

W O U N D E D W O R D S

Sunday, October 25, 2009 — A sermon by Rev. Barbara W. ten Hove, *co-minister*
CEDARS UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH, BAINBRIDGE ISLAND & NO. KITSAP COUNTY, WA

“God is not God’s name.” — Forrest Church

Most of us are familiar with the old children’s rhyme, “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.” I imagine you remember it for the same reason I do—because it’s a lie. Words can and do hurt, sometimes as much as a fist.

There are many words that wound. Our language is full of terms that are used to put down others of another race, gender or religion. Some of those words are the kind that can never be used without hurting another.

And then there are words that are not, in and of themselves, designed to wound or even describe someone or something in a way that could be perceived as hurtful. But these words may end up hurting just as much as a slang word used to put us down. I am talking, of course, about religious words, words like *sin*, *Christ*, *Father in Heaven*, *Lord*, even the words *church* and *worship* and *religion*. These words are not usually spoken with hurt in mind. But for some of us, they can trigger a very painful response.

This sermon is my attempt to explore what I’ve come to call “wounded” religious words. And to look at how and why we can begin to heal some of those wounds so we might reclaim these words in new ways. I hope together we can bring our open minds and hearts to this process.

It is not a new topic. Our former UUA president Bill Sinkford challenged us some years ago to think about reclaiming what he called “a language of reverence.” And I’ve been thinking about this throughout my life, a life lived within our UU faith.

But before I go any farther let me just say a word about words. It is very hard to talk about language objectively. Human speech is still a great mystery, and how we communicate with one another is really quite remarkable. The thing about words is that they are actually nothing in and of themselves. They are pure symbol, both in spoken and written form. They mean nothing apart from the meaning we give them.

One way that has helped me understand words is to imagine them as containers—boxes, if you will, which hold meaning. Sometimes more than one meaning fits in a box—for instance, a word as simple and complex as love!—and sometimes one meaning has many boxes—words like couch, divan and sofa all mean pretty much the same thing. But no matter how many words we

use to try to describe meaning, the words can never actually replace what they symbolize. Words contain ideas and feelings, but they are not those ideas and feelings.

When we speak of religious language we are dealing with a group of words, which over time have become invested with incredible power by many different groups and individuals. And there is a lot of feeling that has been attached to them, along with various and sundry ideas about what they mean.

Take the word religion—There are many ideas and feelings, negative and positive, that may be a part of our understanding of religion. But do you remember where that word originated? It comes from a Latin word “ligare,” which, like the ligaments in our bodies tying muscles to bones, is a word meant to describe the bonds that bind us. Religion doesn’t necessarily have to mean belief in the supernatural. It can simply mean the ties that bind.

When I first understood religion in this way, it helped me reclaim the word. While I was never opposed to or wounded by the word religion, as a young person I would seldom have described myself as religious. But once I understood that the word could mean something to me that did not challenge my commitment to Unitarian Universalism, I began to use it again. Now I proudly speak of myself as religious knowing that while what I mean by the word may differ from another’s perspective, the meaning in the word box called “religious” can indeed fit me.

Let me ask you for a moment to think of religious words that have become wounded for you. Can you recall any?

Some of these words may be wounded forever. One religious word that I find very hard to use (which many in the traditional religious world accept) is *Lord*. This word, used in the Bible as a name for God, was wounded for me when I began to see how patriarchal and sexist it is. While its ancient definition is rather neutral (it comes from an old English word meaning “bread or loaf keeper” or one who feeds dependents), it has come down to us to mean a male person with great power over others.

While it may be truthful to call certain Englishmen of the 17th or 18th century Lords, it does not describe what I call God (a word I’ll get to in a minute). It is clearly male and clearly a male who “lords it over” others. As a woman, I don’t like to call the source of my being by a male name. This word has been wounded for me in a way that I am rarely if ever comfortable using it.

But there are other religious words that I may want to own, words that may once have wounded me and may still wound others, even some of you. But in order to do so I have to look at why they are difficult words, and ask myself whether it is worth the effort to reclaim them.

This morning I want to look a bit deeper into two words: the word *prayer*, and the word *God*. These are two words that are uncomfortable for many Unitarian Universalists. Others often use them in ways that don't work for us. But I have found meaning in them that has transformed them for me. And so I want to share that with you today.

I speak to you about this from hard personal experience. Once, when Jaco and I were being considered by a congregation for the position of co-ministers, I did something in a service that I had been doing for years in previous settings. Following the sharing of joys and sorrows, I led the congregation in a pastoral prayer. It is not a frequent practice in UU churches, nor is it something never done. But for me, it was a regular feature of my spiritual and worship life, which I do quite comfortably and naturally.

But what is comfortable and natural for me did not seem to be so for many at that church. There were a lot of concerns that arose during that time about what I meant by prayer, and why I prayed. To be honest, it caused a certain amount of conflict that took a number of years to work through. But the process of working it through was empowering for all of us, and one of the most important things we did together was to begin talking about wounded words.

And in order to do that with integrity, I had to look at my own experience with religious language. More importantly, I had to reflect on my lived experience with religion itself. I asked myself why I had gotten to the place where prayer felt like the right word to use, the right thing to do, in those circumstances. I remembered all the times I had used or heard the word prayer and wondered what it meant to me—and why I have used it so easily for some time.

Growing up in a UU minister's home, my family life centered on the church. Perhaps because of this, my parents felt it was important to establish some family rituals. So each night before going to bed, my sister and I said the same prayer, usually with my mother or father present. At dinnertime, when our whole family gathered, we would hold hands and my father would offer a spontaneous prayer of thanks for our meal. So prayer, at least in some fashion, has always been a part of my life.

But it became real for me when I was 23 years old, having completed just one year of theological school in preparation for the ministry. I had to do a two-month chaplaincy at a hospital working with ministerial students from other religions. There I was surrounded almost entirely by Episcopalians and Catholics. Very high church folk.

On my second day at the hospital a person died on my floor. As required, I went up to the room, rather frightened. I found out the family of the dead woman were Methodists and told them how

sorry I was for their loss. Then they asked me to pray with them. I was not prepared for this. But I remembered my experience growing up. I did not think my bedtime prayer would suffice so I thought of how we said grace around the table and I followed that pattern as best I could. I held their hands around the body of their loved one in the bed, and prayed the way my father had said grace. I have little memory of what I prayed. I think I may have asked that they feel the great love of the spirit around them at this time of loss. Anyway, I returned to my group of Catholic and Episcopalian student chaplains quite drained.

They (as new to this as I) asked me eagerly how it went. I told them what I had done. Then one of my colleagues said to me, “Did you have your prayer book?” And I asked... “What’s a prayer book?” I did not know that prayers were things other people wrote and you read. I understood prayer to come from the memory or from the heart. My friends were a bit shocked. But my understanding of prayer deepened as I realized that I believed prayer, at least for me, was something that comes from the heart.

Later that summer I had another experience that helped me understand prayer in new ways. When a woman asked me to pray, as she lay sick and worried about what was happening to her, I found myself not praying *to* a God far away, or even praying *for* her health. I found myself praying *with* her, cultivating courage and hope in *both* of us. And I began to understand prayer as something you did *with* others, in a communion of spirits, which brought heart and soul together in a profound way.

And finally during that same summer my chaplaincy supervisor, a wily old Presbyterian, took me into his office as I struggled to understand myself as a minister in that place of pain. After some minutes, he said something to me that I have never forgotten. He looked me in the eye and said, “Barbara, you’re a prayerful woman. You pray all the time.” I was stunned. Could he mean me? What kind of praying did this heathen Unitarian Universalist do all the time? But over the years, I have come to believe that prayer doesn’t have to be about asking for favors, or even talking to God.

Prayer is a way of opening ourselves to the universe, using words or images that invite us to be in communion with the Holy, with those far away or long dead. Interestingly, I discovered later that the word prayer comes from an Old Latin word meaning “to question.” Of course! To pray, for me, is a lot like asking a question of the universe. *Are we alone? Can we connect? Shall we love one another?* This is the kind of prayer I pray.

Since those years as a student minister I have evolved in my understanding and appreciation of prayer, both the kind I do in the privacy of my own home and the kind I do with people in church. For the most part, I pray because for me it is a way of connecting to that source of my

being that is a mystery; and because it is a way of bringing people's hearts together when the need is greatest. I do it privately, because it helps me pay attention to life in profound ways. But to me the most significant praying happens in community, when people of good will all turn their hearts toward each other and toward the mystery.

While the way I pray may differ in significant ways from more traditional religion, it is just as valid, just as real, just as powerful. If any one ever says to you that God does not hear Unitarian Universalist prayers, do not believe them! Our prayers matter as much as those of the next person. And whoever and whatever God is, that spirit does indeed take our prayers very much to heart.

And that brings me to another wounded word, the biggie: the great and terrible *God* word.

While I have always believed in God, I generally don't use the word all that often. Yet, I do use it occasionally. Recently I have asked myself why. God is a word a bit like Lord. It generally implies masculinity and power over. It also has been used so often in this context that even small children, when asked who God is, will point to the sky and say there is "a guy with a white beard up there" somewhere. But the word God, at least for me, is a little less loaded than Lord. I find in interfaith circles I can use and hear the word God without getting my hackles up—unlike when I hear "Father in Heaven" or "Christ, our Lord."

This may be because the word God for me is a less a noun than a verb. And believe it or not, this seemingly peculiar approach to the word God is truer to its original meaning than you might think. For the word comes from Sanskrit and it comes from a verb, the verb "to call out."

When I think of that definition of God, the word becomes a deeper box, one able to contain far greater meaning than a simple supernatural being. For if we choose to let ourselves see beyond the wounds to a different understanding, God can be a way of imagining all of creation being "called into life" by a voice which we may understand only dimly as mystery, even as the "big bang."

God can also mean that place inside our being that "calls out" for love, for hope, for the goodness, the godness that seems so possible in all of us, even in the midst of despair. And God can be that which calls us to be better, do more good, live more justly. Perhaps we can call it conscience; perhaps we can call it soul. I find that using the word God in this way allows me to connect with those who over the centuries have sought to understand the mystery of life and longed to give it a name. It is not a perfect name. As I quoted earlier, it is not even God's name. But it works, at least sometimes, for me.

But ultimately we must ask ourselves: why should we even consider using religious words like God and prayer, words that have been wounded for so many? I believe there are a number of good reasons. The first I learned from my father. He felt strongly that religious language is powerful and that “we shouldn’t let the fundamentalists have all the good words.” So the word God does not belong to those who choose to define God in small and literal ways. For many centuries mystics from all faith traditions have challenged us to see God as more than a person, more than a father, more than a noun. Why should we not use it if it helps us lay claim to the mystery?

In times like we live in now, it has become even more essential that we not let the religious right hijack the power of religious words. They use them in narrowly defined ways but rarely get called on it. We have a long and beautiful history as a religion. The ties that bind us to this faith are strong. We not only have the right, I believe we have the responsibility to reclaim religious language. When we speak using a language of reverence, we give new power to the deep meaning that lives behind these wounded words. And we also can speak in a language the religious right can understand.

In an article in the Utne Reader a few years back, editor David Schimke wrote these words:

If progressives want to reclaim the moral high ground it will require a commitment to a set of values... On the core issues that once defined the liberal tradition—such as charity and justice—there must be resolve, expressed in the language of right and wrong... In fact, [we] should be encouraged to speak about sin or redemption or prayer, to use words like God and forgiveness, if only because it will perk up the ears of those who might not otherwise listen.

What a difference it would make if religious liberals would speak in a voice of power, to challenge those who use religious language to wound others, and remind those folks that religion does not belong solely to them; that words like *God* and *prayer* and yes, *sin* and *redemption* and even loaded words like *love* and *marriage*, have ALWAYS had diverse meanings, and no one definition is adequate to define them in our rapidly changing world.

If we give up our use of these wounded but powerful words, we likely lose our voice in the religious marketplace of ideas. There are so many in our world today hungry for our religious message. But too often the media and other religions ignore us, because they think, not always unjustly, that if we have given up on key religious words (and thus key religious concepts) like God and prayer, it means we no longer think of ourselves as religious.

If what binds us together is that we are all liberal democrats who don’t believe in God, then we *are* no longer a religion and we should say so. But if our gospel is one of radical inclusion with

many names for God and a deep and abiding commitment to justice and compassion, then we are powerfully religious and we should not be afraid to say so. If we remain voiceless, we give the right far more power than they deserve.

And there are those in the wider religious community who are trying, alongside us, to do good in the world and to live according to the values of justice, compassion and peace. And that is another reason to lay claim to religious words. They allow us to have a common language when we work with those whose theologies are different from our own. If we can hear the word prayer or God (even if we choose not to use it ourselves) without immediately assuming it has to mean something we *don't* believe in, we can perhaps be more comfortable speaking in religious terms with those from other spiritual traditions.

I remember a man from my former congregation who was an avowed humanist, even atheist, yet who was able to offer the prayer before a Thanksgiving dinner with his Christian sister because he understood prayer in a broad way, even if she didn't. He told me with tears in his eyes what a difference it made in their relationship because he was able to pray with her.

Finally, there are many UUs for whom the concept of God and prayer are real and alive. We cannot expect that here in our liberal churches we will agree with what everyone believes, says or does. I would never ask you to believe in God or in prayer. What I may ask you is to *imagine* believing in God, or to enter into a *spirit* of prayer.

For there *are* those here, and in other liberal congregations across the globe, who need to hear the word God, and need to be invited into prayer, just as there are those of you for whom such ideas do not speak. That is the beauty of our tradition. Our diversity strengthens us. For ultimately, the power of our particular religion—the tie that binds us together, if you will—is our willingness to be together in worship, community and service, even as our beliefs differ. While some see this as a weakness, I see it as an enormous strength.

In UU churches all over the continent people like you and me struggle to use words that heal instead of hurt. But what may wound one person may touch another's heart in deep and powerful ways. It is my hope that we can begin to ask ourselves what words are wounded for us, which ones we cannot use anymore and which ones we can challenge others not to use because of the hurt they do to us. But I also hope we may begin to reclaim some ancient words that still carry great power today, and find ways to use them appropriately.

One path I have used to hear words in new and powerful ways is through poetic song. Sometimes spoken words that may grate on the ear can create harmony when artfully presented. In recent months I've been privileged to work with Lucy Dickinson, a local singer of great power and

religious depth. Though Lucy's religious tradition is different from mine, I find her perspective meaningful and her approach to an old wounded word healing. I invite you to let Lucy give us another way of thinking about God...

God Wrote a Poem by Lucy Dickinson

God took a walk and strolled along
Then hummed a few notes of his favorite song
And had a thought so beautiful and true
That God wrote a poem and it was you
Oh God wrote a poem and it was you

God took a nap and she dreamed the world
She sent down angels with their wings unfurled
To bless and watch over everything so new
God dreamed a blessing and it was you
Oh God dreamed a blessing and it was you

When God awoke from his marvelous dream
He thought he'd create everything he had just seen
He made it all, and when he was through
God left a gift and it was you
God left a gift and it was you

God sat down with her heart so full
Gazing with love at something so wonderful
As her creation so beautiful and true
And God loved her child and it was you
Oh God loved her child and it was you

By whatever name you call it, the Spirit emerges within and around each of us when we gather in religious community. Let us give thanks for the many ways we share our lives with each other, creating a harmony of voices in a choir of all creation.

Let us trust that we are truly a gift to the world—a powerful poem, a beautiful blessing. And let us go forth, holding each other gently in a hopeful embrace, so that wounds may heal.

* * * * *