



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Circling Around God,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on September 18, 2011

I’m so glad to have Dawn with us as our student minister this year, and I expect you’re pleased too, glad that we’re a teaching congregation again. This week I found myself remembering my own experience in field education, nine years ago, just down the river in Newburyport.

At that point, I didn’t expect I’d end up in a church--I thought I was heading toward some kind of chaplaincy. But I needed some parish experience. I wasn’t even sure I was in the right denomination! As a UU student at an Episcopal divinity school, I found myself on the fence between those two traditions. It was UUism that sparked my interest in religion and helped me discern my call to the ministry. But I loved the way my school embodied the best of the Episcopal tradition, bringing together progressive theology, powerful worship, and justice work. I thrived there, and noticing this, some of my fellow students said, “You came come back, you know.”

On the UU side, I wondered how I fit in our diverse, and sometimes skeptical tradition. Some people told me, “You say ‘God’ an awful lot for a UU.” I didn’t sense they meant it as a compliment.

These things were in my heart and mind that year. Working in that church was a powerful and clarifying experience. I discovered that I loved parish ministry, and confirmed that I was in the right denomination.

I realized that I wanted, and needed, to be with people whose theologies were not necessarily the same as mine, to be part of a tradition where we claim this right up front, where we embrace and celebrate this diversity. I wanted a place to go deeply into my spiritual life, and be with people going deeply into theirs.

There’s a well-known story that begins with a person approaching their minister and saying, “I don’t believe in God.” And the minister responds, “Tell me about the God you don’t believe in.” And that person says, “I don’t believe in that God I grew up with, an old man in the sky, with a white beard, throwing thunderbolts.” Or they say, “I don’t believe in that punishing and angry God that my father invoked when he was drinking and abusive.” They say, “I don’t believe in that God that my minister or priest told us about, who was going to send us to hell if we didn’t confess our sins. I didn’t have anything bad to confess, so I made something up.” They say, “I don’t believe in that God who says I am a sinner because I’m gay.”

And if they're lucky, the minister says, "I don't believe in that God either."

If you said any of those things to me, and some of you have, I'd tell you I don't believe in that God either. Those images, of God as an angry and even abusive father, as a harsh and unforgiving judge, as a perennially disappointed and disapproving authority figure--they are not true. If you think God doesn't love you just as you are, please hear me--that is not true. I know this as much as I know anything, because I have known the presence of a loving and liberating God. Our God. It's possible to let go of these unhelpful and harmful images. It takes some work, and it's worth it.

This idea of a God who's narrow-minded and insecure, who's vengeful and has an anger management problem says more about our human failings than it does about God. A church, a human institution, too often clinging to power and control, asking for obedience rather than encouraging liberation. A culture that tends toward dualism, splitting off body from spirit and shadow from light, privileging what is lofty and pure and distrusting what is earthy and real.

When I use the word God, how many of you picture a figure that is male? I worry about this, and so I never use the male pronoun--I never call God 'He' unless I'm reading someone else's words. When I speak of God, I am not imagining a male deity.

I'm not generally imagining a female one either. I love the images in the hymn we just sang, and how they bend the stereotypes: strong mother God, warm father God. I find these images beautiful and liberating, but the ones that resonate most with me come in the last verse:

Great living God, never fully known,
joyful darkness far beyond our seeing,
closer yet that breathing, everlasting home. ¹

That's how I experience God--as force, as source, as a power moving in the world that we catch glimpses of from time to time. In the words of St. Paul, that one "in which we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17: 28).

Now I know that some of you are atheists or humanists: you don't believe in God and are troubled by the bad things that are done in God's name. Some of you don't find God-talk helpful because of all the baggage that name carries with it.

If so, listen to these words from the 20th century theologian Paul Tillich:

"The name of the infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of all being is God. That depth is what the word God means. And if that word has not much meaning for you, translate it, and speak of the depths of your life, of the source of your being, of your ultimate concern, of what you take seriously without any reservation. Perhaps in order to do so, you must forget everything traditional that you have learned about God, perhaps even the name itself."

¹ *Bring Many Names*, word by Brian Wren, in *Singing the Living Tradition*, #23.

Whatever name you use, I hope we are a place where you can talk about and encounter these depths. Where we are doing theology, not just with our words but in our lives--apprehending what is good and holy in our midst.

Whatever theology you claim for yourself, on some level we should all be humanists--focused on the here and now, working to make life better for our sisters and brothers, celebrating the gifts of the human spirit.

Though I believe in God, I'm also something of an agnostic: I can't know for sure that God exists, or if the ways I imagine God are true. A little doubt is a good thing--I'm wary of those who are too sure of their faith, or of their unbelief.

What I do know is that orienting myself toward God helps me to lead a happier and a more helpful life. It keeps me accountable, it reminds me that I am not at the center and am certainly not in charge.

This doesn't mean I believe in a God that controls things, that allows bad things to happen, that causes natural disasters, illness or suffering. Nor do I think everything that happens is part of some grand plan. God is not a puppet master in the sky. The truth is, bad things happen. And grace happens too. Sometimes it is in the midst of difficulty or trouble that we are most open to experiencing the presence of God.

The other day I read a posting on Facebook that said, basically, God is whatever you imagine God to be. That we can make up God however we like. I could not disagree more. Of course we can only apprehend this mystery called God through the lens of our own lives and experiences. But any God worthy of the name is, by definition, way more than what you or I can imagine. We're talking about the source of life, the ground of being here!

The Book of Job is the story of a man who falls upon hard times and challenges God to justify himself. God finally responds to Job, saying,

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Have you commanded the morning since your days began,
and caused the dawn to know its place?
Have you entered into the springs of the sea,
or walked in the recesses of the deep?
Have the gates of death been revealed to you,
or have you seen the gates of deep darkness? (Job 38: 4,12,16-17)

I hear these words not as rebuke, but as blessed relief. As a reminder that I am not God, and cannot know God's ways. That my job is to be full of awe and wonder at the mystery and the beauty of it all. To stand in reverence before the miracles of birth and death and daily life, to kneel down in thanks for this spinning earth and all its creatures, to be blessed by the stars and planets that companion us.

Every age and religious tradition has been blessed with mystics, those who have transcended the barriers that separate us from God. The mystics are simple and earthy and often unusually joyful people. They speak of the divine not as a king, but as a friend or lover. What they want is a relationship with God, and this desire takes them beyond the struggle to prove or verify God's existence. They inhabit a deeper level of knowing. As it says in the Psalms, "be still and know that I am God."

One of my favorite mystics, because of his willingness to explore the shadow, is Rainer Maria Rilke. In his poem Dawn read earlier, he said God speaks to us and walks with us, saying

go to the limits of your longing.
Embody me.
Flare up like a flame
and make big shadows I can move in.²

Here's another poem by Rilke, that describes his lifelong attempt to open himself, to go deeper and broader in order to apprehend God:

I live my life in growing orbits
which move out over the things of this world.
Perhaps I can never achieve the last,
but that will be my attempt.

I am circling around God, around the ancient tower,
and I have been circling for a thousand years,
and I still don't know if I am a falcon, or a storm,
or a great song.³

Over time I've learned how to drop down into God. To do this, you have to be willing to turn off your rational mind and, as Obi Wan Kenobi, said, "Trust the force." To be willing to let go and be led, even get lost, sometimes. To be trust your instincts and your deepest longings; to put yourself in the vicinity what is holy and real.

My prayer is that we will practice an openness to the Spirit here; that we will become a congregation of mystics,⁴ with hearts and minds awake to that infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of all being. That whatever names we use, we will be circling around God, and part of a great and beautiful song.

Amen.

² Rainer Maria Rilke, "Go to the Limits of Your Longing," translated by Joanna Macy and Anita Barrows.

³ Rainer Maria Rilke, "The Seeker," translated by Robert Bly.

⁴ N. Graham Standish wrote an essay titled "A Congregation of Mystics."