

First Parish UU, Bridgewater
Worship Service – Soul Matters Theme: “Trust”
Sunday, March 31, 2019 10:30am

Thought for Contemplation:

“He drew a circle that shut me out-
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.

But love and I had the wit to win:

We drew a circle and took him in! - Edwin Markham

Homily “Whaddya Say about the Sacred?” McKayla Hoffman

“Hey Kayla, I found a way to talk to Papa on the phone!”

My fourth-grade self was simultaneously horrified and overcome with curiosity at my sister’s offer to speak to Papa. He had died many years prior.

A quick interjection--earlier that day, my father took my siblings and I to a Borders bookstore. My sister had placed a spellbook on the checkout counter, and our father bought it without giving it a second glance. He let the world shape us as it would, and I thank him every day for that. Maybe having four kids and never enough caffeine had something to do with it, though.

Now, back to the story. I approached my sister, my throat stuck with fear. She spread the spellbook open to the page with the “communicate with a lost relative” spell. She pulled a sage leaf out of the spice cabinet and placed it carefully over the earpiece. She pushed it against my ear.

“Say anything you want, and he’ll hear you.” She let me take the phone from her hand and then backed away, her eyes wide with expectation. Fear overwhelmed my senses. I couldn’t feel my tongue, but I managed to utter a small “Hello.” I listened hard, ignoring my sister’s plea to press the

speakerphone button. But I heard nothing. My sister, frustrated, flipped back to read the full directions of the spell. The instructions were explicit: “Cast this spell on a dark moon.” My sister had no idea what phase the moon was in, but was determined that we should try the spell again later.

When we were young, my sister Victoria often constructed these adventures, ones that either ended in self discovery or injury. I usually feared these adventures (perhaps rightfully so), just like I feared nearly everything in my small world. But--the possibility of God manifesting in something like a spell book was tantalizing. I knew the Catholic God of my upbringing well until that day. I knew my language for truth well until that day. It changed the course of my life.

How do we frame what brings us awe? How do we define the undefinable, the tension in our stomach after being caught up in a rainstorm, or the moment we first see our newborn child after 9 months, or when we watched the Sox break the curse in 2004, or while we listen to an orchestra perform Vivaldi? Some of us name these sensations as emotions. Others name them Krishna, Allah, Elohim, science, chemical churnings, God, or the Spirit of Life.

Language, for many, matters. It's how we come to the closest possible understanding of the intangible. Names also matter--as they define our respective languages. Sometimes, these names come from terminology that is created by those with privilege and power, and do not necessarily speak truth for those who

are defined by them. For these reasons, names are often in need of revision. For example, the word “Hindu” is a survival of a mispronunciation repeated for centuries by the Greeks, Persians, and others. “Hindu” was a name given to those who lived east of the Indus River Valley, regardless of their ethnicity or “religion.” In the 19th century, the term served to reinforce distance between Southeast Asians and Europeans. The religion commonly called “Hinduism” is actually called “Sanantan Dharma,” or the “Eternal Way.” For thousands of years, it went unnamed because it didn’t need definition--until colonialism hit India and the region like a thunderbolt. So, even well before this age of social media and perpetual information channeling, language has had great power--to revolutionize, to maintain the status quo, and to assert dominance, whether consciously or (most insidiously) not.

Otherring language also leaves its mark outside conversations around belief or nonbelief, specifically around marginalized communities. Destructive language not only relegated to the hateful rhetoric spread by Neo-Nazis or the Westboro Baptist Church. As our denomination has been discussing over the decades (and particularly over the last few years), language used by well-meaning individuals with privilege also tend to do harm, and the work continues on dismantling what causes the proliferation of this language. For example, recently, an article was published in the UU World entitled “After L, G, and B: Listening to transgender and nonbinary people is about respect, relationship, and

whether we can be a truly inclusive faith.” This article caused harm to many trans UUs across the country. The article’s author centered cis voices in trans experience, encouraged conversation about sex changes rather than the sum of trans people, and repeated derogatory terms. Additionally, the UU World editor was also unwilling to pull the article after a trans individual named concerns about it. He has since issued an apology with a call to action, and while it has been accepted by many trans UUs, the hurt was done. Whether discourse continues about belief, race, gender, or ability, the language of privilege and supremacy are not well hidden behind intention.

Rev. Paul and I will be sharing more background about this issue later today or tomorrow.

Our inner voices might tell us any of the following:

“Atheists are completely unaccepting of any opinion other than their own.”

“Christians are the source of so much hatred and ignorance in our world.”

“Don’t blame me if I get your pronouns incorrect--they’re too difficult to use.”

“It wasn’t my intention to be racist!”

If an Atheist sits next to a Christian, or a Muslim sits next to an Agnostic--and if all of them are Unitarian Universalist--the covenant between them is no less valid. Likewise, if a gender nonbinary individual sits next to a self-defined “Grammar Nazi,” the same covenant applies for all parties. We might expound

upon our 7 principles here and consider them not so much aspirations as promises. Our 3rd principle calls us to practice acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations, and our 4th advocates for a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. So, when we feel those deep stirrings after hearing the word God, or after our words caused harm even though our intentions were good, how do we square this with what our principles ask us to do, and to be, for one another?

If – for all the beautiful and celebrated differences between us – we are all bound by these principles, then perhaps we ought to challenge ourselves and each other to take responsibility for our reflexes and thereby come closer to right relationship with one another. To live into this goodwill, we might practice a variation of this: noticing our reactions when they happen, holding our words for as long as it takes to move through them, recognize where these reactions come from, and expand the understanding that the reaction's origin likely has nothing to do with whatever caused it in the present. Our histories, identities, relationships, family, and other forces often shape where these reactions come from, and contextualizing them within these forces is an important step towards ensuring that our words and actions do less harm. It also teaches us how to be unconditionally supportive of one another on our respective journeys.

As people of goodwill, we ought to carefully evaluate our reactions to Allahu akbar and why that might be different than Praise be to God or Science is

the language of the universe or Om Namah Shivay--or someone's preferred pronouns. Because while they may not all mean the same thing, they are not only expressions of a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, but who we are.

Friends, let us harden and hearten ourselves to the challenge of understanding our neighbor's hearts, to learning the language of their livingness, and to love deeply--beyond our ingrained prejudices. Let us rise to this opportunity with the assurance that when we make mistakes, we will join hands, reaffirm our covenant, and grow along the way. Let the circle be drawn--wider and wider--to fit each of our journeys and the language that paves the way for them all.

Namaste!

Homily "Whaddy'a Say about the Sacred?" Rev. Paul Sprecher

When I started going to theological seminary twenty-one years ago, I intended to work another seven years, until I turned 55 and could take early retirement. That meant that there was only one choice for me in the city – New York Theological Seminary. NYTS was designed for students who were already working full time, especially for working pastors and other religious professionals, and our average ages were probably in the early forties. Hence, all of our classes met in the evening and on Saturdays. NYTS oriented itself to students who were inner-city pastors and others who wanted to be pastors and it

had a rough balance of men and women and a majority minority student population – perhaps a third Black, a third Hispanic, fifteen percent Korean and the rest Caucasian or other. I was one of only four white males in an entering class of eighty-four that year. Needless to say, it was a sharp contrast to my experience at work downtown, which was dominated by white males.

The classes at NYTS presented a relatively liberal, social justice oriented Protestant theology, and some of my classmates had a difficult time finding out – as an example – that the story in the Jewish Bible of how the walls of the city of Jericho tumbled down after the Israelites marched around the walls seven times probably never happened. On the other hand, the worship style at NYTS was Bapticostal – some combination of Baptist and Pentecostal – which was a problem for me as a lapsed Pentecostal become Unitarian Universalist. Some of the hymns used in worship at our retreats were familiar to me from growing up while others were praise songs written since I had left my family’s church thirty years before. My religious allergies kicked in pretty quickly. I didn’t want to sit out or stick out, but I also didn’t want to sing songs or say words that I couldn’t in conscience believe. Plus, there was a communion service at each retreat and the words that welcomed Christians to be part of the ritual often did not welcome the three or four of us who were Unitarian Universalists. How could I be truly present with my fellow students – who were also my friends – without compromising my own beliefs?

Over time my allergies abated somewhat. In the midst of these gathered worshippers, I found that I could in fact enjoy singing those hymns, not so much because I had changed my beliefs as because I had changed my understanding of what we were doing there together. I came to see that, while I wouldn't have chosen the language we used, we were all engaged in lifting up the sacred among us in ways that spoke to most of my classmates. I found that I was able to join them in that work we were doing together. At one point it seems I was singing one of those old hymns so enthusiastically that my mentor, Dr. Dale Irving – later president of the seminary – tapped me on the shoulder after the hymn and said he wished that my Pentecostal preacher brother could see me now!

I didn't convert – though my wife Deedee sometimes worried that I would – but I was able to leave behind some of the reactivity I had developed by being a come-outer, someone who left the religion they were raised in and found a home in Unitarian Universalism, as have many of you.

When our son David was eight or nine, he tried puzzling out the disparate religious categories in our family. “Grandma believes in God,” he said, “and Mom's an atheist, and you're not sure.” That would make me an agnostic, I suppose, to be technical about it. But actually, it's *not* the case that I'm not sure. I am sure that there is *that* beyond us and between us and within us that is sacred – “divine” is the word that many traditions use – and that, whatever *that* is, it can never be completely captured in any tradition's words. We list the first source

our Living Tradition as Unitarian Universalists as “direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder.”

The most fundamental of religious impulses is awe at the wonder of this universe of which we are only a tiny part – and that awe helps to keep us a little humble and a little more committed to doing our part to respect and care for one another and for our mother earth – a commitment of the heart – even as we come to understand and master some of its complexities with our reason and with science – a commitment of the head. So the “God” question is not so interesting to me. “God” to me is a pointing word, pointing to mystery, to wonder, to humility, named by many words in many languages and traditions.

When you find yourself having an allergic reaction to words used in other traditions, you can use that symptom as a way of enlarging your own awareness, a way of appreciating the great diversity of ways of using language for the sacred. This is a way of growing in the love of all the many ways we humans find our place in this wondrous universe of which we are such a small part.

There is, then, a sense in which the pointing words we use don’t matter as much as we sometimes think. In other ways, though, especially the ways we use to refer to ourselves, words matter a great deal. You need only call to mind the kinds of ethnic and racial slurs that have been used throughout history – “Hindu” is one, as McKayla point out – to realize that the names we use when we refer to one another can build connections or build separations. I love the line in the

hymn “We Are Dancing Sarah’s Circle” that says “We will all do our own naming. So for naming ourselves and one another, names do matter, as do the pronouns we choose and ask others to use.

Our job is to Draw the Circle wide, as reflected in our thought for contemplation this morning by Edward Markham:

“He drew a circle that shut me out –
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle and took him in!

Our siblings in the United Methodist church are struggling with a devastating split over issues of sexuality just now. Some of the more liberal Methodists are drawing courage from the hymn “Draw the Circle Wide,” which our choir will sing as the postlude. You may have noticed that my good friend Rev. Alicia Velez Stewart of the United Methodist Church across School Street has been posting words on their signboard that invoke inclusion rather than exclusion, that call for drawing the circle wide. Today it says:

“No person is incompatible. All are Welcome.”

When we listen carefully to the language other religious traditions invoke as they point toward the sacred, we can learn to expand our hearts to take in more ways of acknowledging the wonders of the universe and our part in this great dance, the journey we call our lives. The more we can listen and understand – the larger we draw the circle of inclusion – the more we grow in love. If God is

Love, as our Universalist forebears proclaimed, then whatever names, whatever words we use to speak of the sacred, all of them point toward the Spirit of Life and Love which moves within us, among us, and beyond us. Let us always strive to embody that Love which is the foundation and the purpose of our lives.

AMEN, and Blessed Be