

Radical Hospitality

Starr King School for the Ministry

September 2, 2008

Opening Convocation Sermon

Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker

President and Professor of Theology

Sksm.edu

Reading

“This is how I can speak of God: a presence gradually unfolded by life in its richness and tragedies, its devastating losses and its abundance: a power calling us into a fullness of living, a passion for life, for good and ill: an unquenchable fire at the core of life, glimpsed in light and shadows.”

-- Starr King visiting scholar Rita Nakashima Brock, in *Proverbs of Ashes*

Call to Worship: We began orientation last week with welcoming acts. At the threshold of the school, the new class, new faculty, and new staff were greeted. In this room we presented welcome gifts--keys, sand dollars--and at the end of orientation we washed and blessed everyone's hands.

All of us are welcome here. Area ministers and friends of the school visiting today, a special welcome to you today. All that we know, long for, experience, struggle with, and feel is welcome here. This week Ramazan begins -- a time of fasting from all that can obscure our hunger for God and a time of feasting on the joy of shared devotion to God's nourishing reality. Let us celebrate that all of our religious traditions and practices are welcome here. Our educational task is to extend that welcome in more and more radical ways – within and beyond these permeable walls.

Come, let us worship together, as we rise and sing “Rank by Rank Again We Stand” and welcome in procession the representatives of Starr King's staff, faculty, and visiting scholars.

Sermon

As we begin this new academic year, I invite us to reflect on a marvelous, strange state of affairs. Theology literally means God talk, from “theo” God and “logos” word. But speaking of God is one of the things one cannot do in many Unitarian Universalist congregations without sparking an allergic reaction. Some of you beginning this fall come from such congregations or will serve such congregations. Starr King School is moving forward in its Unitarian Universalist commitment to multi-cultural, multi-religious, counter-oppressive theological education. Our multi-religiosity assuredly includes religious humanism, and spiritual practices that can be regarded as a-theistic. But what of theism and diversities of theism? How do we approach God at a school rooted in a religious tradition in which ministers who speak of God from the pulpit—or worse, those who pray to God—may have to deal with angry letters to the Committee on Ministry demanding their resignation?

There is a reason for the allergic reaction to God. Many people who have come to make Unitarian Universalism their religious home have fled religious experiences in which God talk strangled life. God talk has been used to hammer home expectations of obedience, to censure feelings and passions. It has been invoked to stifle intellectual inquiry, and to reinforce

oppressive systems: patriarchy, benevolent paternalism, militarism, heterosexism, white-privilege, Christian supremacy, and colonization.

For many people the word “God” stands for conceptions of ‘the ultimate’ that have harmed life or sanctioned unjust systems. “If this is God,” black religious humanist and UU William R. Jones commented in a conversation considering classic white Christianity’s concepts of God, “he is my enemy. My sincere obligation is to fight him.” Jewish theologian David Blumenthal in his book “Facing the Abusing God” discusses how for many Jews after the genocide of World War II the existence of god became a question mark. If God would stand by in silence as God’s people were gassed by the millions, God either was unspeakably cruel, powerless, absent, or non-existent. Rabbi Blumenthal recovers the significance of theology by blessing the act of fighting with God as the only means by which human dignity can be asserted in the aftermath of the holocaust.

For the past two hundred years, liberal and liberation theologians have been critiquing theism—deconstructing image after image of God. Progressive theology has dethroned God as King, undone God the Father, exposed the fallacy of God as White, as male, as straight, as able-bodied, as an “Unmoved Mover” and more. In short, theology has presided over the death of God and conducted the funeral.

Recently, books arguing for atheism have been high on the best-seller charts, but as Chris Hedges points out in his countering book, *I Don't Believe in Atheists*, the new atheists ideas don't hold candle to the *religious* critiques of theism. The new atheists thinly disguise their Islamaphobia and they betray a shocking ignorance of the serious cross-examination of God that has been underway for the past two centuries – as an act of faith by people of faith. People of many faiths know that if there is a God, God must be worthy of our devotion—not an enemy of what is good in us and not the divine authorization for acts of injustice, terror and oppression.

As images of God have been deconstructed, people have introduced alternative, liberating concepts of God. God has been reborn as mother, as Goddess, as Sophia (Wisdom), as black, as queer, as friend and lover, as the Spirit of Life. Others have found renewal and deepening in the divine as the Ocean of Mercy, the one of numberless names or an unspeakable name. In speaking of God, the critical question is whether the Ultimate Source of all Being and Transformation is imagined in ways that liberate or oppress, create relationship or divide, foster compassion or sanction violence.

The characters in Alice Walker's novel, *The Color Purple*, speak of the necessity of clearing away the internalized oppressor before one can come to a life-giving sense of God. Celie writes to Nettie, “the God I been

praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown.” Her friend Shug responds, “Ain’t no way to read the bible and not think God white . . . when I found out I thought God was white, and a man, I lost interest. . . . You have to git man off your eyeball, before you can see anything a’tall.” Shug abandoned the image of God as an old white man in the clouds, and tells Celie she has come to see God as It, as everything, as the connectedness among all things, as the lover of everything we love, including sexual pleasure. God seeks our attention, admiration and love through life’s emergent beauty, diversity, and creativity – trees, people, a field blooming in the color purple. She says, “It always making little surprises and springing them on us when we least expect.”

It has been said that the end of faith is its beginning. When so many ways of imagining God have been shown to be faulty or oppressive we must ask what ways of understanding God are liberating and life-giving?

Answers to this question come on the other side of long struggles to find freedom and wholeness, to recover from trauma and abuse, and to reconcile to life in all its difficulties and ambiguities. These are the struggles we in theological education must engage with, in our own lives and with those we connect with in ministry.

During my own early experience in parish ministry, I learned something about this from a member of the parish I served, Bill Kendall. Bill had been raised to believe in the God of classical theism. God as an ‘unmoved mover,’ all-powerful, and impassable – that is, without feelings. The model man. This unfeeling God saves the world, his variety of Christian upbringing had taught him, by sacrificing his obedient son to redeem others from their sins. All good sons do likewise. When Bill was sent to war, this theology went with him – just as it goes now with those U.S. soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan who have been immersed in similar versions of Christianity.

“I was in the Korean War,” Bill tells, “They made me a sergeant and gave me a group of men to command. They were good guys. I loved them. Everyone. Especially Sam, my best buddy . . . On day a message came through from my commanding officer, ordering us to make an ambush the next day. . . . I knew if we made the ambush there was not chance that we could succeed at the objective or get out alive. It was a suicide mission.

I argued with the commanding officer. I told him the mission would fail, and that it was a stupid idea to send us in. I went so far as to tell him that even if he gave the order, I would refuse to lead my men there. He told me I was betraying my duty as a soldier, that I was letting personal feelings

get in the way of my responsibility, that if I wasn't going to carry out the command I wasn't an American, I wasn't a soldier, I wasn't a man. I felt ashamed of myself for questioning. The next day, I gave the order. We went in. It was bad. . . . most of my men were killed. . . . I was holding Sam in my arms when he died.

I broke down then. I wasn't good for anything any more. They sent me home. In my eyes, I had failed in every way. I had questioned my superior officer. I had faltered in doing my duty. And when my men were killed, I couldn't take the pain. I began to drink. I wanted the shame to go away. I wanted to bury the pain. I drank for the next twenty years. My family fell apart. My wife and children . . . left. I drank more. Slowly but surely I was killing myself.

Then I met Marge. . . . She was tough. She told me I was worth something but I was treating myself like shit. She knew –she'd been there. Thanks to Marge's love, I got into AA. I stopped drinking. I began to feel all the things I buried and think all the things I couldn't bear to think. It was tough, but the others in AA listened to all the crap I had to say about myself, about the world. They just listened. Didn't tell me I was right. Didn't tell me I was wrong. Didn't blink. Then I really began to come to my senses, like the Bible says.

I saw the truth. Back there in Korea, I was *right* to have questioned my commanding officer. I was *right* to feel the order should be disobeyed. And when I broke down because my buddies died, I was *right* to cry.”

As Bill told me this, he placed both his hands on his own chest. “This is my manhood,” he said, tapping a rhythm with his hands upon his body. “That I can feel. That I can care. That I can grieve. That I can love. That I hate war. That I had the courage to question. That I was willing not to obey. I’m not afraid to die now, because I know what love is. I know where God is.” Hands again, pressing against his own flesh.

A dream I had as a young minister showed me how difficult it can be to come to a new sense of God, especially as one grapples with an increasing consciousness of the magnitude of human struggles for dignity, justice and healing. In the dream, I am walking along a city street on a winter afternoon. The side walk is covered with grey slush and passing cars and trucks spray me with dirty water as they charge through puddles and ice. I feel unprotected and so turn down a narrow, dingy alley way to escape the mess. Barely able to see, I make out in the dim light that in every doorway there are homeless people in tattered clothes, with lonely eyes, shivering. One by one they step out of their doorways and walk behind me until there is a small

crowd. I sense their need and am frightened by their silence. Suddenly, the alleyway comes to a dead end at a brick wall with a door in it. I must either go through the door or turn around and go back through the crowd of suffering humanity. Both options frighten me. I chose the door, opening it and stepping through quickly. The door swings shut behind me, locked. In the claustrophobic darkness, a faint green light like an illuminated watch dial reveals the presence of an imposing person. I am terrified. I immediately see that the person wears a crown on which is written “king of the bums.” The leader of the destitute is mute, but the green light is coming from the sign she holds. Letters spell out a message: “God is so tender, sometimes she is called Green.”

The sense of God as tender, as fragile as a new shoot of green life, has stayed with me. So too has the awareness that coming to such a sensibility often happens when one crosses a threshold that requires one to face into suffering. Perhaps the dream was a forecast of the journey I would have to make into the abandoned and mute part of myself, the outcast realms of my own being—the neighborhood in my own soul that I was afraid to visit at night. Perhaps it also indicated that God’s presence emerges from a seed of life planted among those experiencing homelessness, lack of adequate food or clean water, absent the support of sustaining and just community.

“What if God is our baby to bear” Annie Dillard asks in *Holy the Firm*.

What if the new life, the tender existence of the divine, enters the world through places where life is at risk and people must come together to create ways to tend life with care so it will survive?

At the time I had this dream I loved the Easter hymn we sang at church to a haunting, bittersweet tune. “Now the green blade rises, from the buried grain, wheat that in the dark earth, many days has lain. Love lives again, that with the dead has been. Love is come again like wheat that springeth green.”

The question, “Does God exist?” can be a metallic, hard-edged question about what is factually true. As if scientists in a glistening clean lab, peering through microscopes, could settle the matter. Is it reasonable to believe in God? Is there evidence? But the question, “Does God exist?” arises in another way – not as a cool inquiry into the nature of ultimate reality. It arises in the messy, painful dead ends, on the cold winter afternoons where life exposed to the raw elements. It arises among the communities of those who are bereft of life’s necessities. It arises among the lonely, the hungry, the frightened, those without voice. In such settings, the question is not about metaphors or about rational arguments.

It is more elemental. It is a question born in the suffering souls of human beings, and its meaning is a cry for hope: Is there any help for pain? Is there any thing that will spring green from this bitter winter, with its dirty ice and slush? Is there any hope for the disempowered and silenced? The abandoned? And when everything human fails, and nothing that is within the power of human beings to do can be done, what then? *Does God exist?* Is there any grace? Is there a source of healing and transformation that will bring about justice, in heaven or on earth? That desires the thriving of life in its beautiful diversity and abundance?

The answer to this question cannot be coerced. Religious tradition can show a path, give some clues, but when a person or a community is up against a wall, facing a dead end in the alleyway, tradition at best serves as a nudge to try the closed door. On the other side, is the revelation that comes to those who are radically hospitable to what they do not know. The choice to open the door and cross the threshold is an act of holy curiosity. It could also be called an act of faith. To those who act on faith, to those who move in the midst mystery and silence, even when trembling and afraid, the face of God sometimes appears. New ways of speaking of God arise from the luminous dark.

“The final appeal is to intuition,” writes Alfred North Whitehead, the mathematician and philosopher. He respects that, finally, whether or not one has faith in God requires an intuition about the nature of things. But for Whitehead, intuition is firmly grounded in life. It is the result of an accumulation of experience and observation that operates even before conscious deliberation. The full body of our experience, like a deep ocean, sometimes casts up onto the shore of consciousness a conclusion that arrives like a sand dollar onto the glistening sand. If we are watching closely as we walk, we can see it. This is how the intuition that God exists comes for some. It is the only thing that makes sense of all that is experienced and observed – not only of tragedy and loss but of beauty and surprise.

Whitehead calls God “the fellow sufferer who understands,” “the poet of the world,” the lure towards peace. Does this God exist? My intuition says yes. Yours may say no. However the question is answered, let us be together—and let us allow our religious traditions to be together—in an ever flowing relationship in which we join in covenant to manifest compassion, work for justice, and seek to love this earth.

Revelation is not sealed.

Let us offer radical hospitality to one another.

And let us remember that one of the strange others

we may meet in the course of our days

is a tender shoot of green,

in praise of which, some will utter the name,

God.