

Sermon of the Rev. Bill Phillips
Unitarian Universalists of Coastal Georgia

“WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT GOD?”

Sunday, October 19, 2008

Introduction:

Raymond Carver’s “What we talk about, when we talk about love?” is a favorite book of short stories and I have adapted this title for today’s sermon.

Theology is study of the concept of God. The Greek word “theos” from which theology comes simply means “God.”

Today I want to share with you some my own theological process.

There is no one UU doctrine of God or dogma about God. Each UU is invited to carve out there own theology, their own god concept.

In our seven principles there are two which relate to how we think about God.

We affirm and promote: “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.”

We affirm and promote: “respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part.”

Today we are going to do some searching for truth and meaning about this concept of God. “What do UUs talk about when we talk about God?”

I began by asking some friends what comes to mind when they hear the word God. I got simple one-word answers: Spirit, Nature, Love, and “tooth fairy.” I thought today we might dig a little deeper.

I. History

The first human beings to develop ideas of God were trying to explain frightening phenomenon, which they did not understand. These uneducated, primitive people were struggling to make sense of natural events like, lightening, thunder, earthquakes, shooting stars, a lunar eclipse, and floods. Also they were trying to understand illness, birth, and death. They slowly developed ideas of a god or gods. Initially they assumed that these gods were “like us.” They made God look like humans.

The anthropomorphic God was the god with human attributes.

God was like an old wise white man. God was also up there or out there. This “Father God” was often angry, punitive, and judging. But he was also interested in each and every person. This God chose sides in wars and also was the great creator, the cosmic magician who one day created the earth, moon and stars. One primary goal of human beings was to worship and obey this angry,

fatherly god so that when they died they didn't really die; you went to a new place that was better or you went to a bad place because you had been bad. As a child and an early teen this was the God, which I believed in, prayed to, and sought to please.

II. The Trivialized God

Currently in our culture God has come down from up there and out there. We now have an immanent God who is involved and cares about every single human being, especially those humans whom we like. I call this the trivialized God. This God is asked to help us score touchdowns, hit home runs, score well on tests, by-pass the laws of nature and pay constant attention to "me." We Americans pray to our God to make it rain, to stop the rain, we give thanks at every opportunity from ordinary blue-plate Kiwanis luncheons, to helping our soldiers win wars and kill the enemy. It is absolutely unbelievable the arrogance of human beings who think that the creator of the universe is so focused on their every wish and problem. During my early adulthood I slowly began to give up belief in such a God. Several primary events brought about a new search for meaning and new concepts of God.

Theological studies in seminary days were an exciting intellectual journey for me. I began to read new thinkers like Rudolph Otto a German philosopher and theologian. Otto suggested that we needed a moratorium on the use of the word "God". He said that this word had become so over-used, so trivialized that perhaps we should stop using it for a while. He used the term "mysterium tremendum", i.e. "the great mystery." I liked that phrase; it felt right and respectful to me. Another writer was Paul Tillich who taught at Union Theological Seminary in NYC. Tillich developed the concept of God as "the ground of all being." Not quite so cozy a concept of God but one, which sounded plausible and solid to me.

Also I studied with Tom Altizer at Emory University who became famous for his "God is Dead" theory. Altizer meant the personal, anthropomorphic God who is like a caring father, who pays constant attention to his children is dead and gone. I wasn't at all sure about that but I was intrigued and now believe it to be true.

A second occurrence, which forged my theology, was not intellectual but experiential. I entered a two-year clinical training program for clergy, which included an internship and a residency year in training at a general hospital, a psychiatric unit, and an alcoholic treatment program. I witnessed illness, death, birth, slayings, abuse, suicide, and healing. All of these very human experiences called into question my thinking about God. Did I believe that God intervened

in the laws of nature? I read Einstein and his theory of relativity and his deep devotion to the scientific process. Einstein said, "I believe in the God of Spinoza who reveals himself in the harmony of all that exists." He also said, "I am a deeply religious non-believer—this is somewhat a new kind of religion." Hey, that sounded like where I was headed. But then along came Neils Bohrs and the quantum theory guys who said wait a minute, Einstein was wrong there are random, chaotic occurrences in nature which seemingly follow no laws of nature. Maybe God is just a crapshooter, a dice thrower. I had to go back to the theological drawing board.

The crucible of human experience taught me that God is no respecter of persons. One family wants their son to live and so does the other, both petition the deity to save the life of their child. If the child has been hit hard enough by a car or has a fatal illness they will surely both die.

Another facet of my theological development was the civil rights movement of the sixties and seventies. Watching Christian people guard the doors of their white churches with guns and praying to God that no person of color would show up for church was just too much. Also there were for me the sociological and theological problems of slavery and the holocaust. How could an all caring, all knowing and all powerful God let these events occur. I began to think that maybe whatever was true about God, he, she, or it was surely not in charge of the universe, did not listen to all this praying, and would not or could not intervene in the laws of nature, even for a "good person."

I began to carve away at my theological concepts of God. The first to go were genitals. I began to stop thinking of God as "He" or "She"/ I don't think god is made in our image. I no longer have any anthropomorphic concept of God. I do not believe God is father or mother, or the big brother in the sky. I do not believe God is white, dark, old or young. I do not believe that god pays minute- by- minute attention to the desires and whims of Bill Phillips or any other human being. Also I do not believe that God speaks every language on earth or even that of all the billions of stars that the creator is primarily focused on the daily activity of this very small planet.

So where does this "free and responsible search for truth and meaning" lead us and leave us? Each person is responsible to search, read, study, share, and carve out their own concept and theology. Some would have you believe it is easier to be a Unitarian Universalist because "You just don't have to believe anything." I tell you it is much tougher to be a UU because we are called upon to question everything. It is much easier and much simpler to just accept the teachings of your parents or the dogma of a church than to set out on a "free and responsible search for truth." I continue to question and to search. Where am I

these days with talking about God? I am proud that my faith says that each UU has the freedom and responsibility to think and decide for him or herself. I lean toward the thinking of Gandhi who in his last days said, "I used to say God is love, but now I believe love is God." I still believe that Jesus was right when he said that we should "love one another." I am a proud Unitarian. Whatever else is true there is only one God, not one for Christian, one for Jews, one for Muslims and Hindus. God is One is what Unitarian means. I do not believe in the trinity or the divinity of any one person. What ever God may be, if there is such a thing, I believe that God is a great mystery and is somehow a part of the interconnected web of all existence of which we I am a part. My childhood God is dead, my adult God is in process, and my old-age God is emerging or perhaps dying with me. I invite and encourage you to join me in this free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Theological development has many twists and turns, but it isn't boring or lifeless.

We will continue our search next Sunday with "What we talk about, when we talk about prayer?"