

## **“How Not to Hinder God”**

A Sermon Delivered by Rev. Marlin Lavanhar, Senior Minister  
At All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, on March 19, 2006

It's kind of hard to get back up here in the pulpit after Youth Sunday. Those youth who spoke last week set the bar pretty high. They were wonderful, weren't they! I appreciated how, in their announcements, they explained to any visitors that this was not a typical Sunday at All Souls and they encouraged them to “come back to hear Marlin because he's pretty good at this too.”

Seriously though, I appreciated their candor, their insight, and their willingness to share with us some of the most important aspects of their lives. It says a lot about them, and it says a lot about the rest of us, that these teenagers would feel comfortable enough here to risk sharing such intimate and heartfelt thoughts and feelings with us. When you see Kate Starr, our Youth Director, be sure to thank her for all she's doing to make this church a home for our youth.

One of the youth sermons was about the experience of giving up drugs. Two were about giving up the masks we often wear – masks that initially help us to be popular with others, but ultimately lead us to people who are attracted to our mask rather than to us for who we really are. These were painful experiences to learn from, and many of us know these experiences from our own lives. Some of us were wishing we had learned these lessons before we were eighteen. But we all didn't have Kate Starr as our youth director or All Souls as a church to grow up in.

Some of us grew up in churches that tried to shove certain ideas about God and religion into us and by doing so they caused us to run as far from God and religion as we could get. Others of us had parents who themselves had experienced destructive religion, and in the interest of protecting us, they kept us as far from church as they could when we were children. In either case, many of us were brought up in a way that caused us to have serious questions about God, or to outright reject the idea of God and organized religion.

Religion is actually a barrier to faith far more often than we in the clergy like to admit.

The use of fear, guilt and manipulation to get people to believe is the stock and trade of far too many in the religious business. Nobody feels good when they do something out of guilt or fear. And feeling manipulated has to be among life's worst experiences. It's as if people using these strong-arm tactics do not trust that there is an authentic religious experience of the Sacred that people can and ultimately will have. There's no need to twist arms on God's behalf. More than anything, we need to get out of the way and allow people to have an authentic connection to that which sustains their being. There's no wonder that many people have given up on organized religion.

Of course, I like to pride myself on being a minister of a church that has transcended the trappings of organized religion. This could be a fancy way of saying that ours is a "disorganized religion." But in fact we are neither disorganized, nor have we fully transcended some of the challenges of institutional religion. This morning I want to take a look at how you and I, and our church, can avoid being an impediment to the experience of the Sacred. Because the church is a means to that experience, not an end in itself. And any church, including our own, can become an obstacle to encountering God if we're not careful.

In this period leading up to Easter, when in most churches there is an emphasis on giving something up for Lent, I want you to listen to this list of ways people hinder the experience of the Holy. And if you hear something you do, that is reflected in any of these examples, I want to challenge you to try and give it up during the coming weeks. If Easter is truly to be about the rebirth of God, or the return of God into our lives in a new form, then now is the time to prepare the way. And for the agnostics in the congregation, don't worry, there's something in this for you too.

Maybe the biggest obstacle to experiencing God, or the Holy, or the Spirit of Life, whatever you want to call it, is reaction. Many people who enter our church have had some experiences of religion that came to taste like ashes in their mouth. If you're in this category, you may have been upset by the lack of critical thinking in the church you left. You may have found the theology

inconsistent or hypocritical. You may have been fed an all-or-nothing, literal version of the Bible that made the Bible eventually seem ridiculous. You may have been led to feel less than who you know you are, because you are female, or gay, or because you appear to have little faith. And if so, you may have come here out of reaction to what I call “destructive religion.”

You might be like the woman who sent an irate email to Justin after she heard him preach a sermon referring to the Bible. In her email she explained to him that the Bible should only be read from once a year, on Christmas Eve. And even then, it should only be done after all the appropriate disclaimers and apologies are made.

Or, you might be the type of person that cannot stand people who read the Bible literally, yet you discount the Bible entirely because, in fact, you read it literally too. If so, try instead to delve into the rich layers of myth and metaphor, and I suspect you will come to find out why the Bible is the most influential collection of religious writings in the Western world.

Or, you might have decided long ago that God doesn't answer prayers, so you have completely given up praying, without considering the way that prayer might affect you. Prayer might not change what God does, but it might have a powerful effect on what *you* do – if you decide to engage in it.

Or your reaction might flow from having been given an inadequate definition of God. Like the man in the clouds with lightening bolts version, or the great punisher god, or the Santa Clause god who knows when you've been naughty and knows when you've been nice. Or the god who created the world 6000 years ago and then planted dinosaur bones in the earth to try and test our faith. Having rejected one of these descriptions of God, you may have decided there's no God at all. Yet, in doing so, you may not have considered ideas of God such as a powerful source of love and kindness in the world, or God as a kind of energy or power that is in each of us but greater than all of us. You may have stopped exploring before you came to any number of concepts of God that are based in nature or that are congruent with modern science.

So, if your sense of God or religion comes primarily from a place of reaction, I invite you to give that up and see what happens.

Another impediment to the spirit that is commonly found in free religious thinkers is arrogance. This one goes along with reaction for those who deem most religion as superstitious, or anti-intellectual or fear-based-fantasy or as a crutch for the weak, or an opiate of the masses. Those who have this opinion of most religions usually have a pretty high opinion of themselves. The problem with this situation is less about the commentary on other religions as it is about the way the person holding these opinions puts him or herself above others. Anytime we look down on others from a superior view, especially when we stereotype entire groups of people (be it Jews, Muslims, Christians or others) we are cutting ourselves off from those people, and alienating ourselves from some aspects of life and truth. It says more about the person who takes this position, than it says about the people being demeaned by this opinion. Arrogance is a severe hindrance to connection with other people and with the Sacred. If your religious perspective tends towards arrogance, I invite you to take this opportunity leading up to Easter to let go of this destructive and ultimately shallow religious view.

The next common obstacle found in people of free religious attitude is a consumer mentality. It's now common in our culture to talk of going "church shopping." People are looking for the church that is right for them and their family. There's no brand loyalty anymore. And, in fact, I don't have a problem with that. However, once one settles down into a church community or religion, they have to give up relating to that community as a consumer. One cannot just look for a religion that says what they want to hear. Religion, if it's constructive, will often challenge us to reach higher, explore further, dig deeper, become wiser, take risks and experience new frontiers of our existence. Obviously, if a church or its minister is being negligent or destructive, no one should be expected to adhere to, respect, or go along. However, at times we ought to be pushed by our religion to rise to a higher ethic or to courageously live out the values that we

profess. Just like in this sermon, I'm asking you to do some self-evaluation about your approach to religion and I'm asking you to make changes if something I say reflects your experience.

Of course, you have the freedom of the pew to disagree with what I say from up here. But if you or I just pick and choose like a consumer those things that we like to do, or that feel good, then we are not on a path of spiritual or personal growth. We're just looking to stay the same, and seeking a church that will allow us to remain stuck in our own biases. So, while we are free to disagree in this church, we also need to be willing to be nudged beyond our comfort zones. We need to trust the church, its values and traditions and leadership. I'm not talking about a blind-trust, but we must be willing to stand behind the values we proclaim and uphold even when doing so can cause us to feel discomfort or require risks and courage.

I remember three years ago when I was approached about All Souls hosting a Southwestern United States regional conference for transgender persons. I remember swallowing hard and thinking that this was not going to be popular. And that it could cause me to have to speak out both within the church and possibly outside of the church to explain why we were hosting a conference for cross-dressers, transsexuals and others who identify as transgender. I was not looking to take on that issue at that time. I had not been at the church very long and was not really wanting to get a lot of people stirred up. But I knew that to host the conference was consistent with our values. I said yes, and I trusted that I could, and we could, live by the values we proclaim in this church. Sure enough, it was a wonderful experience and many of us learned a great deal as we hosted, prepared for, and in some cases attended the conference. The church is still standing. There was no mass exodus of members. There was no public controversy. And we did the right thing and stood by our values.

I'll be the first to admit that I was uncomfortable at times after making that decision. A person with a consumer mentality might have learned that we were hosting that conference and felt uncomfortable. It might have prompted a long-seated prejudice, and the person might have left the church, because maybe they didn't want to be associated with the church or the issue.

Yet, what was required of all of us in that situation was that we remain open-minded and curious and push through some predictable discomfort so that we could learn and grow. I was as proud to be the minister of this church during that weekend as I have ever been. Not because it was popular, but because we courageously stood behind our values, and lived them, as a community and as individuals.

If you approach this religion with a consumer mentality, and only go along with the things that feel good and that support your preconceived biases, then I challenge you to take some risks. Allow yourself to sustain some discomfort and be courageous in following this faith and its values.

Now, let me recap these three common ways free religious thinkers get stuck spiritually. First, is REACTION – a religious orientation that is primarily reactive. Reactive religion is like what psychologists call a “rebound relationship.” In a rebound relationship a person makes decisions based on what they didn’t like in their last relationship. In this new relationship they find good ammunition for why their former lover was all wrong, but they don’t necessarily find the person they need as a life partner. In “reactive religion” a person clings to all the things that demonstrate that the religion they’ve rejected is wrong. But they don’t move past that, to discover what their true religious or spiritual needs are for the remainder of their life. Don’t get stuck in reaction. There’s a whole world of meaningful religious ideas and practices that you will miss out on.

The second impediment is ARROGANCE. If you discount most other religions as foolish, and the people in them as inferior to you, you have too high a sense of yourself. I’m inviting you to get over it, and begin to be open to learning from people of all faiths. If a person is on an authentic religious path, it doesn’t matter what religion they’re in. If they have found a connection that sustains them to live lives of love and compassion and sacrifice, then they have something valuable to share. To put ourselves above another human being is always arrogant and

unnecessary. But, to consider yourself more highly evolved religiously than another person of honest faith is to admit to the shallowness of your own religious journey and development.

Finally, the CONSUMER MENTALITY which is a fair-weather faith that cannot handle an honest challenge to your values, or a faith that is only good when it feels good. If you are not prepared to wrestle wholeheartedly with the ways your faith challenges you, then you are treating your religion like a consumer and that is inconsistent with true spiritual growth.

On the other hand, you might not have any of these impediments to your relationship with God or the church. In that case, I hope you will take some time over the next few weeks to look for other things that might be holding you back from progressing more fully in your life, and especially in your relationship to what is sacred in life. The work of becoming wise, spiritually adept and personally fulfilled is not so much a long path to attain something you don't possess. It's more about letting go of the obstacles that are getting in the way of fully realizing who you already are. My hope is that as you let go of the things that are holding you back, you can turn your palms to the sky and hold them out. And in doing so, you find an openness and a fullness that leads to your own profound rebirth, if not the rebirth of God.

Amen.