

“The G-Word”

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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.

So ... the G-word. Shawn told me to pick a topic I was passionate about, and I am passionately curious about what drives people to act the way they do. I am in divinity school, and I went because I looked at the world in 2016, specifically November 2016, and said, “How on earth did people think *this* is how things *are* and *that* is how the world *should be*?” My brain said, “Somebody should do something!” And another part of my brain said, “Hey. Guess what? *You’re* somebody!”

I had been going to First and was interested in theology because it is about fundamental beliefs. When people say “God” in the Judeo-Christian context, the one that most heavily influences most people in this congregation, at least culturally, they mean the shaper of life, the giver of the moral code, the face of the natural order. When most people say “God,” then, they’re saying how they think the world was made — how they think the world *is* — and what that deity wants — which is how they think it *should be*.

For the most part, we UUs don’t say “God” here. There are a minority of theist Unitarian Universalists, maybe 10%, and our two ancestral faiths came from the Christian tradition. By and large, though, UUs say they’re agnostic to some degree, so open to the idea but not convinced, or atheist. Moreover, the people I talk to often come from an unhappy relationship with Judeo-Christianity, one that spoke briefly about love and at much greater length of sin and failure and damnation. That’s, for the most part, our cultural heritage, the figure on the cover of the order of service: a stern-looking old man in the clouds. For those of us who have a painful relationship with that religious tradition, that’s a God whom we have always already failed.

You can see how this plays heavily into the world around us, the world of 2016 and 2017 and 2018 and 2019 and ... 2020. When we look at the bad things that happen, you can easily believe that many people follow a God figure like that. That may not be the God some of our fellow-beings follow — they follow a God of the Sermon on the Mount, of the Great Commandment to love not only God, but to love your neighbour as much as you do yourself. That God says to treat everyone you meet as you would your own twin, but especially those in need. But there are a lot of people who *say* they follow that God, while their actions say otherwise. I’m not going to pursue that gap in action and words, because I think UUs see that with great pain.

But how do people come to believe in that God? That’s another reason I went to divinity school: I wanted to know how people were so *sure* about God. I wanted to know how they were so *sure* they were either acting as God wanted, or, if they fell short, that they

were *sure* they would be forgiven for the bad things they did. We all do bad things, after all, without meaning to: we live in a world that makes it far too easy to create climate change and to profit from the labour of the worst-off. I have joked that I may not believe in God, but I believe in Mammon.

So I go to divinity school, and I want to emphasize that everyone there is very kind, very thoughtful, but many, not all, are a little ... *confused* about Unitarian Universalism. You can't make a blanket statement about God with UUs, it's all by the percentages, so I end up saying, "Well, the vast majority of us are either strong agnostic or atheist, but many have some theist beliefs or spend some time in another religion, and although we're not Christian, we come from the Christian heritage, and ..." and so on. For many Christians, this doesn't answer the question, "Do you believe or not?", which often also means "Are you saved or not?" and maybe "Are you *really* a good person?", meaning "Are you a good person because you get your moral code from God — or *not*?", and yes, sometimes if you sort of question sideways, people will say that they don't see how you can have a well-founded, solid moral code without a belief in a God, and moreover in a God who specifically told someone to write it down.

I even once ran into a guy who said he didn't see why we got together, why being a Unitarian Universalist was different from being in a Lions club.

I want to stress this is not common, this is not everyone, most people say, "Okay, that works," when you explain the principles, too, but for some people, yes, there's that feeling: *How is it you guys think you're a church?*

Now, if you're curious about how people are so *sure* about God, there's this thing called the Wesleyan Quadrilateral divinity students like. That's from Wesley, the founder of Methodism. He said we come to belief through reading Scripture, from studying the traditions and words of the faith, by using our reason as guided by the Holy Spirit, and from direct experience of the divine.

Coming from where I am, that doesn't convince me much, because if you don't believe in God you don't believe God wrote Scripture. The same is true of tradition: that comes from people who already believe and who wrote accordingly and whose words were accepted by other believers. The reason part — well, Wesley said it had to be with the help of the Holy Spirit, meaning, again, you have to believe in that guiding force and other people have to agree it accords with what the God they know says. So the first three seem circular to me: you believe because you believe. The last, direct experience, would seem the most compelling to people like me: sure, if I'm *really sure* God spoke to me, burning bush or thunderbolt or the still, small voice — that I can see being different. But for the most part, what I find is that people believe because they believe. It's the same as most things, we believe things because we believe them already, and when we look at the world we put things in that framework we already have.

I can see the appeal, the comfort, the *surety* that there's a being who knows everything about you and loves you no matter what, who always sees things from your perspective, who gets angry when you do things wrong but only because He or She or It wants you to

do better, to come closer to Him or Her or It, and that that entity will come to you at your dying moment and sweep *you*, the *you* in you, your inner voice and being, off to a wonderful new place where you'll be loved forever, in comfort and joy, with everyone you've ever — lost.

But I don't believe that. I just — don't.

When people say, "Where does everything come from?" I say, "I don't know!" And to me, "God" often sounds like a synonym for "I don't know!" A circular argument: God made everything, including God's own self, and that's that. Why did such and so happen? Because *God!* That's not really a good reason to me.

And why do I do good things? Because they're the right thing to do. I think there are good evolutionary explanations for cooperation, compassion, and empathy, and I think that we have thought about it a long time and developed new and kinder ways of thinking. Did God tell me any of this? Not as far as I know. Would it better if I could point it back to a source that is, by its nature, unknowable? Well, that's in some ways what I'm doing now. I just don't think there's a *guy* up there who made it official.

All the major religions agree that these are the right things to do, and yet no one agrees, even within religions, what the nature of the *guy* is, and what every little thing is that makes that *guy* mad. But they agree on a few things: love thy neighbour as thyself. Help those in need. Do as little harm to others as you can. Fix the brokenness in the world. Love thy neighbour as thyself.

So why are *we*, us, right now, here? We call it spirituality, we call it belief in something greater, we call it community, the earth, the interconnected web of existence of which we are a part, the spirit of life. Something calls us to goodness. We don't agree on a name. Do we need to?

The Unitarian Universalist theologian James Luther Adams wrote an essay called "The Love of God." In it, he said that even the nonreligious have faith, though he suggested the better word was *confidence*: "the confidence that human life has some important meaning either actual or potential, and that this meaning may in some tolerable fashion be maintained or achieved."¹ Adams said that rejecting the word "God" itself revealed a confidence in something else, that that rejection was, in his words, "a sign of devotion" — devotions we live by, our confidence in something, be that human nature or reason or scientific method or the community of a church or nation.² To him, to seriously and thoughtfully reject the idea of God shows only a "loyalty to a standard of truth or of goodness on which [that] judgement, [that rejection,] is made."³ We all make decisions on what is ultimately reliable, what is truly sovereign, what is *sacred*. Sacred. Sovereign. Reliable. Adams calls this the "temperature test": when the "temperature of a person's

¹ James Luther Adams, "The Love of God," in *On being human religiously: selected essays in religion and society* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1977), 93.

² *Ibid.*, 94.

³ *Ibid.*

mind or spirit rises to defend something to the very last ditch” — well, there’s your sacred devotion.⁴

This is the love of — yes, God — to Adams: “the giving of oneself to the power that holds the world together, and that, when we are tearing it apart, persuades us to come to ourselves and start on new beginnings. It is not bound to achieved evil, and it is not bound to achieved good.” It doesn’t matter what’s come before, good or bad, just that we know we must come together and work to make things better.⁵ Adams says, “Through this love ... all persons, in their relation to each other and in their diversity, become mutually supporting rather than mutually impoverishing.”⁶ We only come to that love when we come to it together. And we see this love not just in our words, our attitude, some costume of being a good person. We see it in our actions. Those are not just in those of us to one another in person! Not just in personal humility and kindness! They are also in “institutional behavior ... [the] kind of family, or economic system, or political order it demands.”⁷

I want to remind you of 2016 and the years since. What kinds of institutional behaviours, families, economic systems, and political orders have the faiths of the world built?

Our devotion, our loyalty to standards of truth and goodness, that lead to action — not just what we do to the people we see face to face, but what institutions *we permit*, that *we build*, — *there* is what you might find something we could, perhaps, call God. But that word, “God,” seems, to me, so small for the vastness of that, *the way things should be*— the institutions we believe in, our larger actions, the effect I have not just on you today but on people in Bangladesh 50 years from now, people in Mexico or Mississippi right now, all the plants and animals in the air and the sea and on the land for millennia, the interconnected web of existence on which we depend, and which depends *on us*. That love, that love that goes beyond a desire for personal immortality, that desire to treat *all* as a neighbour: *that* seems to me too big for one word.

But *that* is why I go to church: to come back to that love, to be reminded of how to live it. I come to talk about the ways to live up to my standards of truth and goodness, to face up to the ways I fall short of them. I come here to know that we are not alone, not because we are with any particular God, but because *we are here*, and we can help bring *a* heaven — not *the* heaven, not *one* heaven, not some distant heaven with gates of brass and a lock of steel, but *a* heaven — here. On Earth. For all that live and will live.

That is why I come here. Let us be joined in that love. Let us make a heaven for all.

Blessed be, and go in peace.

⁴ Ibid, 94–95.

⁵ Ibid., 98.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 100.