

Letting Go of God

My hopes and desires for Ordinary Life are modest. I want us to transform the world.

I want those of us who participate in Ordinary Life to become “spiritually literate.” By this I mean that we be involved in the ongoing process of growing in peace, love, joy, patience, and humility. And, that we bring these qualities into our personal lives and living - into our homes, the various communities in which we participate, our work environments; and, that our circles of influence become part of a global effort to foster a world where there is truth-telling, where all people can live with dignity because they are treated with dignity; where all have a sense of belonging.

Spiritual literacy is growing in the ability to experience and express the Sacred within and from us. We use our spiritual literacy to experience and communicate meaning and connection in a world that desperately needs such.

Thankfully we live in a world where there are many places where we can be enabled in our desire to become more and more spiritually literate. An example of one of these places can be found on the website called “Spirituality and Practice.” I’ve been familiar with the people behind this site long before there was such a thing

as the internet. I notice that they now offer a certification program in “spiritual literacy.” I’m grateful that Ordinary Life is another place that has growth in spiritual literacy as a goal.

As you are aware, I go even further and stress the importance of growing in “religious literacy.”

Every religion, since the beginning of when religions were invented, has had two things that the people who are adherents of that religion hold in common. One is some body of material that they refer to as their “scriptures.” The other is a set of traditions about how they regard, use, and relate to these documents.

In Buddhism this written material is called “The Pali Cannon.” In Hinduism the writings are referred to as “The Vedas.” In Judaism, “The Torah.” In Islam, “The Koran.” In Christianity the accepted writings are called “The New Testament.” For those who seek to know and follow the teachings of Jesus the accepted writings are five. They are, in order of their composition, The Gospel of Thomas, The Gospel of Mark, The Gospel of Matthew, The Gospel of Luke, and the Gospel of John.

When people in these religions gather for their main rituals they usually bring some portion of this tradition forward for people to reflect on and find relevant in what

is studied to seek for matters that are relevant for their own lives and living.

Those of you who are gathered here today are a diverse group. Some of you are very familiar with the Jesus narrative in one way or another. Others of you are not. Some of you have been taught for years to read, hear, and/or interpret these writings in one specific way. Others of you could likely care less. Since we are doing this deep dive into the Gospel of John, some of you have read Spong's book on John. Some of those who did found it liberating. Others were shocked at some of his assertions.

The passage we are up to for today is what John Sanford calls a piece of active imagination on the part of whoever wrote these verses. No contemporary biblical or Jesus scholar believes Jesus actually said these things. John was written at least sixty years after Jesus was executed. Most of us can't remember what we had for dinner a week ago. Biblical literalists get around this by saying that the "Holy Spirit inspired the writer so that there was no error." Indeed, some biblical literalists believe that God actually dictated the words that in the Bible.

There is a question raised by Jesus in Mark, Matthew, Luke, and, by implication, in the section we are up to for today in John. The question is: "Who do you say that I

am?” Jesus scholars say that Jesus rarely initiates dialogues or refers to himself in the first person. But, his followers had to answer that question not only for themselves but for others. Who is Jesus? Who is Jesus to you? Who is the you who answers this question? More importantly, so what?

This sets the stage for Holly’s rendition of the passage:

Holly:

In some ways the entire gospel is a work of active imagination. It was written after Jesus’ life, stories of his teachings recounted by his followers the way they remembered them.

Active imagination is a Jungian process that bridges the gap between the conscious and unconscious mind, but it’s clear to me, that ever since humans conceived of gods and then God, that we have been engaged in the process. There were things early humans could not scientifically understand because they didn’t have the tools or instruments, so they explained phenomena with stories and visual representation. The imagination becomes a tool for perceiving outside of mental constraints. And language - symbolic or verbal - is the tool we use to give shape our imaginations. To quote from Lloyd Geering, a 103 year old New Zealander, member of

the Jesus seminar, who wrote a recent book called *Reimagining God*, “Language is the medium in which we live and move and have our being. In it we act, we structure the world, and order every aspect of our social life. Only Language stands between us and the Void. It shapes everything.”

Words, of course, have power. They create and destroy and recreate ideas, solidify our beliefs, and turn them into actions, so what we say about God...matters.

You’ve heard the saying “Think outside the box?”

Well perhaps it is more apt to say “Thinking *is* the box.” Thinking alone stifles the imagination. Of course it is required, and we ought not give up thinking, but the problem comes when we take ourselves too seriously or too literally that we cannot access the deeper meaning, or we lose the ability to consider someone else’s point of view without becoming defended.

Here is a story from Eckhart Tolle’s *The Power of Now* in which language tickles our imaginations, not just about ourselves, but about God and the *Godself*:

“A beggar had been sitting by the side of a road for over thirty years. One day a stranger walked by. “Spare some change?” mumbled the beggar, mechanically holding out his old baseball cap. “I have nothing to give

you,” said the stranger. Then he asked: “What’s that you are sitting on?” “Nothing,” replied the beggar. “Just an old box. I have been sitting on it for as long as I can remember.” “Ever looked inside?” asked the stranger. “No,” said the beggar. “What’s the point? There’s nothing in there.” “Have a look inside,” insisted the stranger. The beggar managed to pry open the lid. With astonishment, disbelief, and elation, he saw that the box was filled with gold. I am that stranger who has nothing to give you and who is telling you to look inside. Not inside any box, as in the parable, but somewhere even closer: inside yourself.”

This discourse that we are treated to is not to be taken literally. It is, like the story of the beggar I just shared, like the healing story of the paralytic, like the water into wine miracle, a consciousness raising speech. Jesus isn’t talking about literally raising the dead, but about achieving the kind of consciousness that can hold both doubt and faith, the willingness to question everything we’ve ever known while still trusting something is “true.”

What do we find if we let go of our ideas about God? We find our Self. What do we find when we discover the Self? We find God.

Bill:

The writings in John cannot be understood apart from an awareness that it is a mystical writing. We who have been born and raised in this country are not trained to see and experience ourselves or our world in a non-dual manner. To move in that direction requires a committed contemplative practice.

One of our contemporary mystics is a man by the name of Lawrence Freeman. I am in the process of reading his book, "Jesus: The Teacher Within." This book is massive and not an easy read. It is also a bombshell of a book. It is, as Archbishop Rowan Williams says on the cover, "written . . . without anxiety, with boldness, wit and calm."

The entire book is a meditation on the question put into Jesus' mouth by his followers, "Who do you say that I am?" And, Freeman adds, "Who is the you who answers that question?"

Freeman contends that it is in answering this question, if we are seeking to be guided in our spiritual life and living by the teachings of Jesus, that we are prepared to enter into the community of his followers. When we are in this community there is neither hatred nor any other source of division and we are free to act in accord with our essential goodness, or our True Self.

In the book he recounts a story that may be familiar to you. A Gentile, tired of the endless Jewish wrangling over the Law, once asked Hillel, a liberal rabbi contemporary with Jesus, for a summary of the Torah. Could he recount the essence of the Law while standing on one foot? Hillel replied: “whatever is hateful to you do not do to your fellow man. This is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary. Now go and live this story.”

Communicating the nature of the vision of this “community of empowerment” is the work of an artist. Jesus was a master of the story and of the unforgettable image. In his parables of the community into which he invites us he describes its multi-dimensional nature: a seed growing, bread rising, birds settling into branches, crops coming to ripeness, pearls being discovered, seas being fished, people cancelling debts, wayward sons coming to their senses and returning home, stubborn petitioners getting what they ask for, people being forgiven, children being children.

Simone Weil, an amazing mystic in her own right and gone way too early, said that the tragedy of Christianity is that it came to see itself as replacing other religions rather than adding something to them all. This essential addition is Jesus’ teaching about “community and belonging.”

You don't have to go looking for this kingdom. As Holly has indicated, it is already in your pocket, in your purse.

Now, here is the tricky part: in order to enter into the idea of God, to enter into Jesus' experience of God, the main idea that we have to shed is that of a punitive God. That's why we're calling this time "Letting Go of God" because the reflexive idea of God in Western culture is that of a punitive God.

Holly:

Every wisdom tradition that I know of has a concept of unification between the self and all that is. In monotheistic traditions, we often call "all that is" God, Allah, Yahweh. Any concept of God is a human construct. Polytheistic religions have concepts of many gods to explain phenomenon, and the move from polytheism to monotheism is reflective of the evolution of knowledge and consciousness.

We are now in a post-theistic society in which we mostly know better than to prescribe things we don't understand to an unseen God. We are trying to find a place for mystery alongside our tremendous advances in science and understandings of the unconscious. It seems like we are teetering somewhere between post-theism and humanism, and I say teetering because I think a full

embrace of humanism would mean a readiness to take personal responsibility for our beliefs and behavior, acknowledgement of how we have used and misused language, and a willingness to embrace the full dignity of every single person. Full stop. Every. Single. Person.

The things we say we believe about God - that God is loving, just, and good - actually lay a tremendous responsibility at our feet. If we say these things about God, oughtn't we also believe them about us? This is the challenge I think Nietzsche gave us when he famously proclaimed, "God is dead." He saw a world in which humans were unkind - more than unkind - horrific in their behavior, so his assessment was that God must be dead if humans are not living according to the God we say we believe in.

The god-self union is expressed in all religious traditions.

Upanishads: "The All-embracing is my self in the inner heart."

Buddhism: The buddha taught not a view or ideology, but a Way that illuminates the unification of the soul, the "boundless inclusion in the heart of all that has become."

Christian: "I and the father are one."

The entire gospel of John is about pure relatedness - where two have become one, where community is fundamental. Even scientists seek a unified theory of everything.

Martin Buber, Jewish mystic and philosopher, wrote: “In truth there is no God-seeking because there is nothing where one could not find him. How foolish and hopeless must one be to leave one’s way of life to seek God.”

There is no God-seeking...only God “presencing,” which in turn is becoming present to the Self and the world. Attend to the parts of you that want to distance from problems like racism and poverty. There are no quick fixes; but there is *being with*. We want to spring into action because action feels good and purposeful, but action without contemplation only goes so far.

Bill:

Let me quote something from Freeman’s book: “The symbol of God is the most powerful of all the symbols the mind clings to. It constellates our entire symbolic universe. It influences and interprets all personal and social life. However we may think, or even refuse to think of God, whether we are theists, atheists or agnostics, the idea of God is the most comprehensive of all symbols.”

I once had an encounter with someone who, on finding out I was a spiritual teacher, said, “Oh, I believe in God - just not in the way you believe in God.” That was the second thing he said to me! He assumed he knew what was in my head. That’s called projection.

Even the image of God that non-believers say they do NOT believe in is a very potent symbol.

I have come to believe that our understanding of the symbol the word “God” points to has been under construction from our earliest moments of consciousness. It comes from all the encounters we have with authority absorbed from our parents, older siblings, teachers, priests, police, etc. The fear of rejection or punishment associated with these authority figures leaves lingering impressions, and wounds!, on our psyches.

We transfer this to the “god out there in heaven” and in a way this symbol becomes an idol that descends into serving our human power systems or our petty needs. I know, some of those needs don’t seem petty at the time. Especially if we are at the bedside of a dying loved one, or our team seems to be losing, or we are badly in need of a parking space. You know what you pray for.

The masculinity of God has shaped and is shaping our politics. What would happen if instead of our thinking of God as “He who is,” we thought of God as “She who is”? Or even more powerfully as God as “She who is black”? If you haven’t read *The Shack*, you might take it on. It’s got the best section on judgment and an understanding of “the Trinity” as you can get your hands on.

When we are free from our cultural understandings of God, and this is what I think was one of the main purposes of Jesus, then we are free to develop all sides of our personality. This is one of the effects of experiencing what Jesus called “the kingdom of God” and which we are calling “the empowering community.”

Holly:

So here we get to the fun part. I think this would be an excellent exercise for everyone here. Bill and I talked about it on the podcast we recorded that got lost somewhere in the ether, thus was never shared. How would you write this discourse in your own words?

To return to the beginning, this is the active imagination at work. Engaging with a text with your heart and mind without overthinking or judging.

I am sure that as I read, my conscious mind will judge, but here goes.

John 5:19-38

“I’ve said this to y’all before.

I am not interested in your rules and doctrine. I’m not actually even concerned with your beliefs. I am interested in You. No one else can do You. The whole planet is

rooting for you, keeping you alive and raising you up when you are low.

I am interested in how your heart sees, in how you show up each and every day, whether you remember to look up and say “Hello, world.”

Whether you honor the God in you as I do.

When I see you it is reflected back to me and I am blinded by your lightness.

This spark is the very essence of you, and this is what must be brought forth in order for to have life to the full, in order to be raised from a lifeless life.

We are caught in a web of reciprocity to which everything belongs.

Anything that affects you affects me. It is a bi-directional flow. A continuous unbroken loop.

You’ve heard of the butterfly, yes? About the butterfly who flapped it’s small and fragile iridescent wings on one coast that swelled to a tsunami on another. The butterfly felt proud and humbled by her power. She did that!

You, too, have this softness, this strength. Your voice stirs the stars. So raise your voice from the dead, and stir.

We are all but different colored threads in this grand cosmic tapestry. When we get this, I mean really get this, our senses will come alive.

Yellows will become yellower.

Blues will become deeper, drawing you forth into their blueness.

Birds will sound like holy song and trees like chimes in the wind.

Fruits will dribble with their sweetness down your chin, stick to your hands,

And your laughter will sound like praise, your tears like rain.

If you put your ear to the ground, feel the pulse of the gravitational pull that keeps you and everything tethered to it, if you can feel yourself moving in rhyme with all that is, you will get this - that you are part of life and life is part of you.

You will look down and say, "Hello world. What do you need from me?"

You are yourself, you are everything that ever was and ever will be, too.

The very cells of your being are in cadence with the memory of creation.

It is ancient and you are ancient. It is new and you are new. Both will die and both will live forever.

I have an idea. If you still don't believe me, if you think I am a crazy person talking crazy talk and still all you experience is muted, soundless, tasteless and dull, take up your bedroll and go lie under the west Texas sky. Better yet, look into someone's eyes. There is an entire galaxy here, too. Watch as they come to life. Notice that you are alive in them, your very breath in line with their very breathing. With every out-breath, you become part of the memory of the world. If you believe this, like really believe this, your soul will be renewed and your life will be saved because you will see just how beautiful you truly are.

Bill:

The title we gave to today's talk is "Letting Go of God" and the general theme of this series on the Gospel of John is "Reimagining Our Sacred Story: A Place to Come From." Jesus didn't talk *about* the "community of empowerment" he talked *from* "the community of empowerment" and invited anyone who would to join him. I looked back over some of the notes I've made since we began this series on John. One possible theme title was "Discovering and Living the Way of Embracing the True Self" and another way "Experiencing and Expressing a Hidden Wholeness." "Reimagining Our Sacred Story."

The Gospel of John, at least this is the current opinion of the scholars I trust, was written in different layers by different authors over a period of about thirty years. What you have in John is the raw feelings of the followers of Jesus who had been excommunicated by the leaders of the synagogues where they belonged. They were learning how to live apart from Judaism. Of course, this was more than some of them could tolerate so they returned to the synagogue.

We are living in a time where, because of the messages coming to us from the world of evolutionary cosmology as articulated by people like Ilia Delio and Michael Morwood, we have been invited to learn to live

apart from the forms of Christianity we were likely taught. This is more than some who call themselves Christian can tolerate. Consequently, we are living in a time of not only a growth in fundamentalism but also where an almost new form of Christianity, which I call “American Christianity,” has come to the surface - it is militant, permissive of anger and racism, and bent of destroying what and who gets in its path to dominate.

The gospel of John is not about religion. It is not about sin and salvation. It is about expanded life and living through expanded consciousness.

There are three main things to keep in mind for a proper understanding of the writings we find in John: first, it cannot be taken literally; second, it must be seen as a Jewish writing; and, third, it is mystical from beginning to end.

What this means is that for the writers of John and for the members of the community that produced this writing, the journey into the Self, was the same as the journey into God. God was not perceived as “a being.” God is not distant or other worldly. John understands God to be a verb - an energy that is calling, informing and shaping not only us but all of creation into being all that we were created to be. It is this life-expanding oneness with God to which the writers of John believed that Jesus was calling us into.

I don't want anything I've said to make this impersonal.

After Jesus was executed, his followers were terrified. They are depicted as afraid to go outside. Further, as their experience of what they called resurrection grew among them, they were kicked out of the synagogue.

They shape this story in a crucible of people who are afraid, full of doubt. One of the most important things that American Christianity misses about how this story was given birth was the role of women. We've already encountered the Samaritan woman at the well and we will meet others all the way to the first person to experience and report on resurrection, Mary. Jesus treated women with way more respect than the church has treated them from the beginning.

The term Jesus used for his work and what the people of the Johannine community experienced was "community." A Community where belonging isn't based on status, achievement, or gender but, rather, on the deep belief that everyone is welcome, every one matters, everyone is loved - no exceptions. This community is for scarred and scared people, for people who want to belong but aren't sure what or how to believe.

The Gospel of John sees in Jesus both an invitation into and a doorway through which we can walk into a new dimension of what it means to be human. But, and here is the tricky part, we can't do it and, at the same time, hold on to any kind of literalism whatsoever. People who do that become violent, even though sometimes that violence is wrapped in a velvet glove. Sometimes it's not. That's why some of the insurrectionists on January 6 of last year could take with them into the capital building copies of the Bible, the cross, and the Christian flag. As I said last week, history will show that Christianity will forever be the victim of religion.

John opens a door into the world of mysticism where we are invited to re-examine what we mean by faith, how we understand God, what it means and how to enter a new realm of consciousness and relate to the sacred, the need to cross boundaries and break down barriers both within and without. Then we are given a model in this passage for us to say how we respond to this, how you respond.

I'm not going to leave you hanging. There is nothing to hang on to. We're held.

No matter where you go this week, no matter what happens, remember this: you carry sacred cargo. So, watch your step.