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Sermon: “Bart Simpson and the Nature of God”

Rev. Dr. Len De Roche

Year and a half ago Ritch Cable bid on a sermon at our service auction, like you will have next week. He asked me to develop a sermon based on the song from Hair that you heard in the offertory. He was interested in the song, “Manchester England” and particularly the words “I believe in God, And I believe that God believes in Claude, That's me.” Now those of you who have never seen the musical, Hair, it was out of the era when even I had hair. It was an anti-war musical from the 1960s when long hair indicated a certain political position. It might still represent the political position for many from the era who haven't changed much since it was illegal to smoke marijuana in California. The generation represented in Hair had a particularly romanticized idea of reality and asked very difficult questions of society. The churches of the era were divided over the concept of war and Johnson's idea of a great Society. The idea of God was greatly questioned. Now the term God will generate many different emotions.

I was at one congregation where members didn't like the use of the term God and another parishioner who would count the number of times I said God if not often enough would declare the service wasn't religious enough. For Unitarian Universalists, I have found the term God will raise lots of emotional responses. Many of those responses come out of the ghost of the religion you were raised, so I tend to use the term God infrequently. I prefer the term the divine, the higher power or something that is greater than the human.

Now I decided to investigate the concepts of God starting with the Animated Fox TV series of 28 years, *the Simpsons* who look at the world through the satirical eyes of a working-class cartoon family. In his 1992 State of the Union Address, George the First (George HW Bush) said that “what was needed was a nation closer to the Waltons than the Simpsons.” But what we have is the Simpsons. On Sunday nights for 28 years, the nation's best-known dysfunctional family is a fixture in millions of American households. As important to Fox as the show's enduring ratings success has been, The Simpsons' enduring critical acclaim.

The show has been nominated for 33 Emmys and has won 15, as well as a Peabody Award. Time magazine called the show the century's best television show. Even the *The New York Times* predicted in its millennium edition, probably tongue in cheek, that The Simpsons would still be a top-rated show in 2025. It may soon contain the last Fox celebrity that is misogynous. From the time of its premiere in the 1980s, until now, The Simpsons continues to influence American culture and comment on religion. Much of the American population can identify the characters in the series and had a greater percentage of children and adults than could identify then-Vice President Al Gore in the 1990's. I feel the segment of America represented by The Simpsons may be more important with the election of our current president.

The Simpson family is an archetypal American family: father, mother, and two children of opposite sex. They consist of the Homer, the beer-gulping, ape-like father. He is an over-weight nuclear plant worker. His wife, Marge, is the housewife and community do-gooder.

Bart, the son whose name is an anagram for brat, is the 10-year old anarchist and vandal. Lisa, the 8-year old super-achiever, feminist, vegetarian and social activist -- live in Springfield, a small city in an unidentified state. Their lives and loves, their wacky adventures as Bart and Lisa refer to them, have been chronicled since 1989. When the show first appeared, it raised a great brouhaha with much of the religious community. As one critic put it about religion, "What 'The Simpsons' do ...is yell that the emperor doesn't have any clothes on." I will add especially about religion and the nature of god.

In a media that is basically devoid of any serious religious acknowledgement, the Simpsons and all the characters portrayed are actively religious and much of 'activity' does not throw religion in its most favorable light. The most other shows that address any religious agenda are escapist and simplistic. The issue of religion has been intentional ignored I believe because of its potential of being so controversial. Religion's invisibility in prime-time programming speaks volumes about how the industry views faith in the life of American society.

Yet we know other controversial subject matter especially surrounding sex have been openly displayed for the viewing public.

The sacred cow of religion has been one subject that the media moguls have resisted exposing. But a lot of people are watching *The Simpsons*, and have been watching faithfully and, yes, religiously if you will for more than a decade.

The Simpsons have been able to push this envelope because they hang religion on its own petard by exposing some of the hypocrisies that all religious communities are susceptible. I believe the show has survived because the characters are animated. In the series, the God figure is displayed as a white male hand from the sky and a booming voice. Like Michael Angelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling, it was great art, but poor theology. The Simpson's God from a theological perspective is unsophisticated. It is a God that is seen acting in the world, a God that is always present and one that directly affects, physically and temporally, the lives of the characters.

To answer Ritch's question, this is a god who the characters believe in and believes in them. It is probably a typical image of God, god is male, anthropomorphic or seen as a Human like image and causes things to happen in the world today. This image probably came from the creation story in the Hebrew Bible of man being made his image. This also assumes that's divine uses similar thinking patterns, aspirations, and intent. So Claude's phrase in the song that God believes in Claude would have a very limiting understanding. It also assumes that God can be only Male rather than encompassing all the varieties of humankind. And it also brings up this disturbing fact; what if God was created in Homer Simpson's image. That's probably a pretty scary thought, especially if you apply that thought to Homer representing the average American voter. Other creation stories are very different even Moses burning bush isn't an anthropomorphic view. As our two readings and the mediation point out more sophisticated visions of God can be very different and much more complex.

Jefferson, Adams, Franklin and many of our founding fore-mothers and fathers, had the image of God which they called Deism. This has been called the clockmakers nature of God. The assumption for this image is that God created the universe and put it in motion and let it unwind. In this image the divine does not interact with humanity directly, but as a result of the system called creation which was assumed to be perfect. Here you believe in God, but God does not have to believe in you. In traditional popular Christian thought, God was understood as intervening here and there in the course of the world. The notion of "acts of God" referred to events which did not have

natural causes, but were directly caused by God. In traditional theological thought, all events were understood to be totally caused by God, so all events were "acts of God." However, most events were understood to be caused by God through the mediation of worldly or natural causes. God was the "primary cause" of these events, while the natural antecedents were called "secondary causes." However, a few events were thought to be caused directly by God, without the use of secondary causes.

These events were "miracles." Accordingly, while all events were in one sense acts of God, these miracles were acts of God in a special sense. Thus, both in popular and theological circles, there was meaning to be given to the idea that God was creatively active in the world.

This would be counter to the Simpson's concept of God where throughout the series the characters are constantly praying to God for the material things of life. In this the series mocks the idea of prayer. Prayer for the characters on the Simpsons is always directed toward gaining favor with a worldly request. When The Simpsons characters meet crises, they turn to God. He answers their prayers and intervenes in their world. In one episode in fear of failing the fourth grade, Bart prays for a miracle so he may have time to study. God answers his plead with a snow day, allowing Bart to pass his exam. Bart thanks God saying, "Part of this D-minus belongs to God," he says.

The series particularly makes fun the Simpsons evangelical neighbors the Flanders who constantly pray for misfortune to occur to the Simpsons. One particularly interesting episode, Bart is playing a video game at the Flanders. In the game, you shoot characters and turn them into Christians (Interesting image of evangelicals and guns). Bart hits one and is excited until the Flanders boy tells him you only nicked him and made him a Unitarian. That joke might be closer to the truth than we would like to imagine.

Now Alice Walker's nature of God in that short paragraph gives us a very different image. Here Avery's evolution in theology first finds God in nature. This was the position of our transcendental ancestors; Ralph Waldo Emerson, James Henry Thoreau, and Theodore Parker. For them, god was seen in nature and this was superior to reading about the nature of God in the Greek or Hebrew Scriptures. Nature for them was expressing the creation of God directly. God as goddess or is seen in paganism would be a similar evolution. Later in the same reading, Avery speculates everything is God.

Think what a concept like this would do with what is happening to our planet. Anything that destroys the ecology would be a sin against God. This would directly oppose the Old Testament view that everything was created for the use of humankind, i.e. we have dominion over the planet. Both these views of god create different imperatives that can be reflected in our political process. Are we stewards of the planet or is the planet here for our use?

Lastly Avery speaks about feelings and how we should react to them. These images of God I believe are pretty consistent with Universalist and Unitarian thought. In experiencing something in our world that is pleasing, say sex, is pleasing to God. This probably is counter to a judgmental God, and certainly counter to the God of damnation that our Universalist ancestors rebelled against.

Now the Simpsons show looks to the children for many of the lessons of the nature of God. Since all the children of the town go unwillingly to Sunday School.

Here theological issues interest them and get aired through a lesson. In one program when the teacher announces that the day's topic is Hell, Bart states with delight, "All right! I've sat through Mercy and I sat through Forgiveness; finally we get to the good stuff!" In other shows Bart plagues his Sunday School teacher with questions about the life hereafter, questions like. "Wouldn't you get used to Hell, like in a hot-tub?" answer no. "Will there be pirates in Hell?" answer yes "Will an amputated leg be reattached in Heaven?" yes "Will there be animals in Heaven?" NO "What about cavemen?" I don't know. "Robots with a human brain?" No "What if a ventriloquist goes to Heaven, will his dummy go too?" No. Finally the teacher breaks down pleading: "I don't know! All these questions! Is a little blind faith too much to ask?!" These nature of God questions have been around and asked since our prehistoric ancestors carved effigies of the goddess and is a prime reason why our denomination and particularly this church practice small groups and is moving to lifetime faith development. May it always be so.

In an ever-evolving a never-ending world amen.

Rev. Dr. Len De Roche