

"God: For She So Loved the World..."
A Sermon Delivered by Rev. Marlin Lavanhar, Senior Minister
At All Souls Unitarian Church on December 12, 2004

Second Reading: "Self-Portrait" By: David Whyte

It doesn't interest me if there is one God or many gods.
I want to know if you belong, or feel abandoned.
If you know despair or can see it in others.
I want to know if you are prepared to live in the world with its harsh need to change you.
If you can look back with firm eyes saying, this is where I stand.
I want to know if you know how to melt into that fierce heat of living, falling toward the center of your longing.
I want to know if you are willing to live, day by day, with the consequence of love and the bitter unwanted passion of your sure defeat.
I have been told, in that fierce embrace, even the gods talk of God."

Sermon:

In the book *The Color Purple* the character named Shug asks, "...Celie, tell the truth, have you ever found God in church? [Cause] I never did. I just found a bunch of folks hoping for him to show. Any God I ever felt in church I brought in with me. And I think all the other folks did too. They come to church to share God, not find God."

Then she [said], "Tell me what your God looks like, Celie."

"...Aw, naw I'm too [a]shamed." Nobody ever ast me this before, so I'm sort of took by surprise. Besides when I think about it, it don't seem quite right. But it all I got. "Okay," I say, "He big and old and tall and graybearded and white. He wear white robes and go barefooted."

"Blue eyes?" [Shug] ast.

"Sort of bluish-gray. Cool. Big though, white lashes" I say.

She laugh[ed].

"Why you laugh?" I ast. "I don't think it so funny." What you expect him to look like...?"

Then she told me this old white man is the same God she used to see when she prayed. "If you wait to find God in church, Celie," she say, "that's who is bound to show up, cause that's where he live."

"How come?" I ast.

"Cause that's the one that's in the white folks' white bible."

“Shug!” I say. “God wrote the bible, white folks had nothing to do with it...”

“How come he look just like them then?” she say. “Only bigger? And a heap more hair. How come the bible just like everything else they make, all about them doing one thing and another, and all the colored folks doing is gitting cursed?”

“I never thought bout that.”

“Ain’t no way to read the bible and not think God white” she say. Then she sigh. “When I found out I thought God was white, and a man, I lost interest.”

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Did you lose interest in God? Have you ever thought the God of the Bible was an old, barefoot, white man with a beard and a long white robe? Because that’s a third grade Sunday school image that’s meant to be a stepping stone. If you ask most of the adults attending the Presbyterian, Methodist, Catholic or other churches this morning whether they believe in the white male God up in the clouds, they don’t either. There are literally thousands of ways of understanding God, just within the Christian tradition.

Throughout the span of recorded human history some of the brightest minds of every age have attempted to understand and describe what it is that we mean by God. Some of these ideas of God are transcendent, supernatural and metaphysical, but others are naturalistic, scientific, philosophical and poetic. My point, in saying all this, is that if you call yourself an atheist, I hope it’s not just based on rejecting the third grade Sunday school God...because while this is a very understandable position, it is not a very sophisticated one. My goal this morning is to offer a notion of God that is worthy of belief. A God that is neither male, nor white, nor anthropomorphic. A God that is consistent with and credible in light of science. A God that is as lovable and personable as Jesus and as mind-blowing as the galaxies we marvel at in the night sky.

Last week in my sermon I talked of God as that which is of ultimate concern to you. That (whatever it is) which has the highest demand on your loyalty, that which trumps all other demands on you. I said, it has to be a God that Freud would not deem a childish fairy tale for ignorant people. It cannot be one that Karl Marx would reject as a tool of the wealthy and powerful used as an opiate to keep people oppressed and poor. And it cannot be one that the philosophy of Nietzsche would pronounce is dead. I said, it can’t be a Santa Claus God who watches over us keeping tabs of whether we’ve been naughty or nice.

It’s not the God that ordered the Israelites to murder tribes as they made their way to Canaan. It’s not a God that does magic tricks and miracles to convince people to believe. And it’s definitely not a God that thinks only men can be priests or that thinks woman need to cover their heads or submit to their husbands.

As I said last week, I'm talking about the love that is the source of all love. I believe it is a well from which anyone at any time can draw love and strength. Here's how Alice Walker described it in *The Color Purple*:

"Here's the thing," [said] Shug. "The thing I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don't know what you looking for. Trouble do it for most folks, I think. Sorrow, lord. Feeling like [dirt]."

"It?" Celie ast.

"Yeah, It. God ain't a He or a She, but a It."

"But what do it look like?" [Celie] ast.

"Don't look like nothing," [Shug] say. "It ain't a picture show. It ain't something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself. I believe God is everything," say Shug. "Everything that is, or was, or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found it."

[Shug explained], "My first step from the old white man [God] was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. And I laughed, and I cried, and I run all around the house. I knew just what it was. In fact, when it happen, you can't miss it."

When I first read this passage from *The Color Purple* I remembered an experience I had in my late twenties. It was while I was on my bicycle trip around the world. I had been gone from America and almost everyone I knew here for four years. I was in Krakow, Poland camping out on some peculiar man's cement driveway. He gave me a key to his basement to lock my stuff during the day. His basement was the dirtiest, dankest, most mildew-smelling place I've ever been. It was a storage cellar and there were piles of old, worn shoes, and empty jars, and it was clear that this man hadn't thrown anything away since before World War II.

This particular night it was cold and raining. My travel partner, who was also my girlfriend, was off somewhere and I was all alone, trying to stay dry in this musty cellar. We had recently decided we were going to break-up and she was leaving to fly to Israel the next day. Sitting there on an old smelly mattress under the light of one 40-watt bulb hanging from the ceiling, I felt as sad and alone in the world as I'd ever felt. Here I was with a tent and a bicycle, in Eastern Europe and the person who knew me best in the world was about to be gone from my life. But at some point in the midst of my loneliness and alienation, I suddenly realized that I was a part of all that is in the universe. A feeling of connection came over me like a wave and gave me a sense that I was a part

of something larger than myself and that I was not separate from the marvelous world – and I was okay. As I stepped outside, the cold rain now felt more like a brother than an enemy.

The feeling didn't last forever and I had a lot of grieving still to do before it was all said and done, but that experience of connectedness (with all that exists) has stayed with me.

On that note, the former dean of Vanderbilt Divinity School, Sally McFague, has written a book called *The Body of God*. In it she offers a theology of God incarnation and the Holy Spirit that is not only consistent with modern science, but one that gives us a basis for an ecologically sound religion. McFague's theology could be likened to a well-reasoned and highly intellectual version of the God that Alice Walker's character Shug described.

McFague, who is a Christian theologian, argues that God did not become flesh just in the form of one man at one time named Jesus. In her view, God's physical manifestation, God's flesh if you will, is the universe. But this is not pantheism because, for her, God is more than the physical cosmos. God is in fact the animating spirit inherent in all life, through all time. Therefore, God is not an intelligence or a mind or a controlling power above us, God is the breath of life that energizes us and all that lives. Such a God does not direct our lives, but is what gives us vitality. We depend on the breath of life to survive. As McFague reminds us "Our lives are enclosed by two breaths –our first when we emerge from our mother's womb and our last when we give up the ghost."¹

She asks us to keep in mind that spirit is a wide ranging, multidimensional term: "We speak of a person's spirit, their vigor, courage, or strength; of team spirit, the collective energy of people at play; of the spirit of '76, or the spirit of Tiananmen Square, and [of the] resolution of people banding together in a common cause to oppose oppression; [we even talk] of a spirited horse..."²

I can remember being in India and watching ritual animal sacrifices. I specifically remember a large goat that was brought forth and slaughtered. It somehow sensed what was coming because this goat was fighting hard to get away. I could see the life in its large brown eyes and in its pulling and kicking and squealing. It was animated and conscious. Then, with one quick swing of the sword, it laid before us in two pieces. That intense consciousness and energy that I saw just moments before was gone. I secretly hoped I could see the spirit leaving the goats body. I imagined it like a light green smoke rising out through its ear. But no such luck. While I could still see the entire physical body of the goat, I could not see the consciousness anymore. Where did it go?

Science tells us energy cannot just disappear. Now, let's consider that for billions of years, this energy of life has been forming and reforming and animating the physical universe. We human beings are relative latecomers on the scene, having only been

around a mere 40,000 years. With us this combination of energy and matter has taken a new turn, it has become conscious of itself and its life. In humans, we find a new kind of creature that can think and imagine and question and create new realities. So, keep in mind that in this theology, God is the spirit of life and breath. The physical universe (including you and me and the plants and oceans) is the embodiment of that spirit. In Christian language the universe then is the incarnation of the spirit or the spirit made flesh. And the Holy Spirit, if you will, is distinguished from the general spirit of life, because it is the special manifestation that comes in such forms as inclusive love.

Think about that. The spirit of life has existed in physical form for billions of years. But it has only become manifest as inclusive love, since humans emerged. In other words, the spirit inherent in all life, has come to exist in the form of love and trust and compassion and forgiveness only as long as humans have been around.

And these qualities of the spirit are not exhibited by all human beings at all times, but they are available to all of us, if we choose to embody them. We have seen how these qualities are not just abstractions, they are made real through real people, like you and me. And they transcend biology and basic hormones.

We've all heard of the Ghandi's and the Martin Luther Kings and thousands of others who have loved people and the higher good even more than they were afraid to die. Whence cometh that spirit, that courage, that strength to persevere? We don't know from whence it comes, but we know it does come. We've seen it and felt it and know it is real. But it is only real when it is embodied by real people.

This theology, then, provides a framework that gives all life intrinsic value as being infused with God. In McFague's words, "It places a premium on the physical, the lowly, the mundane, the specific, the vulnerable, the visible, the other, the needy"³. If all existence is the body of God, then we have an ethical imperative to respect and care for all bodies, be they lakes or birds or other human beings. Keep in mind that for her, people and birds and lakes are not God, but they are the physical bodies through which God is mediated or demonstrated to us. The world and people around us are the vehicles through which we can know something about God. It's as awesome as the galaxies at night and as personal and loveable as Jesus.

Let's go back to the characters in *The Color Purple*. Celie is abused physically, verbally and sexually from the time she is a little girl. One of her abusers, Alphonso, warns her that she "better not never tell nobody but God" about his abuse. For years, Celie's letters to God are her only outlet, but despite her writing to God in private, she remains confused and unable to protect herself. But once she finds sympathetic ears in her friends Shug and Sophia she finds her voice and strength. The unembodied God she was writing to in private could not help her. But the spirit of God, if you will, was able to be mediated to her through her friends and helped her find her voice and summon the courage to transform her self and her life. It's in sharing our lives with one another, that we have an amazing opportunity to encounter God.

A man named Bill Evans told me that, “we each have two walls that are part of who we are.” One is our trophy wall, where we place all the mementos of our achievements. And the other wall contains our fears, and worries and hurts. He said, “it’s the second wall that connects us with one another”. We’re all bonded by the common human experience of vulnerability. In the story from my own life that I shared earlier, it’s not that I biked around the world that connects me to you. That’s one of my trophies. In fact, it is how I’m different from you. But the part of my story about feeling alone and alienated and broken-hearted that’s something that you’ve probably also experienced in one way or another. What brings us into community and makes us feel close is not our great success stories — it’s our vulnerabilities.

Keep in mind that if it’s intimacy you’re seeking in your life – with your lover, your children, your co-workers and friends, don’t ask them about their trophy wall or keep telling them about yours, dare to show them what’s on the other side. It’s in sharing the stories of our lives, that we reveal to one another something about the spirit that is often referred to as God.

My colleague Mark Beletini says: “almost all theology is also an elegant form of biography”, by which I think he means, our quests to discover God have a lot to do with our quest to discover ourselves and one another. It seems that most of the time when someone talks to me about God and theology, it eventually turns out being a conversation about themselves and their lives. It might begin, “I don’t understand God... my brother and I are always arguing...” and it really becomes a conversation about the strained relationship with the brother. Or “How could there be a God that would cause a family to become divided over religion?” and it quickly becomes a pastoral conversation about the family’s brokenness.

It occurs to me that this search for understanding and being understood...this desire to share our lives and reach our potential...this longing to not be alone in our vulnerabilities...this is what’s at the core of our being religious -- even more than theology. So, I don’t really care whether you believe in God or what name you use to describe the spirit of love and life. With David Whyte, I want to know: “...if you belong, or feel abandoned. If you know despair or can see it in others. I want to know if you are willing to live day by day with the consequences of love and the bitter unwanted passion of your sure defeat.” To me this is much more important than the label you place on your beliefs.

Yet, as I end, I hope I’m not leaving you feeling like Celie who said: “Well, us talk and talk about God, but I’m still adrift. Trying to chase that old white man out of my head. ...Whenever you try to pray, and man plop himself on the other end of it, tell him to git lost,” says Shug. “Conjure up flowers, wind, water [or] a big rock.”

Closing words:

“For all who see God, may God go with you.
For all who embrace life, may life return your affection.

For all who seek a right path, may a way be found,
And the courage to take it, step by step.”

- Robert Marby Doss

¹ McFague, Sally. *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993 p. 143

² Ibid. p. 143

³ Ibid. p. 134