

Call to Reverence

A Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tom Goldsmith
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What I remember most fondly of my first ten years of ministry are the many interfaith clergy dinner parties which were very much in fashion back then. I don't know what springs to your mind when you envision the local clergy coming together to "party," but I assure you that when the whole spectrum of faiths sit around the same table and break bread together, anything can happen. Indelibly marked in my memory was the dinner when the Lutheran pastor, a large imposing man – let's call him Ernie – regaled us with detailed accounts of his recent surgery for hemorrhoids. It was a show-stopper. We were gathered in the Methodist parsonage, and our host, a single woman of about 40, was visibly pained by the turn of the conversation. But I was fascinated by it all, and kept the conversation alive not only because I had compassion for Ernie on many levels, but also because I felt I was in the midst of an Edward Albee play and someone had to feed Ernie some lines. I have never feared Lutheran pastors since that evening.

Coincidentally it was another Lutheran pastor who arrived at one of these dinner parties with a broken arm set in a cast. On the plaster of the cast was written – boldly – TEACHABLE. I asked him what happened. He told me he fell out of a tree. Never having encountered a fundamentalist in my life up to that point, I asked naively if "teachable" meant that a person of a certain age should no longer climb trees. He said, "You're the Unitarian, aren't you?" I figured I was missing something and that I was in trouble. He then proceeded to explain as though I were a theological midget, that God wanted to teach him a lesson. He reminded me that God punishes us for misbehavior and that suffering is redemptive. Rather than leaving it alone, I asked incredulously, "Are you saying that God threw you out of the tree?" At this point our Episcopalian host interrupted us and announced that the chicken was off the grill and invited us to grab a plate. The one-armed Lutheran and I found different places on line.

In the intervening years I have thought a lot about the kind of personal God who has the capacity to throw people out of trees, the God who spares one survivor in a hurricane or car accident, the God who assists in laying down gas pipelines in Alaska, and the God who helps high school football teams to victory. I have a hard time separating this personal God from a person's own narcissism, a heightened narcissism of frightening proportion where the self essentially emerges as the centerpiece of the universe: God knows I'm here and cares for me, teaches me, and rewards me for my virtue.

Freud, with whom I often quibble, had it right when he insisted that religion was a form of infantile regression. And when you look at religion through that lens we can't help but become aware of this process whereby human beings try to placate an all-powerful God in return for protection from the vicissitudes of life. It's a scary notion to walk alone in the vastness of the universe without feeling some personal connection to whatever lies beyond. We're pretty powerless here by ourselves.

It would prove offensive to pretend that Unitarians hold a superior position on religion to those who still see God in very human terms. It's not a contest, but we still need to understand more fully in our own minds what exactly religion offers to those who reject a God with human attributes. We prefer not to endow God with certain human prejudices nor with the belief that God favors our country over others, or that by fulfilling certain criteria we can manipulate God to work on our behalf.

But here's our challenge:

- By walking away from a personal God
- By walking away from a powerful God who allows suffering on earth
- By walking away from a God who demands our blind obedience
- By walking away from a God of human characteristics and emotions and biases
- By walking away from a God who rewards and punishes our behavior

Then how do we feel religion, manifest religion, claim religion, and even begin to understand religion. Furthermore, how are we made aware of and value the transcendent without an anthropomorphic God taking up residence there? How do we explore the infinite, the ideal, the invisible, spirit?

For example, Emerson denounced priest, bible, church and sacrament (no wonder we love him so), but offered in their stead a religion proclaiming the divinity in all that lives. He said, "a dogmatizing early church reduced the divine to one or two persons, and denied with fury the divine nature to everything else." Emerson captured for me the one overarching salient point in my personal religious journey: "True religion," he said, "is open and sympathetic. It is always open to new revelation, but historical Christianity is a closed book. ...the church limits inspiration to a closed canon, and it claims the age of revelation is over. It is my duty to say to you, that the need was never greater of new revelation than now."

Revelation is at the heart of religion. And those of us who do not subscribe to an actual "something" in the heavens, fear to even acknowledge transcendence because it feels like an empty house. Nobody's home. The problems we face in getting our arms around transcendence seem to stem from an old mistake in the translation of a key phrase in the bible. God answers Moses' request for revelation with the words, "I am who I am." Wrong, wrong, wrong. It's the wrong translation. What God actually said was, "I will be what I will be." Makes all the difference in the world. God is not anything concrete. God is actually understood as EXPERIENCE. (I will be what I will be). God is not a noun that takes up residence in the transcendent, but an action verb.

We might say, even as religious liberals, that god comes to us (we experience god) in the profound flashes of insight that cut through the darkness. We transcend the boundaries of reality when filled with hope in times of utter despair and suffering. We transcend the limits of reality in the healing solidarity of love...There is much that lies beyond our capacity to explain.

Would not most of us concur with liberal theologians who shapes the matter not as a question of god's existence - -that's basically irrelevant. I don't want to argue about the existence or non-existence of God. That accomplished absolutely nothing but an increase in blood pressure. The question for those of us who have walked away from God as a noun or thing or parent or resident policeman in the sky is whether we contemplate or are utterly indifferent to the transcendent forces that cannot be measured or quantified...those forces that lie beyond the reach of rational reduction. We all encounter these forces. They are love, beauty, alienation, loneliness, suffering, good, evil, and the reality of death.

We struggle to find words for these mysteries and moments of transcendence. Let me point out two competing religious perspectives. One: Faith in a pre-scientific tradition where an external being called god delivered a revelation a long time ago that's been forever sealed. Two: God not as fixed entity, but an action verb which works upon us and through us to find meaning and relevance in a morally neutral universe.

God is, as Thomas Aquinas writes, the power that allows us to be ourselves. God is a search, a way to frame the questions. God is a call to reverence.

The biggest mistake we make (in our own personal spiritual journeys) is confusing the characteristics humans beings have invented for God, with the real moments of transcendence. Refusing to accept the rather flawed efforts to describe God, we too often walk away from the very experience of transcendence, understood as the struggle to acknowledge the infinite.

We may not think about God in human terms, but we still have this impulse that asks why am I here, what am I, what if anything am I supposed to do, and what does it all mean? Are we not all super-infused with a religious impulse that not only helps us frame the questions, not only blesses us in our hours of despair, but also calls for reverence?

I don't know what Thomas Aquinas actually meant by a call to reverence, other than the fact he is not your usual spokesperson for liberal religion. But I will try to be clear about my interpretation of a call for reverence, which forces me to rely on poetry and metaphor in order to break through the resistance to transcendence and revelation that many of us have. Those who walked away from inadequate human descriptions of God, those who walked away from priest Bible, church and sacrament, those who walked away from a rather calcified religion cannot simply turn off the religious impulse to explore beyond the boundaries of an infinitely complex reality. And even just an appreciation for the very complexities that surround us calls for reverence.

We talk frequently about the interconnected web of all existence. Do we ever stop long enough to reflect on the immensity of that proposition and in turn learn to regard the interconnected web as a source of humility? Ocean currents in the Pacific affect rainfall in Africa. Every time we exhale in Salt Lake City it affects the velocity of wind in Beijing. The milk from cows in Vermont became irradiated ten days after Chernobyl. Can anyone doubt our interdependence? I'll always remember an old Miss Peach cartoon in which one little girl says to another: "Hey Shirley, are you still into that metaphysical stuff?" And Shirley replied, "No. I used to want to be one with the universe but now we've decided to go our separate ways." The new physics assures us that we can't.

Emerson drove home this point in his poem "Each and All." He gathers up seashells on the shore and writes the following:

I wiped away the weeds and foam/I fetched my sea-born treasures home;

But the poor unsightly noisome things/had left their beauty on the shore/with the sun and the sand and the wild uproar.

The point is: All are needed by each one. Nothing is fair or good alone.

The complexity of creation calls for reverence. You may remember Ogden Nash's theological dictum:

The Lord in His wisdom made the fly/And then forgot to tell us why.

We human beings are not masters of creation.

It is my solemn belief, that from our humility which springs forth only from reverence...from our embrace of the majestic wholeness of the interconnection among all beings and eco-systems, it is from this reverence that ethical injunctions flow. How can I feel separate from those who suffer, how can I declare certain people enemies, how can I feign superiority as an American or male or white or heterosexual when everyone is held in the hand of the same Creation?

All are needed by each one. Nothing is good alone. In ignoring the call to reverence, in our indifference to the transcendent forces of love and suffering, we have divided the world into selfish loyalties. Greed has wrought the economic hardships that touch rich and poor. And the so-called bailout or rescue – whatever your politics may be – we all need to ask if this rescue really extends to the powerless as well as to the powerful. All are needed by each one. When you take the seashells home for your treasured collection, you will notice that they left their beauty on the beach with the weeds and sun and foam and sand and the uproar of wind and surf. When ripped away from their complex surrounding, they become unsightly.

Religion is not about carrying our God with us to keep us safe and prosperous. Religion is about those profound flashes of insight when we finally understand that sacrifice is required of us because justice and mercy go hand in hand. A call for reverence helps us see more clearly our very modest place in the scheme of things, and that the interdependence of this awesome and magnificent creation, compels us to acts of reconciliation. May we awaken to the call and follow its teachings. Amen