



"UU Theology VI: Pneumatology
(The Theology of the Spirit)"
Rev. Krista Taves
April 19, 2009

Emerson UU Chapel, Ellisville MO

Sermon

I'm sure many of you could tell incredible stories of the crazy things your kids have done to get what they want and still look like they're doing what you told them! I would also hazard a guess that even as adults, we do crazy things to get what we want and still look like we're doing what we think others think we should be doing! All of this involves a dance of the spirit, we're dancing in the paradox between all the different levels of the expectations we have for ourselves and the expectations others hold for us.

In our children's story this morning, Nasreddin and his mother were in that kind of dance. Like all close relationships, whether by blood or choice, they were in a sacred covenant. It was an implicit covenant, meaning its terms were largely unspoken, which is not unusual for many of our deepest relationships where we rely on trust and tradition and intuition to guide us in our faithfulness to one another. As a mother, she was committed to his well-being and nurture, and part of that covenant involved making sure that he had the basics - a roof over his head, food in his belly, and clothes on his back. Just the clothing part was no small covenant to fulfill. Before the days of washing machines and indoor plumbing, women spent huge amounts of time doing laundry. It's no surprise that she was gone more than an hour.

Nasreddin's covenant with his mother was to trust her, to trust that she was looking out for his well-being. So her request that he watch over the house, was asked with the expectation of that trust, that there was a good reason for what she was asking. So even in this most mundane of activities - a mother doing laundry and asking her son to watch the house - there is a sense of mutual obligation to each other and a whole set of assumptions and values at play. We should never underestimate the depth of the sacred in the ordinary.

But of course, there was a catch. There always is in a story that's worth listening to. She didn't come back in an hour as she said she would. Nasreddin waited and waited. He tried to do what she asked of him, but like most children he had a limited ability to manage things like boredom and restlessness. So he tried to find a way to leave the house without breaking his promise. And you have to admit that he came up with a very creative solution even though it didn't work! Nasreddin took literally his mother's order to keep his eye on the door and brought the door with him, ironically leaving the house wide open to all kinds of dangers. But, he tried, and even though he broke the covenant in one way, in another way, he strengthened it through his creative attempt to hold all these different needs in balance.

Our covenants are like that. They are not always easy to honor or they wouldn't be as special and powerful as they are. Living them will ask us to grow and mature. The thing we call life is the creative dance we do as we hold ourselves in the tension and beauty of our covenants. For many Unitarian Universalists, the thing we call spirit is that beautiful, mysterious, often unnamable thing that moves through that dance. For many of us, this is the spirit of life. For some of us, it is the revelation of the holy, or God. For others, it is a mysterious thing for which there is no name and comes about only through human action and choice.

Today is the sixth and final sermon in our series on Unitarian Universalist theology. We started this series back in January, and it's been a long and meaningful road. This series is inspired by the work of Unitarian Universalist theologian Rebecca Ann Parker. Parker says that every religion has the same six components - foundational theology, meaning your understanding of the divine/human relationship; ecclesiology, meaning the theology of church; soteriology, meaning the theology of salvation which is basically how do you understand evil and how do you protect yourself from it; eschatology, meaning the big picture of where we're going and how we're getting there; missiology, the theology of how you look at other religions and beliefs that are different from yours; and finally, pneumatology, your theology of the spirit.

Our foundational theology is based on the concept of the divine and the human in a covenantal relationship based on love and trust. Our ecclesiology is that we are equal and we walk together in the bonds of fellowship. Our soteriology is that evil is not something outside of ourselves but rests within all and happens when we betray our potential for goodness. Our eschatology is that no one is left behind; everyone has a place at the table. Our



missiology is that all religions contain truth and wisdom. When you look at these five pieces of our theology, some pretty powerful values emerge. We believe in inclusivity more than exclusivity. Our faith is more about who comes in than who we keep out. Love is more powerful than hate. Equality is the hallmark of a divine relationship. Interdependence is the universal way.

Each of these theological components is interrelated. It's the love and trust in our foundation that informs the way we do church. Evil is turning away from that love and trust. Eschatology is about offering that liberating love and trust to all and welcoming everyone to the table. Missiology is also about loving and trusting the truth in things we might not understand.

Our pneumatology, our theology of the spirit, informs all of this. So although this may be the last in our sermon series, it is by no means the least. In fact, all the other parts of our theology are about welcoming, nurturing, accessing and manifesting the spirit.

The spirit is the beginning of everything. Where does our consciousness come from? Where do our values come from? Where do we get that spark of knowledge of what is right and wrong? What compels us to create lives of meaning and purpose and service? Where does the love and trust which is our foundation spring from?

Every religion has a theology of the spirit, which is really a theology of how the divine or the sacred moves into the mundane, human, and ordinary because religion is fundamentally about bringing these two realms more closely together. This is why, for instance, the example of Jesus is so powerful in Christianity. He was the complete fusion of both. This is why Mohammad is considered the central prophet of Islam. The divine reached out to him, it crossed the line so that he could be a messenger of God. The Buddha was less about bringing the divine down to earth, and more about helping the earthly reach the divine – that was transcendence. In many Native American spiritualities and in Paganism, the spirits of animals and peoples and gods cross back and forth all the time. Religion gives us a path to navigate these two realms of existence because there is a universal hunger in all humanity to do just that. We want our own lives to be infused with a sense of higher purpose and meaning, a sense of sacredness, godliness, whatever.

Unitarian Universalist pneumatology has a bit of all kinds of pneumatologies in it because we are so open to truth in many forms, but still, the way we do it is uniquely ours. Jesus is powerful for us not because he alone is the fusion of the earthly and the divine. He came to show us the path so that we ourselves can fuse those in our own lives. We see Mohammad and Buddha in the same way. But really, it's more than that. Unitarian Universalism has, in many ways, completely broken down the line between the earthly and the divine so that there are not really two realms at all, but one.

Listen to what Rebecca Ann Parker says about our theology of spirit:

"Our Pneumatology is as close as breath, as fiery as the sun, as transformative as the waters of the river. Our particular perspective on spirit is our emphasis on the immediate presence of the spirit of life in all of life. We don't have a sense of spirit that is outside of us. We do have a very strong sense in our heritage that there is a spirit of life that is in all things, moves in all things, is in us and in others and weaves us all together. You can see this in how the 19th c. Unitarians spoke of God as ever present, as with us, as closer than breath. The way that Emerson spoke of the oversoul, there is this force of soulfulness that is in all things and it breathes through us. It's a sense of God as all permeating, all pervasive, moving in all things, each one of us a manifestation of that spirit that is greater than any one of us."

That is our pneumatology. Direct, unmediated, available to all and in all. And this rings true, regardless of your particular theology, whether you are humanist or deist, or theist, or Christian, Jewish, Pagan, Buddhist, or simply Unitarian Universalist.

The way I see it is that as liberal religious people we are about being conduits for the indwelling of the spirit of life. We are to live the truth that there is so separation between the earthly and the divine. But it's also more than that.



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We are to be conduits for the breaking in of the spirit of life in those places where it has been forgotten or suppressed. As we know so well, a lot of the world still lives as if there is this harsh separation, and lot of the pain and suffering of this world, whether that is a personal pain that each of us experiences individually, or a collective pain that we experience together, comes from that harsh separation, which is a form of violence. It allows us to dehumanize each other, to be unmoved by suffering, to be careless in our words, to be rash in our choices, and sometimes to justify this violence as being moral.

One of the reasons we are so committed to open-mindedness, tolerance, and acceptance, is that these acts of spiritual generosity weaken the power of that violent separation. When you are committed to open-mindedness, tolerance and acceptance, you're really asking yourself to slow down and think and walk in a different way. We've all learned how to walk the path of violence. It takes a lot to unlearn it. We are so easily tempted into the rashness of that place of dividedness. Oh we'll try to tell ourselves that we're living out the covenant, there are so many ways we can fool ourselves, but we'll just end up tearing the door off of its hinges and being even more exposed. No, that's not what we're called to do. We are trying to be undivided people in our own hearts and by our example and by our lives we become part of the healing. We are the spirit made flesh.

Our pneumatology asks us to see the promise of wholeness everywhere. When we allow that promise to govern our lives, that is how we are healed, and it is how we bring healing into this beautiful and sacred world.