

“Tiptoeing Into God Talk”
Sermon by Sharon Wylie
August 22, 2010

I want to talk with you this morning about God, about how we who have so many different ideas and visions and beliefs about God—including the belief that there is no God—can find language to talk to each other. I want to give us some language for talking about God. And I want to encourage us to talk with each other about God.

Most people in the world who wake up on Sunday mornings and gather as a congregation to hear a sermon given from a pulpit EXPECT to hear something about God. But it’s one of the quirks of even perhaps definitions of our denomination these days that we don’t often talk about God. In some ways, this reluctance is understandable. Our fourth Unitarian Universalist principle is that we affirm and promote a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Our search is affirmed and promoted, not whatever conclusions we may draw. Our searches lead each of us to differing questions, differing personal beliefs. We don’t necessarily NEED to talk about God because we Unitarian Universalists don’t NEED to agree about God.

The irony is that our denomination exists because—historically—we disagreed with others about the nature of God. The word “Universalism” refers to the Christian belief that all humanity is saved. In contrast with the predominant Christian thinking of the time, the Universalists believed there is no eternal hell and no eternal punishment. In 1779, Reverend John Murray helped found the first

Christian Universalist church in the United States, and in 1790, the first Universalist convention was held.

The word “Unitarian” refers to the belief that God is one, not the Trinitarian idea of a father, son, and holy spirit. In the early 1800s, the word “Unitarian” was meant to be derogatory, condemning those who rejected the idea that humanity was innately depraved. In 1819, Reverend William Ellery Channing—often called the father of Unitarianism—gave his sermon “Unitarian Christianity,” in which he embraced the term “Unitarian.” UnitarianISM as a distinctive theology was begun, and the American Unitarian Association was formed in 1825.

The formation of our two denominations and their eventual merger in 1961 to form Unitarian Universalism is rich and complex and not the topic of this sermon. But I lift up our early formation to remind us there was a time in our history that all we wanted to talk about was the nature of God and how our free and responsible search for truth and meaning could bring us to a better understanding of God. In fact, much of our formation and movement has been to an ever-widening embrace of theological diversity, a recognition that there is no ONE answer, an affirmation that revelation is neither sealed nor finite. Unitarian Universalism as we know it today draws from MANY sources, not just Christianity.

But somewhere along the way, we’ve grown so diverse that we stopped talking about God. At best, we’ve lost the language for that discussion. At worst, I worry that we’ve become afraid to talk about God.

The main reason for our reluctance, I believe, is that we are a denomination that

includes theists AND atheists, those who believe there IS a god and those who don't. That's a pretty big theological difference. I know I have felt at times that my belief in God must seem quaint or even sort of low brow, simple. In a denomination that values the use of reason, I believe in something I can't see or prove. It feels pretty unsophisticated.

And I also know that my atheist friends feel at times that the idea of God is being shoved down their throats in our culture. Our national anthem declares that we are a nation under God. All of our money includes the words "In God We Trust." In contrast, our Unitarian Universalist congregations are places where atheism is welcomed as a valid viewpoint, one of many possible answers to a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We none of us want our denomination to become yet another place where God is shoved down our throats.

So I think that's the core reason we've stopped talking about God: between the theists and the atheists, we feel uncertain and uncomfortable. We don't know if we WANT to talk about God or if we SHOULD talk about God, and even if we decide we want to and should, we don't know how to talk about God in a way that feels supportive of all of us.

I'm not sure that the things I'm about to tell you solve any of those problems. But I know that we aren't going to become more comfortable by avoiding the conversation. I think the conversation is the first step to figuring out how we can do this in a way that truly holds our diversity.

On top of that, so many of us—no matter what we believe—don't like the word

“God” itself. There is a sense that the word “God” refers to the patriarchal, judging, angry god in the sky, the god that so many of us have rejected. In rejecting that specific IDEA of God, many of us have rejected the word “God” also, preferring instead so many of the other words available to us: the Holy, the Divine, Mother, Spirit of Life. These words seem less loaded, less controversial, less troublesome.

But these words are also vague, and mean different things depending on who is using them. I’m sure we don’t all agree that the words “Spirit of Life” necessarily refer to God. And if I use the word “Mother” to refer to God, I might be thinking of God as immanent, meaning a God that is present in and through all aspects of this material world, including us. But you might hear the word “Mother” and think I refer to a God that is transcendent, meaning a God that exists separate from this material world. We might both of us feel safe and good using the word “Mother,” but we still wouldn’t be having a meaningful conversation about God. We’d just be feeling safe and good.

Using the word “God” prompts us as Unitarian Universalists to stop and ask, “Wait, what do you mean when you say ‘God?’” I think—I HOPE—using the word “God” moves us into deeper and more meaningful conversation. We might not feel safe or good, but oftentimes the really important spiritual work pushes us out of our comfort zones. And that’s okay.

I also think it’s important for us as religious liberals to reclaim the word “God.” We shouldn’t just let the fundamentalists have it. We shouldn’t leave the word “God” standing as an emblem for hatred and fear. I believe we need to fight for an

understanding of God as an emblem of love, forgiveness, and interconnection. As a chaplain, I have sat in an emergency room holding the hand of a woman who was contemplating suicide because of her fear that God would punish her to hell for her divorce. This talk of God is not just semantics. God is worth fighting for.

So I want to give us some language and some ideas about talking about God. Some vocabulary words, if you will. Many of you may be familiar with these terms and ideas, so just consider this a refresher course. And if you disagree with the definitions I'm about to give, that can be the basis of its whole own conversation. I'm envisioning all of you at coffee hours today and in the future debating these ideas about God.

I gave you some words already: theism is the belief that there is a god or gods. Atheism is the belief that there is not. Anti-theism is a type of atheism that includes the active opposition to the idea that God exists. This is a relatively new term describing a relatively recent kind of dogma, but it seems relevant to define it here.

Agnosticism is frequently confused with atheism, but agnosticism doesn't mean there is no God, it means we don't KNOW if there's a god. I imagine that most of us here would acknowledge that we can't and don't KNOW for sure if there's a god, and perhaps we should use that as the foundation for any conversation we might have. We can't KNOW. But many of us choose to believe something more specific. Many of us feel that God can be experienced, and that experience forms the foundation of beliefs that extend beyond agnosticism.

Monotheism, of course, is the belief that there is one god, and polytheism is the belief that there are multiple gods.

Deism is a type of monotheism in which God is understood as being like a clockmaker, one who created all the world and then stands back to let it run its course. This understanding means that God does not intervene in the troubles of humanity.

Pantheism is also a type of monotheism, in which God IS the universe, they are one and the same. You and I and everything is God. There is no separateness, no god as creator, no god watching over us. The interdependent web of all existence is God. That's pantheism.

PanENtheism is an understanding that God is the universe and MORE. God is immanent AND transcendent. You and I and everything is God, but God is still something more than just that. There is no separateness because we are PART of God, but we are not all of God. The interdependent web of all existence is part of God. That's panentheism.

So I've given you a jumble of terms, but hopefully these will be starting points for your own reflection and conversation. Like learning a foreign language, it will take some time to build some fluency. You will need to practice. Do you think God is everything and more or just everything? If you are an atheist or agnostic, please feel free to join in. Quiz your theist friends, demanding they articulate their beliefs. Theism, atheism, deism, pantheism, panentheism. These are your beginning vocabulary words. I hope you will use them in a sentence soon.

Once you've started to use that basic vocabulary, you can begin to wrestle with the meatiest questions. Is God all-powerful? Is God all-knowing? How could an all-powerful and all-knowing God let someone break into the church office and steal the computer? Is it God's responsibility to control what happens to us? What role does our free will play? Do we have free will? If God is loving and compassionate, then why is there suffering in the world? These are questions that theologians and philosophers have wrestled with for millennia.

The beauty of these questions is that there are no set answers. I think THIS is the stuff that Unitarian Universalists will love best about God-talk. We can talk about this forever! We will never run out of possibilities for conversation. And because we don't have to agree with each other, we don't have to get tense and angry trying to convince each other who's right and who's wrong. We can have fun with this. We should laugh while we God-talk. We should be playful and whimsical. There are no right answers.

I will suggest to you that one of the richest areas for Unitarian Universalist discussion right now is the interrelationship between scientific discovery and ideas about God. In 2006, Francis Collins, the head of the Human Genome Project, published his book entitled "The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief." In it he writes, "Many will be puzzled by these sentiments, assuming that a rigorous scientist could not also be a serious believer in a transcendent God. This book aims to dispel that notion, by arguing that belief in God can be an entirely rational choice, and that the principles of faith are, in fact, complementary with the

principles of science.”

And just a few months ago, novelist Herman Wouk published his non-fiction book called “The Language God Talks: On Science and Religion,” a memoir that depicts his own wrestling and wondering about God and science. In it, his friend physicist Richard Feynman suggests Wouk learn calculus because it is the “language God talks.” These ideas that the mysteries and discoveries of science are deeply intertwined with our spiritual lives and religious beliefs seem to me to be **ESPECIALLY** the purview for Unitarian Universalists.

Developing a language for talking about God paves the way for deeper and more meaningful conversation. We tend to get stuck talking about God as a noun, a fixed object, a permanent and unchanging entity, and those beginning vocabulary words start with that idea. But once you’ve mastered the basics, you might consider: perhaps God is a verb. Perhaps God is what happens when we love. Perhaps God is what happens when we dance. Perhaps God is a never-ending multiplicity of events constantly forming and re-forming, pushing for the best possible outcome, rooting for all humanity to make wiser and better choices, moving and hoping, pulling us forward into the next multiplicity of events.

“I cannot walk an inch without trying to walk to God.” [Anne Sexton]

In our reading for today, Anne Sexton suggests that God has but one prayer. “You have a thousand prayers but God has one.” That line makes me want to cry. There is something for me about the idea that in the same way that some of us pray to a God we cannot touch or see or **PROVE**, just as we pray hoping for a response,

for some indication that our prayer has been heard and answered, that in that same way God prays to us, unable to touch or see US, hoping for a response, for some indication that God's prayer has been heard and answered.

May we hear God's prayer and answer it.

Blessed be.