

Not My God!

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Words to Enrich the Spirit

“There are people in the world so hungry that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread.” – Gandhi

Sermon

“Who is the Lord, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord.... (Exodus, 5:2)”. This is Pharaoh’s response, the first words from his mouth, when Moses demands that he free the enslaved Hebrews from bondage in Egypt. “Who is the Lord, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord....”

Throughout the Hebrew Bible, the “Lord” distinguishes himself from other gods worshipped by other peoples. Parts of the text can lead to an interpretation that validates these other gods. The way that this particular god, who calls himself the “Lord,” has chosen the Hebrews to be his people leads one to believe that other gods have chosen other peoples to lead.

And when Moses says to Pharaoh, “This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘Let my people go.... (Exodus 5:1)’,” Pharaoh legitimately doesn’t know anything about this god of Israel who calls himself the “Lord.” “Who is the Lord....?” he says.

In the Hebrew Bible, the Lord repeatedly distinguishes himself from other gods by stating that he is “...the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery (Deuteronomy, 13:5)” and “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob (Exodus 3:6).” (Oh, *that* God, the Lord!)

Despite several instances in the Hebrew Bible showing that the Lord can be a vengeful and jealous God, with no shortage of violence done in His name, or even at His behest, we have, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people... so I have come down to rescue them...and to bring them...into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey (Exodus 3:7-8);” and “Yet the Lord longs to be gracious to you; he rises to show you compassion. For the Lord is a God of justice (Isaiah 30:18).”

In the New Testament we have, “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God.... Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love (1 John 4:7-8).”

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Ok. Despite some confusing inconsistencies and contradictions, we have a God, this Lord, who is love – a God of justice, compassion and emancipation.

With this, I've been thinking that I may have been wrong all these years in thinking that the God people speak of and refer to in our culture is *this* God, the Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; and also the God of love, justice, compassion and emancipation.

Why do I think this? Because more often than not, in our culture, people invoke God's name yet their ideology, their theology, is devoid of love and justice; bereft of compassion and emancipation – in my opinion, a bankrupt ideology and theology that again, more often than not, espouses the opposite. They must be invoking a different God. That can't be the same God. That's not my God.

I read the Bible, and other sacred texts; and I read some not-so-sacred texts. I take from these portions from which I can make meaning while leaving other portions behind - portions that don't make sense to me. I gather up all this, reflect upon it in light of my experience of life, my experience of the natural world and the cosmos, and I weave a web of what I deem Holy. Some might call this God.

From the book of Tobit: "Do not turn your face from any poor man, and the face of God will not be turned away from you (Tobit, 4:7)."

Early 20th century Baptist minister E. W. Kenyon is credited with the founding of what has evolved into the "Prosperity Gospel" – a theology which espouses the idea that God has destined you for a "blessed" life in the here and now; a "blessed" life meaning a life defined by wealth, success, prosperity, fortune and even conquest. Again, in my opinion, this is truly a selfish narrative. Even the act of giving has selfishness at its core for the prosperity gospel advocates that it is giving that brings rewarding – and rewarding means financial, remuneration not simply in the afterlife, but in the here and now.

Not my God! My God isn't a "me first" God. God isn't pulling for one to win big...to get that new boat one could only dream about. My God won't condone a theology where the only love consists of an unhealthy love of self.

Tobit calls us to turn toward the face of the poor, the outcast, the invisible who are everywhere. What about the common good? The common good – it's a phrase that you don't even hear much anymore. It sounds almost out of place. It's been lost in in a trash heap of prosperity gospel and selfishness. My God compels me to be of service to the common good; to help the poor, the marginalized, the dispossessed, the other wherever I happen to find them.

True giving springs forth from love. It is selfless and it never demands anything in return.

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“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another (John 13:34).” “Love must be sincere.... Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves (Romans 12:9-10).” That’s my God!

From the book of Jeremiah, “I brought you into a fertile land to eat its fruit and rich produce. But you came and defiled my land and made my inheritance detestable (Jeremiah, 2:7).” God created that which was good – a sacred, fertile land from which we draw sustenance. It provides us with a bounty of fruits, vegetables and grains.

Climate scientists from around the globe, from all walks of life have confirmed the dire threat of climate change – how it is devastating to the earth and us. As a result, North Carolina, just as an example, is to expect rising sea levels that may threaten its Outer Banks. Yet, the North Carolina legislature has responded to this threat by barring state and local agencies from developing any regulations or plans to address the problem. This is the same North Carolina legislature that begins each session with “God Bless America.”

Not my God! Planet earth is not merely a means to an end. It’s not simply another asset, a resource to be consumed and exploited for the acquisition of riches.

It’s not that we as Unitarian Universalists simply respect the interdependent web, we are it. We are the stuff of stars. We are the sunshine, the raging rapids and the meandering stream, the nourishing minerals of the soil, the gentle breeze. Defiling the environment defiles who we are. Have some self-respect North Carolina!

Hymn 175 says, “We celebrate the web of life, it’s magnitude we sing; for we can see divinity in every living thing.... Respect the water, land and air which gave all creatures birth; protect the living things that share the glory of this earth (Alicia Carpenter).” That’s my God!

In the Gospel of Luke, John the Baptist states, “Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same (Luke 3:11).”

Yet “the richest four hundred Americans have the same amount of wealth as all black people in the United States plus one-third of all Latinos! (Becky Bond & Zack Exley, “Rules for Revolutionaries,” p38).” “The median African American family has just 8 percent as much wealth as the median white family - a gap that isn’t explainable by income differences....(Dalton Conley, The Sun, February 2015, p6).”

And those at the top seem to want more and more and are always willing to keep people out, exclude people from creating wealth for themselves. The practice of “redlining” was set up to keep people of color out of certain areas confining them to the ghettos, Banks would also

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charge exorbitant rates for loans in the impoverished neighborhoods. Those with means always seem to be resistant to any raise in the minimum wage, always resistant to expansion of health care for the poor. And all this in a so-called “God-fearing” nation?

Not my God! My God doesn’t condone such practices. Those who believe in my God would share their shirt with another, not hoard their bounty while others have none. My God condones a living wage for all.

Those who believe in my God show mercy on the less fortunate by giving them a fair chance to create wealth for themselves without having climb over mountains of discrimination and marginalization based upon the color of their skin, gender identity, age, religion or ethnicity. My God compels me to not only help care for the needy; my God also compels me to share my bounty. My God compels me to bestow upon the less fortunate the privileges I have been granted. That’s my God!

The book of Leviticus states: “When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as our native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt (Leviticus 19:33)”

Yet I see foreigners treated, oddly enough, as both scapegoats to fear, and as slaves to be exploited. We are told that the “illegals” are the cause of the problems yet at exactly the same time, there are those who are willing to look the other way so that such “illegals” can pick our fruits and vegetables, make beds in our hotel rooms, do our landscaping, build our new homes. Many are more than willing to look the other way so that such illegals can be exploited without labor protection or payment of even minimum wages.

In antebellum America, in the era of the Fugitive Slave Law, the same “are they legal or are they illegal?” and “what does the law state?” arguments were made. “Aren’t they legally slaves though? Isn’t it a violation of the law not to return them to their legally rightful masters because the law states that they are property not people?”

Again, all this in a so-called God-fearing Christian nation.

Not my God! Not my Christianity! Don’t ever invoke my God to condone such hypocrisy! My God is a God of love, compassion, mercy, understanding and emancipation. My God says, “And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:8).”

During the industrial revolution and throughout this nation’s history, the welcoming of immigrants is what truly made America great. The welcoming of all who were willing to risk it all, to create something new for themselves and their families, in a land of opportunity, is what truly made

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America great in the first place. And I believe, and I know, that this is still the case. Refusing to welcome immigrants, believing that this land was made for you and me only will also result in our economic decline, leading to in economic insecurity for our children and grandchildren.

No, my God is not one who condones the building of walls and the exploitation and criminalization of others. My God is not one who defines others as “illegals.” No, my God is an opportunity for all God. That’s my God!

In General Assembly’s Ware Lecture, Bryan Stevenson said that one of the things we must do is change the narrative – change the story we tell ourselves about ourselves. I believe we need to be a bit more specific than that. We as Unitarian Universalists, united will all people of all faiths need to be more specific than that. We need to work, work, work, change the *theological* narrative. Our arguments and actions for justice need to go on a pilgrimage – a pilgrimage to higher ground – to higher theological ground. I fear that if we don’t do so, we expose ourselves to the threat of being labeled, wrongly, as nothing more than a bunch of liberal activists.

I’ve touched on four items in this message and attempted to frame them briefly in an alternative theological narrative. I spoke of: 1) Emptiness of a Prosperity Gospel 2) Climate Change Denial 3) Injustice of Income Inequality 4) Hypocrisy of Viewing Immigration through a legalistic lens

These are just four items; there are so many others.

We could talk about the insanity of a justice system that incarcerates people with lengthy mandatory sentences for relatively minor offences – a system that offers no rehabilitation – only stigmatization.

We could talk about the insanity of gun culture – a fake narrative spun by profiteering gun manufacturers.

We could talk about the hijacking of our democracy by corporations and money – the personhood of corporations through Citizens United and other decisions. We could talk about the seemingly never-ending efforts of those who attempt to restrict or rescind the voting rights of others.

We could go on and on.

Yet, like Bryan Stevenson illustrated during the Ware Lecture, I have tremendous hope. It’s more than hope actually. It’s certainty. The emptiness of the dominant narratives will be swept away; it will take hard work and it may not be achieved in my lifetime, but they will be swept away. Why? Because they are false narratives – they are lies. They are lies we tell ourselves about ourselves.

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Gandhi always said, and I believe him, that the truth will always prevail. The truth will always prevail over lies. The truth will prevail over greed. And as Theodore Parker said, "The arc of the moral universe is long...but it bends towards justice." I have faith in that. I have faith in myself. I have faith in you. I have faith in our collective humanity amongst the interdependent web. That's my God!