

## Many Beliefs, One Spirit

A sermon by Rev. Fred Small

First Parish in Cambridge, Unitarian Universalist

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A few years ago when I was serving the Unitarian Universalist church in Littleton, Massachusetts, a member of my congregation came to see me in my office.

A bright, thoughtful young man, Robert had been worshiping with us for about a year or so with his wife and two children and had become a leader in the congregation.

Robert told me he and his family were leaving the church.

“There’s not enough God here,” he told me.

“How much God would be enough?” I asked.

Robert paused for a moment, then answered: “I’d need every service to be about how I can get closer to God.”

Performing a split-second mental survey of my congregation, counting the atheists, the agnostics, the spiritual skeptics, all those wounded by past religious experience, I answered, “I can’t do that.”

But Robert knew that. That’s why he was leaving.

Just a few weeks ago, a devoted leader of this congregation told me she and her friends had been startled and dismayed by the words of a hymn we’d sung the previous Sunday.

“God of Grace and God of Glory,” the hymn goes, “on thy people pour thy power. . . . Grant us wisdom, grant us courage for the facing of this hour.”

Petitioning a powerful God for grace and wisdom was very uncomfortable for her, she said. It wasn’t that she disdained spirituality, she explained—quite the contrary. The word “God” itself, she told me, was an obstacle to her entering into a spiritual or mystical state.

Some of us have come here this morning because we feel a deep hunger to know, to experience, to love God.

Others are disturbed or even angered by the word God.

“Ours is a simple faith,” we sang together this morning.

But it’s not true! *It’s not true!*

Unitarian Universalism is a *complicated* faith!

As in, “It’s complicated.”

Some Unitarian Universalists would agree with our critics that it’s not a faith at all—it’s a collection of people with radically different beliefs, ideas, intuitions about the nature of reality.

Unitarian Universalists believe in love, justice, freedom, interdependence, the inherent worth and dignity of every person—but God? When it comes to theology, we’re all over the map.

“We arrive from so many places,” observes UU minister Tony Larsen, “it almost seems as if we each came to see a different movie but we find ourselves, by chance, in the same theater—each hoping for something to feed our spirits, yet wondering how we can all be fed when who we are and what we need seem so different.”

Part of our difficulty is simply the limits of language.

The word God is at once not enough and too much.

It's not enough to embrace the illimitable vastness and incomprehensible mystery of any God worthy of the name.

And it's too much for all of us who've been bludgeoned with it by those demanding conformity to their particular version of God.

"The word God," reflects spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle, "has become a closed concept. The moment the word is uttered, a mental image is created, no longer, perhaps, of an old man with a white beard, but still a mental representation of someone or something outside you, and yes, almost inevitably a male someone or something."

The Advaita Vedantist teacher Gangaji laments that the word "God" "put[s] us in a trance based on our past conditioning."

Even Christian minister John Philip Newell admits the word God is "almost irredeemable" because of its past associations.

And yet all of these teachers use the word God at least sometimes because of its very power and resonance.

When I arrived at First Parish in 2008, it had long been a custom for the congregation to recite every Sunday a Unison Call to Prayer—the words of the prophet Micah: "What does God require of thee but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?"

It's one of my favorite passages in the Bible: "to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly."

Yet one of the first decisions I made in my new ministry here was to remove it from our weekly worship. It wasn't the word "God" I objected to, but the very particular theology of an authoritarian God who imposes requirements upon us, expressed in a Unison Call to Prayer that everyone gathered in worship is expected to recite.

It's one thing to hear someone else's theology from the pulpit or from a fellow parishioner, quite another to feel compelled to speak it from one's own mouth. I just didn't think it was a hospitable way to welcome the diversity of worshipers we seek to embrace.

But its elimination was a loss to those who loved it.

One of those was Kris Fikkan Willcox, who wrote a lovely essay for *UU World* back in 2004, when she was a member of this congregation.

Quoting the Micah verse, Kris wrote: "I love these words. I love repeating them, knowing them by heart, rolling them around like a handful of colorful pebbles. They are a comfort and a challenge. They are also directive. What draws me is not so much the word 'God,' though it was pretty mind-blowing the first time I heard it spoken within the walls of a UU church without qualifiers. It's the word 'require.' God does not appeal to my reason, does not suggest that I be just, merciful, and humble. God requires. Period. At last—an instruction! I can love those words and the idea of a God with requirements because I've never been told to submit to a God with mean or impossible requirements."

That last insight, I think, is crucial: raised Unitarian Universalist, Kris had managed to avoid the dogmatic coercion many of us have faced, whether in a prior religious community or in the public square. For others less fortunate, a requiring God can trigger memories of religious abuse—bringing not comfort, but terror.

I have to tell you, I struggled with the title of this sermon.

"Our Theological Diversity" sounded at once cloying and academic. And would the word "theological" offend those who don't believe in God, because *theos* means God in

Greek? I thought about calling it “The God Conundrum” but worried that the word “God” might keep away some of the very folks who might be interested. Even “Many Beliefs, One Spirit” will irritate those who don’t like the word “spirit” because it may imply something supernatural.

Welcome to my world—and ours.

In her workshop here last November, “Building Multicultural Community and Partnerships,” Paula Cole Jones invited this congregation to lift up our theological diversity as a gift and a resource.

When last surveyed in 2007, congregants were asked to choose their theological identities from a list of eighteen possibilities. Even though each respondent was allowed two choices, no single identity resonated with a majority of the congregation.

Only 9% identified as theists—and only 5% as atheists.

Nearly a third of respondents selected Humanism, which the survey explained as “I believe that human beings are responsible for ‘goodness’ and ‘meaning’ and that we must rely on one another for support.” One-fourth chose Naturalistic Humanism: “I am inspired by the natural world, eliciting a sense of awe and wonder. I also believe in the humanity of this world which gives it meaning.”

17% identified with Mysticism, which the survey explained as “I find support and value in the fullness and connectedness of all things, with or without God.” 14% embraced Earth-Centered Spirituality: “I celebrate the sacred circle of life, which instructs us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.”

UU Christian received 10% support, tied with Other, which respondents filled in with, among other things, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, and—of course!—a protest of being forced to choose only two identities.

Some very thoughtful Unitarian Universalists argue that without theological agreement, without a solid core of shared belief, we can never fulfill our potential as a religious movement.

But how would we decide which theology is essential to our faith? And once we did, how would we mop all the blood from the floor?

I believe the freedom to choose, to learn, to grow in our faith is itself essential to Unitarian Universalism.

But with this freedom to choose our own path comes the responsibility to undertake the journey.

Unitarian Universalists were right to abandon the triumphalist absolutes and dualistic dogmatisms of the past. But when we rejected the answers, many of us forgot to keep asking the questions.

The fourth principle of Unitarian Universalism calls us to “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.”

Actually, the original 1960 wording of this principle was “a free and disciplined search for truth and meaning.” In 1985, when the principles were revised, the word “disciplined” was replaced by “responsible.”

Apparently discipline was too daunting for Unitarian Universalists a quarter century ago. Is it still?

My colleague Peter Boullata, minister of First Parish in Lexington, reminds us: “Being together in community takes discipline and effort.” Peter says, “I think we have

become lazy and simply tell each other, ‘You do your thing, and I’ll do mine. You have your spiritual practice and I have my book discussion group. Whatever.’”

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. warned us of “a society where [people] are physically desegregated and spiritually segregated, where elbows are together and hearts apart.”

He was talking, of course, about racial justice, but he was making a spiritual point: that the Beloved Community demands that we engage with one another in genuine curiosity and compassion and mutual respect, not content simply to tolerate one another but to appreciate and celebrate one another.

Here at First Parish we know from experience that we grow spiritually when we dare to reach across borders of color and culture, when we welcome the stranger, when we listen in reverence to each other’s stories. We will grow spiritually when we do the same in exploring our theological diversity with curiosity and humility.

Some have called for a campaign of theological literacy for Unitarian Universalists.

Personally, I’d be happy with theological *listening*.

To dwell together in Beloved Community means at the very least to cultivate a tolerance for words that are deeply meaningful to others.

Those of us who have been wounded by religious language—and I am one of them—need to attend to the work of healing our wounds rather than seeking to deprive others of the comfort and inspiration they may find in that language.

As in any healing process, we must learn to distinguish the present from the past.

Unitarian Universalism is not in danger of a hostile takeover by fundamentalists. Unitarian Universalism is not raising an army in God’s name. Unitarian Universalism is not telling us what to think.

I am not your childhood priest, and neither is Reverend Cuervo. Our church is a democracy, and we are accountable to you.

Worship leaders can do our part by using a variety of words that invite rather than alienate: not just God, but also divine, spirit, mystery, ultimate, infinite, ground of being, wisdom, understanding, love—bearing always in mind the Muslim tradition that there are ninety-names of God that we can speak but that the true name of the divine is the hundredth name that no one knows because it is cannot be spoken.

And the mystics among us must understand that every worship here will not be about how to get closer to God—at least not in those terms.

But we knew that.

All of us can learn to translate in our own minds the language others use that doesn’t work for us into language that does. For instance, if the word “sin” is painful for me, I might translate it as “falling short.” “Salvation” might be translated as “enlightenment.” Or vice versa. The point is not to distort the other person’s meaning, but to be able to hear it without judgment and reactivity.

And all of us can muster more courage to talk authentically with each other about our religious and spiritual beliefs.

How readily and confidently Unitarian Universalists hold forth on politics, justice, movies, restaurants, social media, backyard poultry. How rarely we initiate conversation on the meaning of existence (if any) or the nature of the divine (if any)!

I have those conversations all the time with parishioners *who are dying*. It might be useful to have them sooner.

After our Sunday worship on February 12, I invite you to join Rev. Cuervo and me for a workshop on “Our Theological Diversity.” We will reflect upon and share our theological and spiritual beliefs and identities in a safe and respectful environment. We will listen deeply to one another and honor each other’s stories.

I love what Kris Fikkan Willcox wrote in *UU World*:

“In my religious journey, I’m glad to be free, but I am still hungry. I’ve read the menu, and I know it to be virtually limitless—but I want to sit down at the table and eat. . . . I am deeply grateful for a faith that requires me to consider carefully, even laboriously, before I choose, and walk the humble path of uncertainty. It makes every choice so much sweeter.”

My friends, the banquet table is spread before us with a dazzling variety of mouthwatering dishes. In the midst of such abundance, let’s not go hungry.

Let’s eat.

Amen and Blessed Be.