centuries ago, in the mid-1500’s, with the emergence of modern scientific thought. Rene Descartes and Isaac Newton were both highly influential in promoting the idea of God as an identifiable being, as creator and law-giver, the originator of an apparently orderly universe. The clockmaker God. This is an idea of God created in the image of man, if you will -- highly anthropomorphized -- someone in charge of the universe, creating and

managing it according to his will. Prior to that time, the pre-modern notion of God was defined in theological thought as the Unknowable, an intangible concept of the larger, ineffable mystery in which all life, including human life, is embedded. The stories and lessons we read in the bible were created to be evocative and mythological; they were never intended to be read as history. Religious ritual was designed to evoke the participants' sense of the incomprehensible, of the underlying power of the universe that was beyond human understanding.

This deeper concept of God as indefinable, cloaked in grandeur and mystery, got revised under modern ways of thinking into a sort of super-human being who we can call upon to intervene in the outcome of high school football games. And religious ritual became a way to pledge obedience to this deity, as though "he" were a human king or emperor. God was downgraded, as theologian Karen Armstrong says, into the position of a minor deity, part of the natural world. That is the notion of God against which modern atheists stake their claim. That idea of God is simply not in accord with their rationality or experience of the world, not acceptable to them. And there are more than a few theists who would respond in agreement, "I don't believe in that God either."

I don't often speak of God, but when I do, I generally mean the creative, sustaining energetic force in the universe, not a super-being who rewards or punishes, who needs to be adored and obeyed. I choose to articulate and apply the definition I think is most true – in my own search for truth and meaning in our religious context.

I once asked a friend why they thought more people were not coming to Unitarian Universalist churches – why we are not, as Thomas Jefferson thought we would be, the dominant faith tradition of this nation. She replied that our way of being faithful is too much work for many people, that it is simpler to be told what is true, and to assume everyone believes the same singular correct thing, than to be challenged figure it out for yourself. Maybe that is the case, or maybe we have just not figured out how to tell our story, and how really to be warmly inviting and welcoming to others who are seeking community and might be travelers with us on this exploratory faith journey.

In order to reclaim our right to use the language of religion, we must first get past the belief that someone else owns language, that a word we heard or learned a certain way in our childhood, or that is used a particular way in general conversation, is the only definition of the word. For example, can you remember what picture or object you first associated with the word "apple?" For me, the first image that comes to mind is the generic apple that we find in the alphabet books, which looks sort of like a Red Delicious. Today when I go to the grocery store, I am confronted by dozens of very different sorts of apples – all different colors, shapes and sizes. Somehow, I have been able to re-build the pathways in my thinking to accommodate many apples. I own the word "apple" and can use it in many flexible ways. If we can do it with apples, I am pretty sure that with some caring attention, we can do the same with our thinking about God.

As we reclaim our right to use religious language, we can step more fully into our power as a liberal faith movement. We can re-take the religious field, coming back to symbolic rather than

literal understandings of the divine, the holy, God -- as that which lies beyond human understanding, which we experience in myriad ways, and which in no way conflicts with our rational scientific understanding of the world. In so doing, we may even become more effective in promoting our values of human worth and dignity, compassion and justice. We can be a leader among faith communities in establishing a positive social presence in the courage of our convictions.

As we create a safe space to explore and deepen our thinking, to strengthen the foundation of our life commitments, we will deepen our relationships of trust with each other, and experience increased power in living our values in the world. I invite you, now and always, into the freedom of language and the flexible, caring conversation that is the hallmark of our liberal, non-doctrinal faith, sharing our search and discovery for truth and meaning, as we make our way in the world.

Sources:

Armstrong, Karen (2009) *The Case for God*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf