

Gods We Have Known

A Sermon Delivered on August 26, 2018
by
The Reverend Axel H. Gehrmann

“I believe in God, only I spell it Nature.”

-- Frank Lloyd Wright

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First Reading: by the Buddhist author Stephen Levine (from *For the Love of God*, p. 62)

Some years ago while I was involved in an arduous Buddhist meditation practice, the door opened to the room in my mind in which I was sitting and in walked the luminescent figure of Jesus. I was dismayed. [I thought:] “You must have the wrong guy. I’m a Buddhist. Maybe you’re looking for the fellow down the hall.” He smiled with the smile of the heart that knows no separation... He motioned to be still and to listen... I was ecstatic for days...

... Asked afterward what that experience was all about, in exasperation I could say only that it was the experience of God, of our God nature, of our underlying reality, the ocean of being on which floats the tiny waves of thought and personality.

Since that time I have found myself often using the term “God.” I am very comfortable with that term because I don’t have the foggiest idea what it means. But I see no place that it is absent.

Second Reading by Pat Schneider from a piece entitled “If I Were God” (from *Sun Magazine*, Feb. 1997)

If I were God, I would make a world exactly like this one. I love its inconsistencies, its contradictions. I love it that this river flows around stones and finds its own way. I love it that people are free, even to be selfish and to think they own beaches and mountaintops and have the right to keep the poor off them. I love it that things change, that the boundaries of nations and the fences of the rich get torn down sometimes. I love it that some people think we have many lifetimes while others think we have only this one. I especially love it that no one knows for certain, even if they think they do.

...I love it that I am sixty years old and my hair is gray and my hand against this white paper is showing age spots and I am sitting on a wedge of land between a river and a stream on a Monday afternoon in July. I love it that I don’t know exactly where I am, because it helps me to remember that I don’t know exactly where Earth is in this galaxy, or where this galaxy is in this universe, or whether I have only this lifetime or many lifetimes. I love supposing this one is the only one, because it keeps me mindful of how precious everything is.

...If I were God, I would make a world just like this one... where nothing is for certain and there is so much to learn. I would make the world unfair as this world is unfair, because only in a world like this one is it possible that maybe the rich will take down their fences; maybe the poor will get together and break the fences down; maybe those who know how to read will teach those who don’t. Maybe the fed will feed the hungry. Maybe the lion will lie down by the lamb.

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Why did you come to church this morning? Are you here because you want to hear today's sermon? Or are you here because you enjoy our fine music, and you like to sing? Are you here to see old friends or maybe meet new friends? Are you here because you have children in one of our religious exploration classes? Or are you here for a cup of coffee, and conversation after the service?

A few weeks back, the Pew Research Center conducted a survey that asked over 4,000 Americans precisely why they do – or don't – attend religious services. (Thank you to Ray Krise, who sent me an article about it.) One of the top ten reasons respondents gave was "to please their family, spouse or partner." Another reason was because "they feel obligated to go." A more common response was "for comfort in times of trouble or sorrow." And more often than that, people said they attend religious services "to become a better person."

The top reason people attend worship services at least once a month – according to this latest Pew Research study – is "to become closer to God."

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Do you come to church to become closer to God? If I had to fill out the Pew survey, that would probably not be the top reason I would offer.

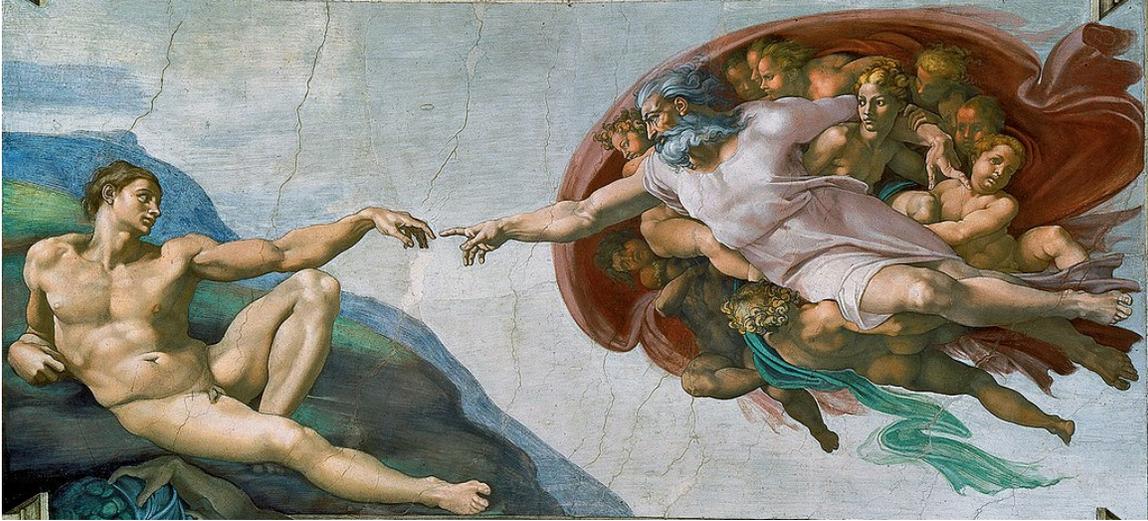
And, over the years, whenever I have asked members of the congregations Elaine and I have served, why they come to church, and what they value most, the top reason I would usually hear was not "God" but "community."

"God" is the top reason most Americans attend religious services. But among Unitarian Universalists, it is a word we don't use a heck of a lot.

The seven principles we affirm, that begin with "the inherent worth and dignity of every person," and end with "the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part" – they don't mention God.

The fact that we use the word "God" sparingly and cautiously is not a coincidence. It is a consequence of our religious history. The founders of our faith, in 16th century Europe, were persecuted and imprisoned, and some of them killed, because their Unitarian beliefs about God conflicted with the Trinitarian teachings of the established church, that were enforced by the state.

What did God look like for 16th century Europeans? Michaelangelo imagined God looked like this:



This picture is called “The Creation of Adam.” Michelangelo, perhaps the greatest artist of his time, was commissioned by Pope Julius II to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome. The Creation of Adam is just one piece of a much larger fresco of Christian imagery, with over 300 figures, stretching across more than 5,000 square feet. Historians say, this picture is perhaps the most well-known and most replicated religious painting of all time. According to Michelangelo, God is a bearded white old man living in the heavens, surrounded by angels, who once stretched out his right arm to pass the spark of life from the tip of his finger, to Adam. Some say that’s Eve under God’s left arm... This is how Michelangelo envisioned God creating humans in his image.

It is no coincidence that this God was white, and the humans were white as well. This is a reflection of church teaching at the time. People who weren’t white Europeans, were considered less than human. And the church provided permission – theological and legal justification - for the invasion of continents, and the subjugation of societies whose citizens were declared savages, in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. The consequences of our belief in this God are felt to this day.

A fair number of Unitarian Universalists describe themselves as atheists. I don’t know which God they don’t believe in, but I imagine this one would be a good candidate.

When I was a theologically precocious child, arguing with my playmates about God, and why I didn’t believe in “him” it was this kind of God I had in mind. I didn’t believe there was a man like that in the sky. And I still don’t.

I wonder what kind of God all those people had in mind, when they answered the Pew Research questions. Did they imagine a God like Michelangelo’s, or did they envision something else?

* * *

In her book, *A History of God*, the religious scholar Karen Armstrong examines how our understanding of God has changed over the last 4,000 years, and how this evolving understanding has been expressed in the teachings of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. She writes,

“The human idea of God has a history, since it has always meant something slightly different to each group of people who have used it at various points of time. The idea of God formed in one generation by one set of human beings could be meaningless in another. Indeed, the statement “I believe in God” has no objective meaning, as such, but like any other statement only means something in context, when proclaimed by a particular community. Consequently there is no one unchanging idea contained in the word “God”; instead, the word contains a whole spectrum of meanings, some of which are contradictory or even mutually exclusive. Had the notion of God not had this flexibility it would not have survived to become one of the great human ideas.” (p. xx)

Our understanding of God reflects who we are and how we see the world. As Sandy Sasso put it concisely in our story this morning: The woman who cared for the sick called God *Healer*. The slave who was freed from bondage called God *Redeemer*. The grandfather whose hair was white with the years called God *Ancient One*. The grandmother who was bent with age and sorrow called God *Comforter*. And the child who was lonely called God *Friend*.

* * *

Stephen Levine, the Buddhist author of our first reading calls God the “underlying reality,” or the “ocean of being.” But he knows that his understanding has changed over time.

His first memory of experiencing God was when he was thirteen. He was attending a summer camp run by a gentle bear of a man who was a Christian Scientist, when one day he got a telephone call from his parents. They were angry with young Stephen, because a neighbor had told them he thought Stephen had stolen something from him. Stephen’s parents were furious, and insisted he make amends. And Stephen was crushed.

Stephen Levine remembers that day clearly. He writes,

“Because I received the call in the camp office, the camp director overheard some of the conversation. He noticed the fear and distress I was experiencing. After I hung up the phone he put his arms around me. I put my head on his chest and sobbed. As I cried, he held me and said, “Everything will be alright. Just take a breath or two. Everything will be alright.” And as he comforted me I looked toward the wall and saw a framed embroidery that read God is Love. I remember very clearly, at that moment, understanding something about God’s nature I had never before comprehended. I realized that what this man offered me was God itself, was mercy, was nonjudgment and unconditional acceptance of me, simply as a human being in all the throes and flows a human experiences [in life].”

Stephen Levine grew up to be a Buddhist. But his understanding of God was also shaped by his study of Native American, Sufi, and mystic traditions. His life's work was devoted to helping the sick and dying. He co-lead grief programs with Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, and used meditation as a method of treatment for victims of violence.

Through his work and practice, a love of God and a deepening self-awareness, took shape in the center of his life. He had a vivid sense of God, even in "the hellish states of mind that we all experience at times," but he knew that God is invariably elusive. He writes: "It is hard not to be an imposter when one speaks of God, for one almost needs to create something separate from God in order to view God."

Levine uses the term God, even though he doesn't have the foggiest idea what it means. He would say, God cannot be known in the mind, but only experienced in the heart. "You cannot know God," he says, "you can only be God."

* * *

The theologian Karen Baker-Fletcher grapples with the God she has come to know coming out of the African-American, Christian experience. For her, God is "something within" that cannot be explained. "Something within" that cannot be squelched.

She says,

"We may not always agree on who God is or how to describe God. It is an ambitious task to name the unnameable. What we know best about this unnameable, unseen God is the ways in which it has functioned, acted, moved, in our various communities, histories, and individual lives. God as Spirit is the strength of life and the source of courage, power, and salvation. This God has functioned both as a God of survival and a God of liberation."

She says,

"I understand God as creativity itself... [My understanding is] based on traditional African cosmological understandings of the sacredness of all life and of God's being and becoming as moving dynamically in all of life. The task for a spirituality of survival, liberation, and wholeness is to address the existential *and* essential brokenness of all creation in a wholistic manner... Such spirituality remembers God who is the strength of *all* life, who keeps humankind in harmony with the sacred in our everyday work, and who works for the healing and wholeness of all creation."

* * *

This is a God I can believe in, this God of creativity and liberation, this God of healing and wholeness. Getting a glimpse of this God, getting an inkling of understanding, this is why I come to church.

I come to church because I hope to hear God's voice. I never know what it will sound like. Sometimes it sounds like Jesus, sometimes it sounds like the Buddha, like Lao Tzu,

or like Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.. Sometimes it sounds like my grandmother or my grandfather. Sometimes it sounds like one of you. I don't know what God's voice might sound like today.

I think the poet Pattiann Roger put it well. She writes:

Maybe no one can distinguish which voice
Is god's voice sounding in a summer dusk
Because [God] calls with the same rising frequency,
The same rasp and rattling rustle the cicadas use
As they cling to the high leaves in the glowing
Dust of the oaks.

[God's] exclamations might blend so precisely with the final
[Cries] of the swallows settling before dark
That no one will ever be able to say with certainty,
"That last long cry winging over the rooftop
Came from god."

I come to church, because I love this world. And if I were God, I would make a world exactly like this one: a world full of inconsistencies and contradictions. A world where people are free, and things change.

I come to church, because I love this world where nothing is for certain and there is so much to learn, this world, in which it is possible that maybe the rich will take down their fences, or the poor will get together and break the fences down.

This world is holy. All life, all humankind, even our brokenness is sacred.
May we embody this sacred truth.
May we work for healing and wholeness of all creation.
Coming together here, with all our hopes and fears,
With all our frailties and strengths
and all our love
May we make this a holy place.

So be it. Amen.