

Words, Words, Words

a sermon by Rev. J. Mark Worth

READING: from Marcus J. Borg, Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power – And How They Can Be Restored, HarperOne, New York NY, 1989

Because many Christians think that biblical inerrancy and its literal-factual-absolute interpretation are traditional and orthodox, it is important to know that this is not so. Rather, this understanding of Christian language is recent. ... Luther and the other Reformers did not affirm inerrancy or literalism. Luther thought that both [the Epistle of] James and [the Book of] Revelation should be thrown out of the New Testament. To say the obvious, you cannot think this and also think of the Bible as the inerrant revelation of God. ...

The impact of literalism on Christian language makes the Bible and Christianity incredible for many. It is a major reason that many young people have little or no interest in Christianity.

THE SERMON

“Words, words, words, in my old Bible, how much of truth remains? If I only understood them while my lips pronounced them, would not my life be changed?” – from a Pete Seeger song, “Words, Words, Words,” on his album, “Rainbow Race.”

Words, words, words. Sometimes, despite our words, or maybe because of them, we have trouble understanding one another.

Do you know what language they speak in England? It's not a trick question. English! Do we speak the same language? Maybe, maybe not. You know what they call a flashlight? In England it's a torch. Over there, the trunk of your car is the boot, and the hood is the bonnet. You don't go to Hertz to rent a sedan, you go there to hire a saloon. Your boss is your governor. French fries are chips in England, and potato chips are crisps. A truck is a lorry, an apartment is a flat, and an elevator is a lift. They don't have garbage, but they have plenty of rubbish, and although they don't have garbage cans, they can put their rubbish in the dust bin.

And if they say, “I'll come to your house tomorrow and knock you up,” they plan to knock on your door. That's all, really! Maybe that's why George Bernard Shaw said we and the English are “two nations separated by a common language.”

The words we use can lead to misunderstandings. And we Unitarian Universalists often struggle with our words. When I first joined a UU church, in 1970, in many UU churches certain words seemed to be forbidden. We were rationalist humanists. We didn't talk about prayer, and certainly didn't have faith. We never spoke of God. We said we were tolerant and open-minded, open to ideas from Buddhism and Taoism – but not Christianity! We often explained our faith by saying, “We're not Christian,” which is not very informative, and not always true.

That was then. Since then, a younger generation has been coming to our churches, and they are often more open to religious-sounding words and ideas. Yes, Humanism is still part of the mix, naturally. We must use our reason, and we value the scientific method. Science is *not* a liberal conspiracy! But at the same time, we no longer have a knee-jerk reaction against Christianity or religious words. And we know that science doesn't answer all questions; questions such as “What is the meaning of life?” and “Am I my brother's keeper?” cannot be tested in a chemistry lab, or solved with a mathematical equation.

I am still a Humanist. My concerns are human concerns, and I want my religion to make

sense. My faith is informed by science. Yes, I'm a Humanist. I'm also a liberal Christian, and a Buddhist meditator and practitioner. As a UU, I have the freedom to explore ideas and words I once rejected, and find new meanings that may be hidden in old ideas and old stories.

Metaphor, myth, and God ~

We still sometimes struggle with religious terms, of course. And so today I want to look at a few of the words that often give us trouble.

Let's start with "**metaphor.**" A metaphor is a figure of speech that, for rhetorical effect, refers to one thing by mentioning another thing. Several years ago I read a letter in our denominational magazine, UU World. Rev. Bill Sinkford, who was then the president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, had said that we ought to be able to speak what he called, "a language of reverence."

In his disagreement with Rev. Sinkford, the letter-writer said he disliked religious metaphors, and said that metaphors have to be literally true.

No! The whole point of a metaphor, the value of a metaphor, is that it *isn't* literally true, and yet it's also not false. The arm of a chair isn't an arm. And yet it is an arm. The same with the legs of a chair – they're legs, and yet they aren't legs. Like the arms and legs of a chair, religious metaphors all have the quality of "is" and "is not" at the same time. So when Shakespeare said, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players," he was using a metaphor. It's not literally true. And yet it expresses a truth.

Theologian Sallie McFague says that all the best religious terms, the most useful religious terms, are metaphors. So when Christians speak of "God the Father," God isn't literally a father. But metaphorically, God both is and is not a father. It's a perfectly good metaphor. And at the same time, God the Mother is also a perfectly good metaphor. And God the Lover and God the Friend.

And yes, "**God**" is a metaphor. It's a word we use to talk about something we can't really describe. Some theologians have said we cannot say what God is, only what God is not. God is not an old bearded White man sitting on a cloud in the sky, for instance. We can be sure of that.

The Book of Genesis says that God walked in the Garden of Eden in the cool of the evening, and talked with Adam and Eve. It's a myth, folks! And there's another term, **myth**. A myth is not a lie. A myth is a classic story that tells a truth, or truths, about the human situation.

Oedipus Rex is a myth. It's an ancient story that makes a truthful moral point. Ancient people were not stupid. They knew that myths were stories that need not be taken literally. When we assume that myths are meant literally we are making a *modern* mistake.

The Garden of Eden is a myth, too. I'm sure the author never intended that it be taken literally. The myth tells us that God walked with, and talked to, the first woman and the first man in the Garden of Eden, and they had a falling out, and the relationship has been pretty complicated ever since. Yes, there's more to it than that, but that's the short version!

So is God a person? When I was a child, I thought God was an old man in the sky. Children want truth to be a solid thing. Kind of like Santa Claus at the North Pole, either it's true or it isn't.

But then I learned that the Bible, in John 4:24, says "God is a spirit, and those who worship God should worship in spirit and in truth." Not a person, but a spirit.

And the Epistle of 1st John says that God is love. And love is not a person. Love is an emotion, and it's also an ideal, and a concept. So God is a person, and isn't a person. God is a

spirit, an emotion, a concept, and an ideal. Because the word “God” is a metaphor, God both is and is not.

And I think that's all biblical. Because the Bible isn't one book, it contains many books, written by many different people, and it says many different things. The Bible is not a divine instruction manual; it is a conversation about God.

So that's not all. The Bible also says God is the sound of silence. You thought that was Simon and Garfunkle, didn't you?

Well, the 1st Book of Kings says that the prophet Elijah encountered God. Elijah was on Mount Horeb, in a cave. And he experienced this: “Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.”

So, God is not the wind, nor the earthquake, nor the fire. But after the fire Elijah heard the sound of silence.

That's from one of the best modern translations, the New Revised Standard Version. The King James Version of 1611 said after the fire there was “a still small voice.” That's what we sing about in the hymn, “Voice Still and Small.” There is a still small voice within each of us. We may call it your “inner light;” that's what the Quakers call it. Some call it conscience. Some call it the voice of God.

So what do we mean when we say “God”? Even the authors of the Bible give many different meanings. The whole point here is to not take this too literally.

John Haynes Holmes, one of the great Unitarian ministers of the early 20th century, said, “When I say God, it is poetry and not theology. The books of the theologians gather dust on my shelves, but the pages of the poets are stained with my fingers and blotted with my tears.”

More terms we struggle with ~

Faith and doubt. Conservative Christians say we must have faith. But “faith” doesn't mean that we have to believe things that are scientifically impossible. The Greek word *pistis*, used in the Bible, means to be true, to be trustworthy. It's not about believing impossible things, it's about trust. I have faith in Mickey because I trust her. I don't just believe in her existence, I know she is trustworthy. Faith is trust. And I believe in her because she is my beloved. Believe and “belove” are related. In religious terms, believe = belove. Faith is about love and trust.

And while we have faith, we cherish our doubts. If you don't have doubt, you either are kidding yourself or you're asleep. Lonni Collins Pratt, author of the book, Radical Hospitality, writes, “Doubt is the ants in the pants of faith. It keeps faith moving. ... No such thing as belief can exist, unless not believing is an ever-present option.”

Grace. Grace is an unexpected gift, a gift freely given that we didn't do anything to deserve, but received anyway. Grace has the connotation of mercy and loving-kindness. The gift of life is a gracious gift. Therefore we know that God is for us. Or said another way, nature is generous and bountiful, a gracious place. The poet and essayist Wendell Barry writes of the peace of the world and the grace of wild things. People, our fellow humans, also can be bringers of grace. Share some graciousness with someone today. I recommend it.

Minister, ministry. A minister is a servant, and ministry, serving others, is the mission of the church. In fact, one of the New Testament words we translate as minister is *hyperetes*, which means “under-rower,” a person working hard pulling oars in the belly of a large ship, one

rower among many. It's a position of service and responsibility, not privilege.

There are many ministries – the ministry of teaching our children, the ministry of music, the ministry of serving coffee hour, the ministry of greeting and passing out orders of service, the ministry of justice work, and so much more, all of them gifts of service. Even in a church with a paid professional ministry, it is a shared task. All of us, together, do ministry.

Salvation. The word “salvation,” to make whole, to preserve, is related to the word “salve,” a balm for healing. We all need healing. Our world needs healing.

I believe our personal salvation is found when we are in right relationship: right relationship with one another, and right relationship with ultimate things (i.e., God). Ultimately, right relationship is the healing the world needs.

In Judaism, the salvation of an individual Jew is connected to the salvation of the entire people. The concept of salvation is connected to “*tikkun olam*,” restoring or repairing the world. Judaism says that because we share a partnership with God, humanity is instructed to take the steps towards improving the state of the world and helping others.

In this way the gospel of Unitarian Universalism is probably closer Judaism than to Evangelical Christianity – we believe that we bear responsibility not only for our own moral, spiritual, and material welfare, but also for the welfare of society at large. Salvation, salve, a balm for healing, means healing the world.

Sin. Wow, this is a word a lot of us find cringe-worthy. Are we sinners? The principle New Testament Greek word translated into English as “sin” literally means, “missing the mark.” We all miss the mark sometimes.

The Universalists, historically “the no hell church,” said that ultimately everyone will be saved. But what are we saved *from*? Sin. It's not that we never sin, for none of us are perfect. Yes, we sin. But because we were *created imperfect*, and because God is gracious, we are also forgiven. The message of Universalism is that we all have value and no one is lost forever.

We all know the word “sin” has been misused to point fingers, so it comes with a lot of baggage. However, sometimes no other word seems strong enough. Rape is a sin. The abuse of children is a sin. Slavery is a sin. War crimes are sins. It's a mistake, I believe, to totally abandon this word.

Worship. Worship comes from an Old English word, *woerthscipe*, which means “to ascribe or give worth to something.” So it does not have to mean “to bow down.” It is about the worthiness of things and people. We ascribe worth to many things, to love, to community, to our promises, our covenants with one another. And yes, to God, which is after all what? A spirit, love, silence, poetry, metaphor, the Creative Process of the Cosmos, the Ground of Being. Mythical yet somehow true. It's a paradox.

Religion. Religion isn't like math, where 1+1 always has to equal 2. Religious faith and practice cannot be tested in a scientific laboratory, where one answer must be right and another must be wrong. I believe religion is more akin to poetry, art, and music. In music, we don't say that because Johann Sebastian Bach is right, then Elvis has to be wrong. In art, we don't say that because Rembrandt is right, Picasso has to be wrong.

In religion, as in poetry, art, and music, there is more than one way: more than one path up the mountain, more than one road to Varanasi, Mecca, or Jerusalem, more than one way to gain enlightenment or salvation. Of course, there is also bad poetry and poorly performed music, and so I believe there are some wrong ways to be religious. If your religion promotes racial bigotry, or patriarchy, or self-righteousness, or marginalizes the weak and the poor, it is

time for you to ask yourself some hard questions.

Christ/Messiah. I once met a woman named Jesus Adelle Christ; that's her legal name. She's not "Jesus the Christ," she's Jesus A. Christ. In her case, it's a name. But in the Bible, Christ is a title, not a name. Jesus Christ was not the son of Joseph and Mary Christ.

Here are three words that all mean the same thing: Anointed is the English word, Messiah means anointed in Hebrew, and Christ, *christos*, means anointed in Greek. To call Jesus the Messiah, to say he is the Christ, is to say he was a human being who was anointed – or chosen – by God for a special purpose.

Several people are "anointed" in the Bible, including King David, King Solomon, and even a Pagan, King Cyrus of Persia. So even in the Bible there is more than one anointed person, more than one Christ. The word "anointed" – the title, Christ – did not originally mean Jesus was divine, only that he was a person chosen for a special task.

Jesus' task, the gospel, could be the subject of many sermons!

Gospel. You've heard of the gospel truth. Well, no, that's not what the word "gospel" means. It means "good news." The gospel of Unitarian Universalism is the good news that we don't all have to agree all the time. It's the good news that you don't have to be wrong in order for me to be right. We don't have a creed that demands theological agreement; rather, we have covenants, promises to support one another on our individual faith journeys.

The gospel of Unitarian Universalism is the good news that a loving God would never create a hell to torture us in and then create us so flawed we have to be sent there. It is the good news that you don't have to be born again; you were born okay the first time! It is the good news that gay, straight, black, white, brown, female, male, trans, tall, short, young, old, undocumented, left-handed, whatever – we are all loveable and valuable just as who we are.

And it is the good news that Jesus spoke in Luke 4:18-19, explaining his mission: "I am anointed to announce good news to the poor, proclaim release for prisoners, bring sight to the blind, let the oppressed go free, and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" – that's the gospel, that's the good news according to Jesus, and to that I can say amen!

Prayer. How do you pray to a metaphor? Well, I like what Mother Theresa said about prayer. She was asked by a reporter, "What do you say to God when you pray?" "I don't say anything," she said. "I just listen."

"Then, what does God say to you?" asked the reporter. "He doesn't say anything. He just listens."

Amen. I end each sermon with "Amen." What does that mean? It means, "So be it."
Amen.