

“The Evolution of God”
A Sermon Delivered by Rev. Marlin Lavanhar, Senior Minister
At All Souls Unitarian Church on December 5, 2004

I begin with a story by the Sufi mystic Jalladin Rumi from the 13th century. His stories are often provocative and sometimes shocking. He used every trick he could think of to get our attention to focus on God and our true nature. And he knew what gets us to listen. His stories sometimes use sex, wine, greed and all the things that make us pay attention. This story is about a married couple arguing.

“One night in the desert, a Bedouin woman has this to say to her husband:

‘Everyone is happy and prosperous except us! We have no bread. We have no spices. We have no water jug. We barely have any clothes. No blankets for the night. We fantasize that the full moon is a cake. We reach for it! We’re an embarrassment even to the beggars. Everyone avoids us. Arab men are supposed to be generous warriors, but look at you, stumbling around! If some beggar were to come to us as a guest we’d steal his rags when he fell asleep. Who is your guide who leads you to this? We can’t even get a handful of lentils. Ten years worth of nothing, that’s what we are!’

She went on and on. ‘If God is abundant, we must be following an imposter. Who’s leading us? Some fake that always says, ‘Tomorrow illumination will bring you treasure, tomorrow.’ As everyone knows, that never comes. Though I guess it happens very rarely, sometimes, that a disciple following an imposter can somehow surpass the pretender. But still, I want to know what this depravation says about us.’

The husband replied finally:

‘How long will you complain about money and our prospects for money? The torrent of our life has mostly gone by. Don’t worry about transient things. Think how the animals live. The dove of the branch giving thanks. The glorious singing of the nightingale. The gnat. The elephant. Every living thing trusts in God for its nourishment. These pains that you feel are messengers. Listen to them. Turn them to sweetness. The night is almost over. You were young once and content. Now you think about money all the time. You used to be that money. You were a healthy vine. Now you’re a rotten fruit. You ought to be growing sweeter and sweeter, but you’ve gone bad. As my wife you should be equal to me as a pair of boots. If one

is too tight, the pair is of no use. Like two folding doors, we can't be mismatched. A lion does not mate with a wolf.'

So this man, who was happily poor, scolded his wife until daybreak, when she responded:

'Don't talk to me about your high station! Look how you act! Spiritual arrogance is the ugliest of all things. It's like a day that's cold and snowy and your clothes are wet too! It's too much to bear! And don't call me your mate, you fraud! You scramble after scraps of bone with the dogs. You're not as satisfied as you pretend! You're the snake and the snake charmer at the same time, but you don't know it. You're charming a snake for money, and the snake is charming you. You talk about God a lot and you make me feel guilty by using that word. You'd better watch out! That word will poison you if you use it to have power over me.'

So the rough volume of her talking fell on the husband, and he fought back.

'Woman, this poverty is my deepest joy. This bare way of life is honest and beautiful. We can hide nothing when we're like this. You say, I'm really arrogant and greedy, and you say I'm a snake charmer and a snake, but those nicknames are for you. In your anger and your writings you see those qualities in me. I want nothing from this world. You're like a child that has turned round and round, and now you think the house is turning. It's your eyes that see wrong. Be patient, and you'll see the blessings and the Lord's light in how we live.'

This argument continued throughout the day, and even longer."¹

This story is not really about a man and woman fighting. It's about us. Some days we wake up feeling on top of the world. Feeling satisfied with what we have and with who we are. And on other days we wake up feeling impoverished, unworthy – like a failure. We have moments of contentment and feeling grateful no matter what our situation, and in those moments it's as if we know we can handle life's deprivations and hardships. And we have other moments when we feel deprived and maybe even depraved. We sometimes feel like an imposter, one who has been fooled and foolish.

It's those days when we're wading in our own worthlessness that we feel like Woody Allen when he said, "I wouldn't want to be a member of any club that would have a person like me as a member."

It's all part of the human experience and it helps to read stories like Rumi's and others like those found in the Bible and elsewhere that help us realize that we're not alone, that we are not the only person who feels this way from time to time and that, in fact, the ancient literature and scriptures remind us that we're in good company with people who have struggled much like we do over thousands of years.

But this story is about more than our relationship with ourselves, it is also about our relationship to God. I've come to realize that our relationship with ourselves cannot be separated from our relationship with God. Even if we do not believe in God, that too affects how we understand ourselves and our place in the world. Therefore, the two relationships are inseparable.

And so Rumi's story of the Bedouin couple is also a metaphor about our relationship with God. We can imagine this couple when they first met and fell in love. The early stage of romance is so full of fantasy and projection. We think the person we have found is wonderful beyond our imagination. We overlook their flaws or sometimes delude ourselves that they don't have any. It is one of the most exciting parts of romantic relationships, but it's mostly built on illusion, since we don't really know the person very well yet and they don't know us. Then at some point, the hormones settle down and reality settles in. The chinks in one another's armor start to become visible. The pedestals we have each other on begin to diminish. This is often the crisis point in a relationship.

If the couple is bonded only by their illusions and good feelings, the relationship has trouble surviving. But it's also the point in the relationship when true love becomes possible. If we can learn to love the person, not for the illusion of who we thought they were, but for whom they really are, then we can grow, a closer and truer intimacy and love.

Our relationship with God has many similarities. There may have been a period when we had blind faith, when God could do no wrong and when we were in denial about any problems we had with God. But at some point, through the experience of life, God let's us down. We find that the God we had believed in, is not who or what we imagined. As in a love relationship, this is a critical moment. We can break up with God and decide to have nothing else to do with God, or we can deepen the relationship. But if we decide to sever the relationship we must keep in mind, that much like an ex-lover, a relationship still exists even after the break-up or divorce and it still has a hold on our consciousness and sense of who we are.

Sometimes, when we get out of a bad relationship we can think, "that's it, I'm fed up, I don't do relationships anymore. Woman are all alike, (or men are all alike...) I'm better off on my own." But when we're talking about God, remember that we're talking about that which is of ultimate concern to us, that which has the highest demand on our loyalty, that which trumps all other demands on us.

Theologian Paul Tilich talks of God as our Ultimate concern (whatever it might be) and therefore, we all have a god or gods. If your ultimate concern is success, or money, or fame ... if you see these as that which holds your highest allegiance and that toward which you devote your time and loyalty and your best efforts, then these are your gods. Whatever it is that is of greatest concern to you is your god.

In other words, if you have stopped believing in God, you replaced it with something. And that is why, our most important religious (or spiritual) task is to make sure that that with which we replaced our God, is worthy of our allegiance.

Keep in mind, that the injunction in monotheistic religions to worship no other God but God, is not so much a jealous Supreme Being trying to guilt us or scare us into believing in it. It's a warning to be careful what we have faith in, to make sure it is worthy of our faith because we all have faith in something.

Even the cynic, like Shakespeare's Macbeth who said, "Life's but a waking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

Even the cynic is deeply concerned about his unconcern and therefore we all have some ultimate concern. So, if God is that which is of ultimate concern, then there are certainly gods that are unworthy of our allegiance.

Freud said that God was a creation of the human imagination and said it was a childish fairy tale for ignorant people. Without a doubt, such a God is unworthy of our allegiance.

Bertrand Russell and other brilliant minds told us that the concept of God is no longer credible considering all that we've learned from science and philosophy. And I'd agree that any concept of God worthy of our allegiance cannot be utterly inconsistent with what we now know from science and other academic pursuits.

Karl Marx told us that God is a tool of the wealthy and powerful used as an opiate to keep people oppressed and poor. And I'd agree that religious belief can be used this way and has been used this way and any idea of God that is worthy of our allegiance cannot be one that is used to justify oppression or any other unjust use of power.

And Nietzsche announced that God is dead. And he was half right. The concept of God that many of us had when we were children has died, for us. The God we were taught about in Sunday school as children has to die in order for a more complex and sophisticated notion of God to be born.

As our experience changes and our ability to understand complex ideas develops, our concepts of God change.

The problem I see is that for some people, when the infantile God they believed in as a child no longer seems plausible, they give up on trying to understand God. They cut themselves off from an entire aspect of human knowing and they often fall into an intellectual arrogance which tells them that anyone who believes in God is ignorant, deluded, weak or at least misguided.

But, when I talk of God, I'm not talking about a man in the cloud with a beard. I'm not talking about a God who like Santa Claus watches over us keeping tabs of whether we've been naughty or nice. I'm not talking about a God that ordered the Israelites to murder tribes as they made their way to Cannon. I'm not talking about a God with nostrils that used to like the smell of burning animal flesh. I'm not talking about a God that does magic tricks and miracles to convince people to believe. I'm not talking about a God that thinks only men can be priests or one that thinks woman need to cover their heads or submit to their husbands.

I'm talking about the love that is the source of all love. I'm talking about that spirit that allows the parent who has lost a child to get up in the morning and continue to live a life of meaning and hope. I'm talking about that power within us and around us that helps us realize that loving our neighbors is the right thing to do...that forgiveness is possible. I'm talking about that unimaginable force that allows us to turn adversity into character, and when I speak of God like this I know that even Humanists and Atheists can believe in it. And their question is, "Why call it God?" Hasn't that word been so misused that it is almost useless? Won't most people misunderstand me if I say, I believe in God? They might think that I believe in their God – and I probably don't. Or if they don't believe in God, they're bound to think I'm a fool. Both of those misunderstandings are possible.

But, I'm here to tell you, that once you discover God in an authentic way for you, all of a sudden the literature and scriptures of the world open up like the most beautiful flower. The words of mystics like Rumi, and Thomas Merton...and others come alive and go from sounding foolish to touching the essence of your being. They go from being outdated, outmoded superstition to being profound and moving and even wise. These

men and woman were in touch with something that uplifted their spirits and called them to lives of courage and compassion and beauty.

And so I ask you, "what -- that is not of your own making -- is calling you to a life of courage and possibility and hope? What is so important to you that you would change the course of your life, if you realized it required you to? What is it that calls you to do and be and become more than you are right now?"

Call it what you like. -- I call it God. And I believe it is a source of love and strength that is available always -- and to everyone.

AMEN.

¹ Rumi, Jelaluddin. "A Man and a Woman Arguing." *The Essential Rumi*. Translated by Coleman Barks. Edison: Castle Books, 1997. 47-50.