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Sunday Sermon: “What is Holy?”

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This is the third lay sermon this season on the “build your own theology” theme. It’s called “What is Holy”. When I think about the Palm Sunday story of Jesus humble entry into Jerusalem and the fate that awaited him, I think about one’s life journey, not sure of where, or to what end, the road will take us. We may hope for triumph but may be dealt disappointment. Out of failure and hopelessness comes learning and a better understanding of the meaning of life. We are given the opportunity to renew the journey to reclaim one’s hope and faith.

In the Valentines Day service, Reverend Len said he couldn’t find a quote about love from an engineer. Here’s an engineer’s sermon about love he can quote. Volume 2 of the Build Your Own Theology series by Richard Gilbert asks the question, “What is holy?” what is sacred or divine? My views on faith and religion have evolved and are still evolving since by my recovery from depression. I see the Holy or divine as the human connection between ourselves and with our wondrous world, a sacred connection we honor and protect, a connection that could simply be called, “Love” or “God”. We owe that connection to the gift of life and intelligence, allowing the evolution of language and the ability to communicate with each other. We UU’s say in our affirmation, “Love is the spirit of this church and service its law.” My definition is not far from what we repeat every Sunday. Love is a part of us. Love is what is holy in us.

God is emergent, ever changing and evolving with every human challenge, every discovery and revelation about our Universe and the evolution of life. I dislike the battle between believers and nonbelievers. It’s wasteful and hateful, pitting one against the other. Some non-believers think if they undermine the belief in God as the creator, then they have destroyed the kingpin, and religion will fall like a house of cards. I have considered the possibility of God the creator but have pretty much rejected that idea as not a necessary requirement for a belief in God. God is born with and is a property of our Universe, accessible only through intelligent beings. God is silent without intelligence and language. God awaits to be discovered. Quantum mechanics and natural laws allow universes to pop into existence and allow the spontaneous creation and evolution of self-replicating life. The amazing

thing to me is the evolution of self-consciousness and intelligence, which allows us to discover God.

I refer to popular science books like "A Universe from Nothing" by Lawrence Krauss and "The Blind Watchmaker" by Richard Dawkins. These books make a strong case for the spontaneity of universe creation and the evolution of life. Call it chance or luck, fortunately our Universe and world is pro-life or life friendly. Life is the ultimate gift, and along with life is intelligence because without intelligence, no one would know about this place or the infinity of places past, present or future. We are honored to live in this place and be able to contemplate God.

Unfortunately, atheists like Mr. Krauss and Mr. Dawkins use science to try to convince believers that there is no God, no creator, and therefore they infer that religion is nonsense, even dangerous. I see the opposite. I see science as supporting and reinforcing my belief that God comes with the territory.

Love is a good word for God because, like gravity, love is what pulls and binds us together as intelligent and compassionate beings and drives us to greater understanding of our role in the Universe, to protect humanity, our world and our environment. I'd like to tell you how I found my faith in God or Love, why my connection with this church is so important, and the importance of a continuing conversation about God or Love. You might consider my words when you try to explain to others why you love this special place on Fern Street, why it's a good place to be.

I'll begin with my faith journey, from depression and hopelessness to recovery and hopefulness. Starting with little faith in anything, I created my faith as an intellectual exercise. I was building my own theology forty years ago. I had to justify and explain my very existence, the meaning of my life, to keep from ending it. I had virtually lost the ability to love anyone, including myself. First, I had to overcome my impatience and cynicism that the cure I desperately needed would forever elude me. I had to adjust to the realization that this was going to take a long time, requiring patience and a positive attitude. I looked to science and nature and the creation of the universe to see where I fit into the scheme of things. I rationalized that now that I am here, I might as well make the best of it, and enjoy the ride. Being created and given life and intelligence is a wonderful gift. Out of infinite possibilities, I am unique. I will never be given another chance. My goal is to understand my place in the Universe where I live, pass on whatever knowledge I

possess, and leave a legacy (my version of heaven) and with a clear conscience. I found the meaning of my life. I learned to love again.

There is a popular misconception that science and faith are at odds with, or contradict, each other. Belief in one precludes belief in the other. The way I see it, you can have it both ways because there is room for both the sacred and the secular. Even atheists have a hard time getting away from their feelings about their fellow man and the incredible mystery of their existence. For me, starting from an earlier state of depression, once it lifted, the beauty of science and the love of nature allowed my faith to evolve and mature. To me, faith starts with “spirituality”, a feeling that some things are sacred and should be protected, that there is a meaning and purpose to life. Spirituality evolves into “hope” that these things will be held sacred and be protected, a longing that all these gifts are true and that I can rely on them. And, finally, hope grows into “faith”, the strong belief that this will always be true, that I can trust my hopes will be realized. Faith is “hope with conviction”. To coin a phrase, “Faith is hope on steroids.”

Hiking and the appreciation for nature and science formed the roots of my latent spirituality, which eventually grew into my faith. The end of my depression allowed my troubled soul to begin to grow, the transition from hopelessness to hopefulness and the expansion of my world-view. My writing became the way I pray. Writing allows me to view my life without getting caught up in my emotions. Writing allows me to laugh at myself even when I stumble because I’ve learned and accept the fact that life is messy. It has opened the petals and allowed me to flower, to reach out in ways I never could have imagined. I marvel when some people call my volunteer prison program my “prison ministry”. Boy! Have I come a long way? Like alcoholism and the fight for sobriety, depression is a curse but also a gift which has allowed me to use my experience and faith to help others break out of their mental prisons.

My maternal grandmother had a favorite pillow in the living room. Although my grandparents were not church going, the embroidered message on the pillow represented their living faith. It said, “God is Love.” It’s an old message that keeps getting renewed with every new generation. Love attracts and binds us together. We Unitarian Universalists, in our search for God in the Universe, don’t profess to know the answer either. If we took it up for a vote, there would be as many answers as people voting. I suspect it has something to do with “Love”. We all

know that “Love” makes the world go round. “Love”, like gravity, holds and binds us together. Don’t you feel its pull in the room you are in?

I would ask, “What are the roots of your faith?”

I’d like to talk about my personal connection with this church on Fern Street. I’ve attended funerals in many faith traditions. People shopping for a church, should attend a funeral or memorial service before finalizing their selection of a congregation where they will feel welcome, respected and loved as an individual. Years ago, I attended a Roman Catholic funeral and memorial service in our capitol city. I expected the traditional celebration of the mass that was duly delivered, but I was pleased by the overall theme of the service. It was a memorial dedicated to the departed and the love that she had for her church, and the congregation had for her. The ritual part was secondary to why we were assembled there to celebrate her life. The spirit of her memory, her love and hope filled the sanctuary.

After the service, approaching the pastor, told him how much I appreciated the service and feeling of respect and inclusion the service created. I told him I was a member of the Unitarian/Universalist (UU) Church in the neighboring town. “We have people from 41 zip codes attending our church”, I said. He drew me close and whispered, “We have 81.” That says it all in a nutshell. Except for the ritual and dogma, I was almost ready to sign up. This was one loving church.

I was raised Protestant, the luck of the draw, going through all the hoops of Sunday school, confirmation, youth programs, etc. I was a boy soprano, sang solos, and made the ladies cry. My wife and I did the same for our kids up through confirmation. Our minister, who we dearly loved, the heart and soul of our congregation, retired. His replacement, and the congregation, shifted to a more conservative bent. We had become more liberal in our views. We dropped out, not attending church again for twenty years. Personally, my growing depression had also eroded my interest in any organized religion. Faith requires hope, which back then was in short supply. Hope is the bridge between spirituality and faith.

One day, my brother said you have to come and hear “this guy” speak. This guy was Stephen Kendrick, who will be with us on April 3rd. Reluctantly, we attended a service. The theme of his sermon was “Enlightenment”. Not only was I enlightened; he blew my socks off. I realized I had been a closet UU my entire life.

We joined a welcoming congregation and haven't looked back for almost twenty years. The congregation has continued to be the major reason for our continued commitment and loyalty to this faith community.

Memorial services at our place are all about the dearly departed and their relationship with the congregation. I'm sure those values are shared in other UU communities. We are a loving, inclusive and truly spiritual congregation. I can't say that I can hardly wait, but know when the time comes, I will be in good hands in this place on Fern Street.

Think about why you joined this congregation?

There is an important conversation we should be having with ourselves and others. It may help us grow and even understand ourselves better. We are in the business of love. Love is the spirit. Rick Warren, the Christian fundamentalist pastor of the Saddleback Church, in a Newsweek interview a few years ago said, or admitted, "Trying to understand where God came from is like an ant trying to understand the Internet." I agree with him. I assume he made an assessment of the intellectual incapacity of humans to even phrase or answer such a profound question. A scientist might say, "We're still working on that one. Check back in a few millennia." The present debate between unquestioning faith and questioning science on the existence and role of God, the creation of the Universe and the meaning of life is still premature because neither side is prepared for the discussion. Neither side understands how to ask the question, answer the question, take a position, even agree or disagree on the debate rules. It paints the faithful and scientists (some who are quite faithful) as opponents, believers and non-believers, the righteous and the unrighteous. There are a lot of impatient people out there who would like to rush to a final answer. We know it doesn't work that way. Every year, decade, century and millennia, we learn something new.

We have not evolved sufficiently to participate in a final debate. Or, if like Mr. Warren believes that we did not evolve but were created, or mankind represents a divine spark in the evolutionary process. Right now, we should just call it a preliminary discussion or a polite conversation.

For now, we have plenty of time to keep asking those questions even though we're like ants trying to understand the Internet. No wonder it's so hard to get our heads around this thing. We should agree to disagree and continue to get along and keep

talking (peacefully) even though the conversation is just getting started. Be patient. Don't expect (or think we can force) any quick answers. Think in terms of millions of years. We're still evolving and learning. We are all in this together. Our personal faith will take care of itself. It will sustain us.

We Unitarian Universalists can add a lot to this conversation with all our religious and non-religious friends. We are probably a little arrogant in knowing that we don't know it all compared to our friends who think they know it all. We should be more open to the conversation because we may learn something and grow in the process. Maybe it's time to reach out. We should look for what we hold in common rather than what separates us. Is a conversation between atheists, religious liberals and conservatives possible?

I can't speak for all. I initially came to this place for intellectual enlightenment. When I arrived, I realized I had been a closet Unitarian/Universalist my whole life. When I came to this place, I realized that to be member of this place and protect this place, I had to contribute to its well-being. My wife, Linda, and I jumped in with both feet. We gave of our selves and our treasure to protect our investment in time and talent so that this place would thrive. I also felt that I had to support this community spiritually. I've conducted a few programs and summer services on faith and spirituality. You might recognize some of the thoughts and questions you heard here today. If you ask a hundred UU's to explain their faith and define what is holy or sacred, you will probably get a hundred different answers. Today you heard one. To me it comes down to Love. Metaphorically, like John Denver says, love is, like a fire when it's cold outside or thunder when it rains. And truly, I feel the connection. I love you all, I love this congregation, and I love this place on Fern Street. We are all very lucky to be here.

In this political season it's easy to become impatient and cynical. In our own lives, our journeys, the roads we take, our roads into our own Jerusalem, we can become impatient with the progress we are making or cynical of the behavior of others and even ourselves. The enemy of hope and faith and love is impatience and cynicism, which can lead to anger, hate and blame of others and ourselves. As intelligent humans, we are offered the gifts of compassion and forgiveness for others and ourselves. We use these gifts to heal our sacred connections, our hope and faith and love. Love is a part of us. Love is what is holy in us. May we carry love with us, together, forever and ever. Amen.