

## **Invitation to the Spirit: Entreating the Divine**

*Sermon delivered on Sept 27, 2015*

*at Third Unitarian Church*

*by Interim Minister Jennifer Nordstrom*

Meister Eckhart, a 13th-century Christian mystic wrote, “I pray God to rid me of God.” Eckhart considered the deepest level of contemplation to be one of “condition-less being.” It is our conditions, our minds, created by perception and experience, that enable us to consider a thing named God. But if the word “God” is preventing us from experiencing God, then Eckhart calls us to throw it out. The millennium-old Buddhist koan goes: “If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him.” A preconceived notion of the Buddha, our idea of the Buddha, can prevent us from truly encountering the Buddha. When we think about God, however we understand it, we are *thinking*. We are in our perceptual spaces with all the years of baggage we attach to the thought. Symbols, stories, and metaphors evoke entire worlds of meaning, based on culture and personal experience. The mystics call us to get rid of everything that prevents our transformation in order to truly invite a holy encounter—including our own preconceived notions of what the Holy *is*.

I know some Unitarian Universalists who have joined various 12 Step programs for support in letting go of addiction. Everyone who goes

through 12 step wrestles with at least one of the steps. For some of our folks, the most troubling step—despite steps like “Write down every wrong thing you have ever done in your entire life and then read that list aloud to another person,”—despite *that* as one of the places a person might possibly struggle, some of our folks have struggled the most with Step 3: “accepting a higher power, however that you understand that power.” In some of the 12 step texts, this HP is named God.

There are many ways to name a power greater than oneself. I believe the 12-steppers are trying to get at the idea that you are not alone in this world, that there is something more than just you. You might call that something more any number of things, and conceive of it in any number of ways. There are traditions larger and small that have named and described a something more. Buddhism might call a “something more” enlightenment. Humanism might call it the human community or human potential. Trinitarian Christianity might call it the Trinity. Judaism might call it God—Adonai—and Islam would also call it God--Allah. Process theology might call it Creating or Change. Hinduism might call it Krishna. The Lakota might call it Wakan Tanka. Wicca might call it the Goddess. Naturalism might call it Reality. What do you think Unitarian Universalists would call it?

Eckhart also said, “let us pray to God that we may be free of God that we may gain the truth and enjoy it eternally...” (German sermon 52)

Eckhart counseled that if God were not truth, then we should “cling to the truth and let God go” (German sermon 26)

In the children’s song by Unitarian Universalist educator Laila Ibrahim, the children sing, “It’s a blessing you were born and it matters what you do/ What you know about God is a piece of the truth/ and you don’t have to do it alone.” What you know about God is a piece of the truth. And that applies to the Christians *and* the atheists. The Buddhist *and* the Naturalists. The Hindus *and* the Muslims. The Unitarians *and* the Trinitarians. This both/and is possible because all theology is inherently fragmentary, because theology is being made by human minds, which are partial, culturally located, personally framed, contingent, and finite. To think what you know about God is The Truth is Hubris.

Power matters when we assert what we know about God. Humans talking about God are humans talking about the nature of reality. To make an assertion about God—that God has a chosen people; that God does not exist; that God desires something or other; that God is within all things—is to make a claim about the nature of reality. Those claims have an effect on peoples’ experience of the world and their behavior in it, particularly when one has power over people. Talking about God is telling a story about reality that simultaneously shapes reality. So it makes sense that people get heated, passionate, and fearful when they

talk about God. They are making claims and counter-claims about the nature of existence that affect that existence.

In the context of unequal power relationships, ie, the context of the world, these claims have the ability to dictate some people's power over others. Some of our people who react the most strongly to the word God have experienced the word as a sledgehammer—one that has been used to pound reality into a shape that harms. There are powerful people in this world who have a rigid conception of a God that excludes some and exalts others. A God that reifies systems of hierarchy and harm. A God that supports the power structure that exalts those who believe in Him (for that God is always a “Him”).

I call that conception of God an Idol. I call it Human Hubris (and worse). It makes sense that folks who have had particular versions of Human Hubris wielded over their heads with rigid cruelty would react strongly against whatever that version of Hubris was named by the people wielding it. The world of meaning evoked by that particular name, story, and symbol, is pride, oppression, and harm. It is right to rail against this kind of harm—the harm we see in Holy War; in Manifest Destiny; in Prosperity Gospel; and in expelling LGBT people from church.

But that framework of meaning is not all-inclusive. People mean many other things when they say God—and when they say not-God.

People mean different things both across *and within* religions. When people use the same words to mean different things, how can we communicate with one another?

As a Unitarian Universalist minister, I sometimes feel like a professional translator. I believe there is value in translating—its part of the reason I became a UU minister. I began translating long before becoming a minister.

I first learned to translate within myself—among the various internal parts who were shaped by various experiences in my life. How could I respect my Lutheran childhood and my Wiccan teenage years? How could I honor the queer me that felt rejected by the church and the part of me that longed to be a member of a church community? How could I have conversations with the Universe and respect the part of me that doubted the reality of those conversations? I had to learn to hold multiple truths at once, to honor that what different parts of me knew about God were all pieces of the Truth. I had to learn a spiritual practice of living with ambivalence—to learn to walk around as a both/and.

Then I learned to translate with the world. What did people mean when they said God? Or Grace? Or Salvation? Were they talking about something exclusive, a club with rigid lines that marked me and my kind out? What did people mean when they said Not-God? Did they mean

they thought I was crazy or stupid for my beliefs? Did they mean they would respond to my practices with derision?

Over time, I learned that peoples' labels and words signified less about how they would behave than I had thought. Saying God or Not God carried some content, don't get me wrong, those words have meaning, but the meaning is not always immediately clear or evident. I learn more from peoples' behavior than their labels. What people mean when they say God or Not God *can* become clear through explanation, but it is more evident by watching what they do. I learn the truth of another person's beliefs through witnessing how those beliefs cause them to act in the world.

For my father, for instance, "the Christian thing to do" is helping the homeless, the hungry, the person in need. He takes seriously Jesus' description of righteous as when "I was hungry, you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ... I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." There are Christians for whom this is the core of their faith—this is what it means to be Christian. There are also Christians for whom being a faithful Christian means not issuing marriage licenses for gay people, some for whom it means pursuing extravagant wealth, and some for whom it means condemning anyone not in the Christian tribe. Is the Christian thing to include, to lift up, to

love, or to exclude, to oppress and to hate? You can tell what the faith means to the believer by looking at how they act in the world.

As you know, Unitarianism is not creedal—we have no required doctrine of belief. We do, however, have requirements about behavior. We come together in gathered community with a covenant. We base our communities on voluntary agreements about how we commit to behave together, and in the world. We don't require the recitation of doctrinal statements of belief, but every week in this church we do recite a covenant about our behavior: "Love is the Spirit of this Church, and Service is its Law. This is our great covenant: To dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another."

Love is the Spirit of this Church. While Unitarians do not have a doctrine of belief, the name—Unitarian—comes from a theological difference. When our forbears questioned their churches' worship of Jesus as equal to God, they were called "Unitarians" as a contrast to "Trinitarians"—people who believed there were 3 Gods (the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit) in one. The Unitarians argued there was just the one God, and Jesus was not that God.

But there is a third element of that original argument, and some Unitarians today joke that we actually celebrate the Third element of the Trinity—the Spirit—rather than God (or Jesus). Indeed, many consider "Spirit of Life" our "Amazing Grace." In the classic Trinity, the Spirit

shows up as an agent of divine disruption. It is the Trickster that unsettles tidy stories and disrupts the binary system. It disrupts the either/or. Sound like a Unitarian kind of force to you?

Beyond the either/or, the dualism of people who mean love when they say God versus people who mean hierarchy; beyond those who say God versus those who say Not God; beyond Being and Nonbeing; beyond even the dualism of what humans think about when we say the word “God” versus the Totality God, the Ground of Being or that-by-any-other-name-which-is-Ultimate Reality—lies the Mystery, the Totality, that which is beyond all naming.

In this space, we are out beyond the binary of subject and object, of self and other, of me and you, of me and God. The 13<sup>th</sup> Century Sufi mystic Rumi wrote, “Out beyond ideas of right and wrong there is a field. I will meet you there.” The mystics try to use words to point us to something that is beyond words, beyond human reason and knowing, not just shrouded in mystery but Mystery itself.

In Hebrew, and the word used for Spirit is Ruach, and it is feminine. It means Spirit, breath, or wind. It is the invisible force that moves, transforms, gives life, creates change. The Spirit is the thing that blows in and “unsettles your life for the sake of your soul.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> From a lecture by Rev. Dr. Jay Johnson, Pacific School of Religion, “Transforming Christian Theology,” Fall 2012.



But in order for the wind to blow through your life, there has to be open space for it to blow. Walk down any of the streets between the big buildings downtown off the open expanse of the Lake of this Windy City, and you will be immediately apprised of the effects of wind being channeled through open space.

There are two elements at play: matter and space. We fleshy humans tend to be mostly concerned with matter. With the possible exception of a few potters and architects among us, we pay attention to the shape of an object rather than its emptiness. When we talk about the interdependent web of all existence, we focus on the strands of the web connecting us. But consider anew how a spider web works. We see the strands of the web that ensnare the spider's food, but the web's openness to the wind is equally important to its bug-catching function (and I mean catching actual mosquitoes here, not just Claire Callahans). In a functioning web, the wind blows through. We tend to focus on the web because it makes the most sense to our human mind. The material—even these thin wasp-ey strands of spider webs—is what we pay attention to. But it is equally the web's open space that allows the wind to move through it that makes the web an effective trap for bugs traveling on that wind.

You have to be open to the Spirit in whatever way it comes—open to the Mystery that is Beyond All Naming. Use the name that is comfortable for you. Learn to translate other people's names into the

language that works for you, but don't insist other people use your language. Look to their actions to see what they really mean and translate so you can communicate and work together. Make sure there is open space in your life to receive: be open to that wind blowing through, unsettling that which needs disruption. Be open to new people, new ideas, new ways of doing and love. The Ruach of Life is our Unitarian spirit guide. It will sweep in to whatever space we leave open for it and bring just the disruption we need.