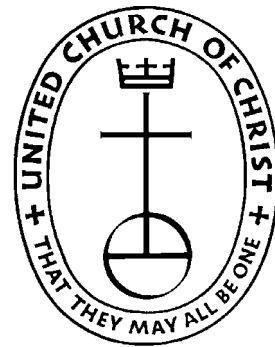


Bringing Shug's God to Church

A Sermon By —
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This sermon relates how in Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* Shug helps Celie change her theology, developing an image of God as a Spirit beyond gender, learning to enjoy life in the moment, celebrating God's acceptance of her, and seeing church not as a place where you find God but one where you bring God.

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

*A Liberal Church, Welcoming of All,
Passionately Committed to Social Justice*
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Rev. Jerald Stinson
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On my office wall there is a poster entitled "The Gospel According to Shug." I had it in my Carlsbad office and it has been in my office here since I arrived. I am so used to it that I rarely notice it, but one day a few months ago it caught my attention and I was reminded of the wisdom in Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize winning 1982 novel *The Color Purple*.

Some of you were children when the novel and the Steven Spielberg film came out, but I am assuming most of you are familiar with it. *The Color Purple* is about a struggling African American woman from the rural south. Raped at age fourteen by the man she believed to be her father, Celie bore two children who were taken away from her. She was married off to Albert; she always just called him Mister. Celie became Mister's household slave. He beat her, forced himself upon her, and wouldn't even buy her a decent dress. Celie's beloved younger sister Nettie came to live with them, but Celie persuaded her to run away when she saw how Mister looked at Nettie. She hated to lose her sister, but didn't want Nettie hurt like she had been hurt.

The book is a series of letters, mostly from Celie to God. The initial letters reflected hopelessness. But then Shug Avery, a blues singer with a bad reputation and a warm heart, entered Celie's life. Shug was wild, wicked and delightful. She stood up to Mister; even made him buy Celie a dress. And thanks to Shug, Celie began to become her own person. Shug, a bisexual, liberated black woman, helped Celie arrive at a new understanding of God which became the impetus for Celie's liberation. I think there's some serious theology in *The Color Purple*, and Shug Avery is a remarkable 20th-century theologian.

Let me share four ways in which Shug transformed Celie's faith. **First, Shug helped her move beyond the image of a stern, white male God to God as Spirit, beyond gender.** Like many of us, Celie was raised to think of God in male terms; to speak of God as "he" or "him". Listen as Shug and Celie talk:

Tell me what your God look like, Celie Aw naw, I say, I'm too shame. Nobody ever ast me this before, so I'm sort of took by surprise. Besides when I think about it, it don't seem quite right. But it all I got. Okay, I say. He big, old, tall, gray-bearded and white. He wears white robes and go barefooted Blue eyes? she ast Sort of bluish-

gray. White lashes, I say She laugh.

Why you laugh, I ast. I don't think it's so funny. Then she tell me this old white man is the same God she used to see when she prayed.

If you wait to find God in church, she say, that's who's bound to show up, cause that's where he live How come, I ast Cause that's the one in the white folks' white bible Shug, I say, God wrote the bible; white folks had nothing to do with it How come he look just like them then, she say. Only bigger? And a heap more hair.

Now think for a moment what it meant for Celie to see God as a man, to call him Father. What were her images of men? A stepfather who repeatedly raped her and a husband who beat and humiliated her. For Celie, God was a powerful master, like those other men.

The God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown. If he ever listened to poor colored women the world would be a different place.

But Shug envisioned a God beyond gender. She said:

Man corrupt everything. He try to make you think he everywhere. Soon as you think he everywhere you think he God. But he ain't. Whenever you trying to pray, and man plop himself on other end of it, tell him to git lost.

Shug saw God as Spirit. In fact, Alice Walker dedicated the novel to "the Spirit." Shug wouldn't call God he or she; she called God "it." Listen to what she told Celie:

Here's the thing. The thing I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside can find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you are not looking, or don't know what you are looking for. Trouble do it for most folks.

It? Celie asked Yeah, It. God ain't a he or a she, but a It But what do it look like? Don't look like nothing, she say. It ain't a picture show. It ain't something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself. I believe God is everything, say Shug. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, then you've found it She say, 'My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me; that feeling of being a part of everything, not separate at all.

Shug is a progressive theologian. God is not male or female, white or black. God is beyond such imagery. And today, continued reluctance to give up that imagery often locks people into unhealthy models of God. Globally, many oppressed people finally find a path to God by abandoning imagery from western, patriarchal, white society. We must move beyond limiting images of God.

That's why we are so careful about language in this congregation; that's why our common prayers avoid exclusively male imagery; that's why the words of some of the Christmas carols have been changed in *The New Century Hymnal*. We try to offer our children broad, inclusive images of God.

It is not easy to change – to give up that old white man in the sky, the old words to the hymns. Celie discovered that – she said:

This hard work he been there so long, he don't want to budge.

It does stretch us to use new language – but a liberating God cannot be contained in language that excludes or hurts anyone.

A second aspect of Shug's theology: she helped Celie move from a legalistic faith focused on a better life after death to a freer faith affirming life in the present moment. Religion for Celie had been all rules. She said:

I used to get mad at my mammy cause she put a lot of work on me. Then I see how sick she is. Couldn't stay mad at her. Couldn't be mad at my daddy cause he my daddy. Bible say, Honor father and mother no matter what.

Rules – or speaking of her brutal husband:

Sometimes Mister git on me pretty hard. I have to talk to Old Maker. But he my husband. I shrug my shoulders. This life soon be over. Heaven last always.

For so long, many Christians have told women to endure cruelty and subjugation, looking ahead to a better day after death. It has been the same for people whose skins are not white. Celie was supposed to obey and respect the father who raped her and the husband who beat her because religion was wrapped up in patriarchal rules. Her only hope was in a far-off heaven. Faith gave her no hope for the present, just rules.

But then Shug came along and challenged the rules. For instance, Celie felt sex was dirty and bad; she was embarrassed by her sexual feelings. Shug said:

God love all them feelings. That's some of the best stuff God did. And when you

know God loves 'em you enjoys 'em a lot more. You can just relax, go with everything that's going and praise God by liking what you like God don't think it dirty? Naw, she say, God made it. Listen, God loves everything you love and a mess of stuff you don't. But more than anything, God love admiration You saying God vain? Naw, she say, not vain, just wanting to share a good thing. I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it people think pleasing God is all God care about. But any fool can see It always trying to please us back.

Shug affirms a God who loves life, a God who wants us to celebrate life, a God who wants us to enjoy the purple fields and the beauty of life. Isn't that what our third Advent candle is all about? Shug's God isn't a life-denying God but rather a life-affirming God.

So Shug's God is inclusive and life-affirming. Transformation number three. **Thanks to Shug, Celie stopped trying to win God's love and simply celebrated God's acceptance.**

In the past, Celie had worked at her church – cleaning floors and windows, washing altar linen, making sure there was wood in the stove. But even so the church women looked down on her because she had two children out of wedlock (it didn't matter that her father was raping her). They wouldn't accept her as one of them, but she hoped that somehow her labor would win their and God's acceptance.

But Shug convinced Celie that we don't need to win God's love, to merit it, to deserve it. No, God loves us for who we are.

I is a sinner, say Shug. Cause I was born. I don't deny it. But once us feel loved by God, us do the best us can to please God with what us like.

That baffled Celie who said:

You telling me God loves you, and you ain't never done nothing for God. I mean not go to church, sing in the choir, feed the preacher and all like that.

Shug the theologian responded:

But if God love me, Celie, I don't have to do all that. Unless I want to. There's a lot of other things I can do that I speck God likes.

Let me tell you a story I used in a sermon eight years ago, so some of you may remember it. A woman was waiting for an airplane at Heathrow Airport in London. She purchased some cookies to eat while she waited. She hauled her luggage to a wait-

ing area, sat down and started to read, putting the cookies on the seat next to her.

A man was sitting on the other side of the chair with the cookies. Soon he reached over and opened the box and took one of her cookies and ate it. The nerve of that – those were her cookies! He just took one. She didn't know who he was.

But she didn't know what to say. So she reached over herself and took a cookie, thinking this would assert her ownership. But a few moments later, the man took a second cookie. She was really angry now, but didn't want to create a scene, so she simply took a second cookie herself. They began taking turns – he would take a cookie; she would take a cookie. She was now seething. How could he invade her privacy like that? How could he take what was rightfully hers?

Finally there was one cookie left. He took it, broke it in half, and handed her half while he ate the rest. Then his flight was called. He got up and boarded his plane. She sat there fuming. When they finally called her flight, she stood up, reached into her purse for her ticket and there, at the top of her purse, was her box of cookies. She had put the cookies in her purse; those weren't her cookies on the chair. She had been eating his cookies. Can you imagine her embarrassment? And there was not a thing she could do about it. He was gone. She could not explain or undo what she had done.

Now all of us have moments when we do that which we know we ought not do or leave undone that which we should do. Sometimes, we can make it up, but at other times we must simply live with failure, inadequacies, limitations. And Shug understood that God loves and accepts us for who we are – even when we eat somebody else's cookies. We don't have to, and in fact can't, earn that love. Our faith is not about obedience, rules and dogma; it is about God's unconditional, universal love.

Then the final transformation: **Shug helped Celie see the church not as a place where you find God but as a place to which you bring God.** An amazing concept. Shug said:

Celie, tell the truth, have you ever found God in church? I never did. I just found a bunch of folk hoping for God to show. Any God I ever felt in church I brought in with me. And I think all the other folks did too. They come to church to share God, not find God.

In Hebrew history there were times when people were obsessed with worship and ended up forgetting about justice.

Amos said God was sick of the smell of their sacrifices; God refused to listen to the noise of their solemn assemblies. What God wanted was for people to let justice

flow like waters.

Jeremiah, in the text I have selected for today, contrasted a selfish ruler with a noble one. Of the poor ruler he said, "Woe to the ruler who builds a house without integrity and its upper rooms with injustice." And of the faithful ruler he said: "He practiced justice and integrity and all went well for him. Is that not what it means to know me [says God]?" To know God is to judge on behalf of the poor and the needy.

Or in Micah's words: "to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly in God's sight."

Shug knew that. People bring from their own daily life the God of justice with them into the church and then they share and celebrate the presence of that God.

As important as what we do in this room may be, it is not primarily in the shadows of these stained glassed windows that we find God, nor even in ritual, liturgy and sermons. The best place to find God is out there in the world – in daily life – in moments of meaningful encounter with friends and family, in those times at work when what we say or do can make a difference, in all the opportunities we have to serve others. As we experience the love and joy that comes to us when we reach out to others and seek to build a more just world – that's when we find God. What we do in church is bring that God with us!

Shug helped Celie see God in a new way – a God beyond gender, a God of joy who affirms life in the present moment, a God of radically unconditional love and acceptance, and a God found in the quest for peace and justice in a wounded world.

That new theology ultimately helped Celie stand up, confront and then forgive her abusive husband; it allowed her to start her life anew. It was liberating. She said:

*God changed into something different that I'll have to speak to in a different way.
Dear God, dear stars, dear trees, dear everything. Dear God.*

Amen.