

Good Dogma!

Given 11/26/17 by Robin Mitchell

I'm very happy to be here preaching this morning – for one thing, it's a wonderful change to only have to go one place on a Sunday morning! Usually I go to the first service at my Methodist church and then the second service here, so when I'm getting dressed for them at 8:30 in the morning I'm trying to figure out what will be comfortable in our amphitheater at noon, and I don't always get it right. But at the same time there are some good things about having gone straight from one church service to another for twenty years; it has given me a wonderful chance to compare the cultures at both places, to see where they're different and where they're more similar than we might think they are.

For example, here at the Fellowship we're proud that our faith is grounded in reason, but the four pillars of the Methodist faith are scripture, tradition, reason and experience. And the sermons there reflect that; they're not shy about talking about the transcendence of God's goodness and love, but I've also heard wonderful sermons about the importance of doubt and questioning and thoughtfulness in building a mature faith.

We are passionate in our commitment to social justice, but that is literally foundational at my Methodist church: at baptism, you are asked "Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?" My local church is active in fighting human trafficking, teaching English to immigrants, and helping prisoners re-enter society. They have invited us to work with them in ending crippling third-world debt, and our minister met theirs at a gun-violence rally in Encinitas a few months ago. Just last Sunday their minister said that someone had once asked him what was the greatest miracle mentioned in the Bible, and he thought of the bit in the book of Acts about the early church: "All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need." That does sound like a miracle!

And we talk about how open and welcoming we are, but again we're not the only ones. The mission statement at my Methodist church is "Welcome all. Grow in faith. Engage our neighbors. Serve the world." and their slogan, printed on their order of service every Sunday, is "Open hearts, open minds, open doors." And they really work on living up to it - like us, they have openly gay, lesbian and transgender members who are genuinely welcomed. But they also have openly Republican members, and members who own guns, and I'm always surprised by how many people stand up when they recognize people who are veterans or have immediate family in the armed forces. Sometimes my heart really aches for us in our cultural and political narrowness; it may feel good, but I'm not sure how healthy it is.

But still, there is one area where we truly are unique, where we really do have something they don't, and that is our theological openness that comes from our lack of creeds or dogmas. It's the heart of what makes us, "us", and I know that for many of us it's the reason we're here. To be able to come together in a community of love, openness and spiritual growth without having to sign on to a fixed set of theological beliefs or style of practice is wonderful, and it truly sets us apart from most other religions.

I know it's one of the reasons I'm here – I have been pledging at my Methodist church for decades, I've served on their Board of Trustees, I've read scripture from the pulpit in their

services, I usher there and help serve Communion, but with all that I've never actually formally joined their church. I went through a new-member class when they asked me to be on the Board, figuring that was probably getting to be time to join, but when they asked us to say the Apostle's Creed I balked at having to say I believed in a list of things that I wasn't really sure about and quietly dropped out. Fortunately their bylaws say they're allowed to have up to three heathens on their Board at any given time and so I was still able to serve.

So I get it; I really do – as I said in my very first sermon here, also on a Thanksgiving weekend, "it's very comforting to have a place where I'm welcome simply because I'm earnestly searching for truth and not because of the particular path I happen to be following." That's as true today as it was when I said it thirteen years ago, and I absolutely love us for it.

But I know from my own life that it's sometimes easy to confuse a preference with a virtue, and I wonder if that isn't happening here too. We love our creedlessness and find it liberating, but I wonder if it isn't as much a weakness as a source of strength.

I think that people come to religion not just for companionship and community, but because they have aching questions deep in their hearts and are desperately hungry for answers. You may have asked them yourselves in times of anguish, or alone in the dark in the middle of the night: "Why do bad things happen to good people?" "Why am I so deeply made for love, and yet everything I love will someday wither and die?" Or my own personal favorite, "Why can I have such high ideals, and absolutely know in my soul that they're the way to live, and yet be so unable to live them out in my daily life?"

These are questions as much of the heart as of the mind, and they can't truly be answered with logic, not in the sense that most people want them answered. They are anguished cries, a sense that something is fundamentally not right in the world and our lives, and at times it feels like we can't go on without having answers.

And the creedal religions offer answers, answers that seem large enough and deep enough to compass the size and depth of the questions. Another word for "creed" or "dogma" is "story" – they have coherent stories about the nature of the world and why it is the way it is. The Christian story of God's perfect creation, Adam and Eve's fall, and God's undying love culminating in redemption and resurrection; the Buddhist story of karma and reincarnation, cycles of suffering that can only be ended by seeing through the confusion of samsara to the true nature of being; the Hindu pantheon of gods with their heroic virtues and tragic faults; these are stories that grip people's imagination and give them a way to understand the agony and the ecstasy of their own lives.

It takes grand stories to do this; stories on the scale of myths. And while I've certainly heard religions called that before, meaning they're all just a pack of lies, that's not what myths really are. Myths are ways to convey deep human truths, and it's not their fault that we've mostly lost the ability to think mythically in our modern age.

Joseph Campbell says that myths capture what cannot be directly expressed in words – they are metaphors that point outside themselves and into transcendent reality. To say that religions are metaphors for the deep, indescribable truth of existence is to say that they truly capture some of that essence and bring it into the more limited scope of human understanding in a way that retains both its beauty and its compelling call. And that's the feeling I have when I practice Christianity or Buddhism, that their stories tap into deep truths that are urgently important for my life.

But the creedal religions do more than just offer people pretty – or powerful – stories to make them feel better about their lives and give them easy answers to their hard questions. If that's all they did they'd be like the "Just So Stories" – "How the Elephant Got His Nose" – simple stories that children believe until they're old enough to know the truth. But there's something deeper happening than this. I think that when people ask these questions, what they're really asking isn't "why are things like this" but "how do I live in a world where things are like this? How do I live with grace and courage and purpose in a world that so often seems broken and meaningless?"

And out of their stories, the great religions have answers to this. Just like a doctor first makes a diagnosis – a story about what's causing your symptoms – and then offers a treatment based on that story, the creedal religions move from their dogmas to solutions drawn from them. The doctor says "take this medicine and your health will improve"; religion says "adopt these spiritual practices and these attitudes about the world and your character and your experience of life will improve."

And the thing is, when people do that, it works. I know that following the Christian story has made me a better person; I am certainly more generous and less judgmental than I was when I started. Ask any of the Buddhist practitioners here how it has helped their lives and they will probably tell you about growing in compassion, equanimity and fearlessness. Read stories about people who have found religion in prison, whether Christianity or Islam or Buddhism or whatever, and you'll find people who credit it with turning their lives completely around.

As the writer Karen Armstrong says, these religious stories "are programs for action, and you recognize their truth for humanity when you put these precepts into action in your own life and discover that they work; that they give you an enhanced spirituality."

This business of putting stories into action, seeing whether or not they work, and judging their truth from that should remind us of something very familiar – it sounds a lot like the scientific method! We sometimes wonder why people are so attached to traditional religions, why a good dose of rationalism or ridicule won't set them straight, but I think it's because they know better; they've tested their stories by applying them in their own lives and seen the underlying truth with their own eyes. That's certainly my experience with Christianity and Buddhism; I can't imagine anything that could erase the insights they've given me in living my life or the respect that has given me for their stories. To paraphrase a former minister at my Methodist church, I don't know whether they're factual but I do know they're true.

So the creedal religions are telling compelling stories that speak to people's deepest questions and provide challenging and empowering answers. And we have chosen a different path, telling people that they have the freedom and responsibility to find their own answers in a community of love and support. That's very noble, and it's why most of us are here, but I have to say I wasn't surprised when Mark Tuller's Board message this week pointed out that only 0.04% of Americans are UUs. I'm all for his plea that we bring people here to experience our community for themselves, but I wonder how many of them will find the comfort and inspiration they are looking for when it is so much closer to the surface in other places of worship.

But maybe this is a good time to try the experiment. I have been noticing in recent years, and especially since Reverend Meghan's coming, that we're moving towards what some UUs have called a language of reverence, a willingness to use evocative spiritual language to

invoke the transcendence and beauty of the truth we're seeking, to at least touch its mythic quality without subscribing to any particular myth. Maybe that will help people see what we're about; the profound depths we're capable of when we go in search of our own stories.

And if we don't have a shared mythical story to back that language up, what do we have is our seven principles and our faith in the scientific method that lets us test them in our lives. Ask yourself: does integrating these principles into your life – the inherent worth and dignity of every person; justice, equity and compassion in human relations; respect for the web of life, and all the others – does that help you through the dark night of your soul? Does it lead you towards being a citizen of the world that we want to bring into being? If so, then there is the proof of our story, even if we don't really have a story in the traditional sense.

And if so, if your life and character shine when they're illumined by our faith, then I think that answers Mark's question about how to proselytize our neighbors. If they see you living your life with courage and grace, being a compassionate friend, working energetically for peace and justice, then they're going to notice and wonder how you got that way. As Saint Francis of Assisi said, "Preach the Gospel at all times. Use words if necessary." Preach our principles at all times. Use words if necessary. The world is hungry for grace, especially in these times of un-grace, and if you embody it they will know that your story is worth hearing and perhaps worth trying for themselves. And then when you invite them here they will come, with open and yearning hearts.

Amen, Namaste, and may that be so.