

“Welcoming Deeper Understanding”

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

How often have you thought of something in relation to your spiritual values and ideals, like Maya just showed? Connecting our faith’s principles to reasoning, and having them to help make a decision has been a tool that I have relied on for many, many years. It soon became habit for me to look for deeper meaning in most everything around me. Whether this was for school, or listening to a piece of music. Reminiscing on a conversation I had with my best friend, or trying to determine how I was going to move across the country. Every one of these aspects of my life suddenly required greater decision making, required that I look to my faith, and the ideals that I proclaimed were important to me.

I decided that I wanted to go to seminary, that I wanted to become a minister, because while I was in my Bachelors degree, studying to become a child psychologist, I was unable to stay away from my church. Evenings, instead of being filled with homework and studies, were spent going to committee meetings, and hosting Soulful Sundown worships. Weekends were spent helping organize fundraisers, and getting to bed on time to wake up for church.

And, as it would happen, as a seminary student, I was often asked to find theological meaning in class readings, or classroom activities – or on walks around my neighbourhood.

So it came as no surprise that when I was in school this past January I had a similar experience. I was taking a class called Unleashing your Multi-Cultural Ministry and on the first day we were asked to help decorate the altar that would be at the front of the room for the rest of our time together. My professor, who is a religious educator at heart, and who loves to incorporate different ways of learning into his curriculum, gave us two tasks to take home with us that evening. The first was to take home a river stone and to write on it one word. The prompt that he gave to us was to think about a time when we were asked to experience someone else’s culture, and to describe it in one word. For the other task we were asked to take home several pipe cleaners, and to create an image that for us would reflect God/Spirit of Life/The More/Ultimate Reality... choose whatever name suits you the best.

So that night I went home, and I started contemplating what I wanted to create. There are many different times that I can think of when I have been invited to experience someone else's culture, having participated in a youth group for aboriginal girls and being a part of an interfaith clergy group. But because the class was based on ministry, and because I was struggling with particular emotions, it being only weeks after the Christmas holidays, I thought about my younger brother's wedding. A wedding in a Greek Orthodox Church, after his conversion from Unitarian Universalism to his wife's religion.

As I thought back about that experience, when my family was in town from all around the continent, and we were supposed to be celebrating my brother's union to the love of his life, I tried to remember what it was like to be invited into a new cultural experience. A wedding ceremony, where the family members were asked to stand for the whole service, almost 2 hours long; where the partnering ceremony happened at the back of the room, under the arched doorway. Where the language was paternal and misogynistic, and the smell of strong frankincense filled the air. The one word that I could use to describe my experience was challenging.

So I wrote challenging on that river stone – not because the multicultural experience that I had was challenging, although it was a challenging experience, but because in those moments I was remembering the relationship that brought me into that experience, and it was challenging.

The second task that we were given that cold January evening in Chicago was to create an image of God with pipe cleaners. Now, I am not a theist; I don't think I ever have been. I grew up a Unitarian, in a Fellowship church, listening to the story of Jesus and God like it was a fairy tale. For me it held the same symbolism of love and morals that Winnie the Pooh stories held. And, it wasn't until I was a preteen that I actually discovered that Jesus was a man who had really existed, and really lived through those struggles. Before this he was just a character in my Sunday school classes.

But having spent the last 3 years in seminary has allowed me to claim my belief in God. Not a Christian sense of God, because I am still not a theist. But using the word God to mean more than just a deity. Wikipedia suggests that "Theologians and philosophers have attributed to God such characteristics as omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, but also perfect goodness, divine simplicity, or eternal and necessary existence. God has been described as incorporeal, a personal being, the

source of all moral obligation, and the greatest conceivable being in existence.”¹ And while the Christian God can be described using these words, he is not the only thing that fits this definition.

I believe that GOD or the all-knowing, ever-present, and all powerful, moral obligation and greatest conceivable being in existence is **our relationships**. Whether it is my individual relationship with each of you, or the special relationship that this group of us here create together, or the relationship that I have with myself, or with the earth, doesn't matter. It is the relationship that is important. How we are in that relationship, how we engage the other and how we don't, how we hold the other's emotion and logic, how we choose to change our behaviour because of the relationship, or how we choose to ignore the relationship by not changing. This is my God. And though it may not be a personal being, it is divinely simple and a necessary existence. It holds our moral obligation and I believe that it is the greatest conceivable existent.

And much like the Christian God I believe that relationships can be misunderstood, misrepresented, and even abused.

So in order to create an image with pipe cleaners for my assignment I created two people holding hands, to show the space between them, the relationship that I see as god.

Now comes the opportunity to extrapolate a deeper meaning of these two objects – that sat on the altar during our class that cold weekend in January. I took the two pieces of art home Sunday night and I left them on the kitchen table. That night, while my roommates and I were all milling about someone was trying to get my pipe cleaner people to stand up. They ended up accomplishing this by placing the Challenging Rock on top of their feet.

This is where my theological light bulb went off, when I saw the two ideas come together, and become one. I have a theology of process relationality, that means that - I believe that the most basic and most fundamental entity that our world is made of is Relationships, and that they need to be treated as sacred. And I also believe that these relationships are in an ever changing always shifting process. That by putting energy into them, ignoring them, holding them as sacred or mundane, believing in the power that they hold over our lives, and the existence of our world we are able to change and develop or de-evolve these relationships. And I believe that this theology is really

¹ Swinburne, R.G. "God" in Honderich, Ted. (ed) *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, 1995.

challenging. That I am required to consistently be vigilant with my ideas and my words, and my actions. That everything that I do has effect on not only my future but the future of this world. And that is really, really challenging, and it can be heavy to carry. It is really challenging to put that kind of pressure on me, and on those around me, and on the world. But no one ever said that faith was easy.

In this month of invitation, where we have been asked to invite friends and neighbours into our church, where we have created a more welcoming building to those who seek to feel full among us, and where you have welcomed new staff members to this place of deep meaning and sacred work, I give you one last invitation. Let us get to know each other better, tell me about the things that are challenging, and the things that make you feel wholly connected. Tell each other. I invite you to share yourself with the world.
