

**FORGIVING GOD
SERMON, OCTOBER 16, 2005**

One of the hardest things about my trip to Baton Rouge, which I'll be talking about in more detail with you next week, was how many times people would say to me, "Well, you're a pastor. Hurricanes, massive earthquakes in South Asia, flooding everywhere, death and destruction, what does it all mean? Are we in the end times? What is God saying to us with all of this?"

And I would take a deep, tired breath and say, "I have no idea what God is saying to us. In my religion, we're more concerned with what we say to **each other** in times like this."

On Monday evening, when I was one of the thousands of travelers stuck in delays caused by radar problems at Logan Airport, a woman I was sitting next to said, "Well, you're a minister. What's the meaning of all of this? What a mess!" We had been stuck inside the plane for four hours, sitting out on the tarmac at the Dallas Airport, which rather did feel like being in Hell. But I said, "I think this entire nation's air traffic control system needs updating, and that's expensive. We have to contact our congressmen and women to lobby for the strengthening of our national infrastructure, because it's not a priority right now."

You know, I don't think that was the spiritual response she was looking for, but she was a good sport.

As we talked for a long time, it turned out that she wasn't the kind of "Left Behind" Bible Belt person I had assumed her to be (you know the "Left Behind" series of books? About the Book of Revelation and the Apocalypse?

Well, she had one of those with her). And I wasn't the arrogant, anti-religious Unitarian she had assumed I might be. That happens when you get to talk to people for a long time – that kind of stereotype busting -- and it's a real treat.

I will get back to that airplane in a minute but I want to preface the rest of this talk by saying this first:

I deeply believe that our country is in the midst of a huge cultural crisis, and much of that crisis has to do with religious ideas. Part of what I am trying to do by raising the issue of God-concepts and religious language and the Bible on a regular basis in this church and from this pulpit is to **equip you to participate in the wider religious dialogue**, which is dominated by an extreme conservative voice. I have been doing this a lot lately. To be truthful, I get tired of hearing myself talk about it sometimes. And I need to know from you, the worshiping congregation, whether or not these topics are helpful, whether they are thought-provoking, and whether they are relevant to your lives. This is my fourth year with you and we're getting a new Music Director soon, and it's a great time to talk together about our dreams and desires for worship here. I'd like to plan to do some meetings on this in the late winter and I'm asking you to think about it beforehand.

Now, part of what happens for those who walk in the world as publicly religious people is that we get caught in the big God problem facing this nation. I say this not to complain (well okay, to complain a *little*) but to share with you my sense of occasional frustration and inner conflict about it.

The first “piece” of my conflict, if you will, is that despite the fact of being a minister, I am not very concerned with what the people in my church or my denomination believe, so long as their beliefs don’t lead them to harm or insult anyone. This is a reality of Unitarian Universalism that many people schooled in creedal traditions, find really shocking. But it is true. I care very much that, in the words of poet Audre Lord, “That the beating of your heart kill no one,” but it doesn’t concern this church that one person has a belief way over here on the mystical theological spectrum and someone else doesn’t believe in any spiritual reality beyond their own brain.

We are deeply concerned, however, with three things.

First, Unitarian Universalists are committed to our church being a place that promotes absolute FREEDOM of conscience for all seekers and members who claim affiliation with us. Secondly, it concerns us what people DO with their most cherished beliefs, not what they say about them. The shorthand slogan for this is “Deeds, not creeds.” Show me the way you behave and I’ll know your religion.

Third, we want the church to be a place that sustains and supports human beings in their search for truth and meaning. So while this church is not invested in everyone reaching a similar conclusion about the nature of ultimate reality, we **are** invested in it being a place of serious inquiry and reverence, an “academy for the spirit.”

In short, this church cares about religious freedoms, about people’s conduct as religious people, and about supporting each person’s development as a spiritual being.

My predicament is that in here within these walls, I want to keep gnawing on that big concept of God, and what it all might mean, because I believe it helps us engage in serious questions of morals, meaning and eternity. Outside of these walls, though, I sometimes want to shut down entirely when the subject of God even comes up, because it's so often incredibly wounding and divisive. Some UUs have done that, have opted out of the God dialogue altogether – leaving everyone to privately have their own beliefs and avoiding the subject in worship.

I believe we must stay in this conversation for two significant reasons (although there are more). First, there are religious allies out there whose ideas and values are, in fact, very much in step with our own Principles and Purposes in the UU movement, and we want to stay in relationship with them. If we redefine religion so radically as to abandon all or most traditional concepts, we won't have a place at the wider table of religious dialogue or relevance in this country or in the world. And I want us to always have a place at that table.

Second, and most of all, I want to stay in it for our children who are inheriting a new world that is heavily influenced by several brands of fundamentalism. I feel it is this church's responsibility to equip our children to have -- **from our own tradition** – something to say to counter and contradict hateful, exclusionary notions of God wherever they find them. Whether or not our children ever have anything that resembles a traditional **belief** is not my worry. My worry is that that they grow into adults who feel that churches are institutions worth loving and joining, and that the great religious questions are ones we think it is eminently worthwhile for them to ponder.

So there's that part of the predicament. To care deeply about church while remaining committed to the theological pluralism of Unitarian Universalism is

one part. But the second part is what happens when UUs go into the larger world and people say things like, “Hey preacher lady, what do you think God is doing with all this suffering, evil and destruction?”

And that’s where I want to throw in the towel entirely. I want to say, “Aw, come on. Haven’t you outgrown that God YET?”

Which would be inappropriate, rude and unprofessional.

And I would never say it, except to you. Because in here, you see, we are accustomed to peeling back the layers of traditional religious ideas, and although that peeling might sometimes feel frightening (because sometimes we’re left not knowing where we stand) we are committed by our heretical tradition to keep doing it. Unitarianism and Universalism both originally come from heresies, whose root word means “to question.” We peel back the layers of old notions for the good of humanity, so that we are not “rehearsing outworn creeds,” as Emerson said.

And we do it because we recognize that damaging concepts of God are more damaging than a lot of other painful things that happen along the path of life.

Many of you have wandered through these doors because you were given an image or idea of the Almighty that felt abusive to your spirit, and you knew – or you had heard -- that Unitarian Universalist churches were a place where you would not be expected to claim loyalty to abusive ideas. You came here seeking freedom, and you came here seeking healing.

Some people come to UUism believing that we are an alternative to religion. Well, I need to offer a slight correction to that idea. We are an alternative **within** religion, where we admit right out loud that there are going to

be as many ideas about spiritual matters as there are people in these pews. That's the case in most other houses of worship, but most other houses of worship can't admit that, as they are invested in building up and proclaiming faith in the same things, seen and unseen.

A friend of mine says that UUism is a hospital for the religiously wounded. That can be the case, but here's the good news: when people join a Unitarian Universalist congregation, we hope to equip them with the freedom and the sense of dignity and the educational tools and the support they need in order to heal that wound, and to find things they **can** affirm as spiritual beings after they have rejected what they need to reject. We hope that they will find that the church is not strong because of theological conformity, it is strong because of love and loyalty among its people. My mentor in the ministry, the Reverend Brad Greeley, is an atheist. We worked together side by side in the ministry for two years serving a large congregation with the same passion, and our solidarity was certainly not one of religious belief but of shared values. Where else could that happen but in one of our congregations - - where neither of us had to hide who we are as spiritual beings?

So this is not so much a sermon about forgiving God as it is a sermon about trying to forgive **ourselves** and other human beings for still being so confused and unkind and judgmental about this unbelievably hard human task of searching for the deep meaning of our existence. This isn't a sermon about forgiving God, really, but about forgiving those who inflict a hurtful, wounding concept of God or Truth (with a capital T) on others.

Let me tell you a story to illustrate this more clearly. Awhile ago, I read the autobiography of Karen Armstrong, who is a very famous religious scholar who has written best-selling books about Islam and about Buddha. Two of her great contributions are the books The History of God and The Battle For God. What's really interesting to me is the history of Karen Armstrong's own battle with God. She lived in England and grew up wanting to be a nun. So she went into the convent and tried her best to fit into monastic life, and in some ways did really well. However, she was given to fits of hysteria, shaking, visions, memory lapses. This went on for years and her Mother Superior was stern with her. – "Sister Karen, you really need to get a grip on your drama" – and this sort of thing. But the swooning spells continued, and distressed Karen very much. Finally, the nuns decided she was really just too sensitive for religious community (which is really very rigorous and emotionally challenging) and so she left the convent and became a college student.

Her fits continued, intermittently, and upset her tremendously. She had been to the doctor to be checked for various things but they never found anything. So she found a psychiatrist and began therapy, and the psychiatrist was also impatient with her. "It's all that religious nonsense you're still holding onto," he told her. "Once you get that all that Catholic guilt out of your system, these fits of hysteria will end."

One day Karen Armstrong was in the subway and she had the worst fit of all – a true seizure-- and as you may have already guessed, she was diagnosed with epilepsy. She had spent years and years of her life being told by fundamentalist-minded people that her disease was in her own mind; people who couldn't see past the dogmas of their own limited world view in order to

guess that she needed help **they weren't qualified to give**. What Karen Armstrong needed wasn't to be controlled by either a Catholic religious leader or a psychiatrist, both of whom tried to persuade her that she was the cause of her own problems. What she needed to do was break free of both those people **–both of whom were worshiping false gods of their own --** to trust her own belief that she was not insane, but ill, and that she deserved to get help and to get well and to get whole.

Karen Armstrong's journey to find her own calling and her own beliefs was a long and painful one. Some of yours will feel easy in comparison, while others are just as hard. Her story is a sobering one, as it confronts us with the uncomfortable reality that fundamentalisms are not just found in religion, that our world is populated with false gods of all kinds, and that we must guard against harmful idolatries of the spirit **wherever** they may be found.

As we often say at the beginning of the service, "Whoever you are, wherever you are on your journey," we hope this church can be a place of solidarity in the struggle, where you can not only survive, but thrive, in the huge work of seeking answers to the big questions, or in seeking the meaningful questions in the first place.

We wish you strength in the struggle, and we are here for you.