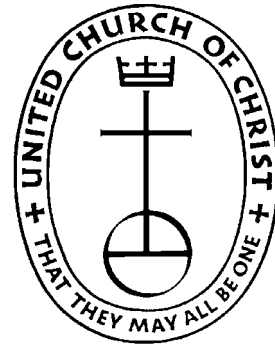


Thinking Theologically

A Sermon By —
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We all think theologically, balancing what we have learned in our heads about how the world works with our lived experiences of God. To do this well, we must bring our whole selves into this community of faith and engage in conversation with others here; we must find language big enough for our experiences of God; and we must ask questions – lots of questions.

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

*A Liberal Church, Welcoming of All,
Passionately Committed to Social Justice*
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Someone once asked their rabbi, "Why is it that rabbis always answer a question with another question?" The rabbi responded, "So what's wrong with a question?"

Any of you who are parents, or who have spent any time at all around a toddler, know that a two-year-old's favorite is "why?" That child's favorite phrase is likely to be "what's this?"

We human beings have an insatiable desire to know, to understand, to make sense of ourselves and the world around us. For us, it's not enough to greet each dawn with our faces to the sun. We want to know what time the sun will rise, upon whom and what it will shine, and what that means to us.

We have been gifted with self-awareness, and making some sense of our lives, trying to understand why we are here, on this planet, in this time and place, how our actions impact others, is all part of our human condition.

For many thousands of years, human beings have looked to the heavens for answers and have populated those heavens with divine beings whose actions or whims have impacted human affairs. As our understanding of the cosmos has become more sophisticated over the years, our ideas about divine beings, and the cause and effect of the laws of physics, the rotation of the earth around the sun, have changed. But our human need for meaning has not. Just like a curious two-year-old, we still ask "why?"

In this new world, this global village we inhabit, growing ever more complicated and accessible through science and technology, many of us think daily about the meaning and purpose of our lives. We are mindful of the decisions that need to be made to make sense of the world and our place in it.

A child is born, a child dies. A job is terminated; a new one is begun. We fall in love; we encounter something in nature that stirs us beyond anything we have known before. A parent dies and the loss lasts a very long time. We feel yearnings in our very soul for something yet unknown. We witness an incredible sunset or experience an amazing piece of art or poetry. Even as we live in a post-9/11 world, with wars and natural disasters, worldwide economic changes, and climate and environmental issues, the search for meaning continues and each generation shares the universal concerns for life and common good.

Whether we realize it or not, whether we have named it this way or not, this kind of thinking, this search for meaning or for connection is innately theological, and all of us engage in theological thinking all the time.

Some folks might say, "You know what, I am too busy just trying to get through the day. I don't have time to worry about theology. That's your job, preacher." Or, some might say, "If I wanted to think about theology, I would have gone to seminary. Again, your job, preacher." I hear that. And I challenge that.

True, it's my job, and it's Jerry's job, to spend a good amount of time thinking about God and purpose what it means to live faithfully. And it's also our job to help you develop tools so that you can think about God and meaning and what it means to live faithfully. And here's why:

Our faith tells us that we have been called to be the church. We usually think of church in terms of what happens here on Sundays, when we gather for music, celebration and learning; or what we *do* collectively in terms of service, like working at the Sunday Drop-In Center, or contributing money to Church World Services, marching in a parade; or who we are in the wider church, like as a denomination or as a part of the interfaith community. We generally think of ourselves as church as a collective. And we are.

But in addition to that, each and every one of you who are sitting out there today are members of the church whom God has called to the church outside the walls of the church. You, collectively, write the laws of our lands and invent new technologies to serve humanity. You study how to clone animals and humans and measure germs on Mars. You rear and educate children. You work in corporations, governments and health care systems. You build roads and homes. You teach in schools and develop public policy. In those endeavors, you, as the church, are called to practice your faith. We need the wisdom of faith through deeper theological reflection to help discern the how and why of it all.

You might think that you're not theologians, but you in fact are doing theology. You may not be trained in theology for preaching, teaching, and Word and Sacrament ministry. That is a particular call. Thinking theologically, or doing theology, does not merely mean studying tradition, doctrine and Scripture so that one knows about those things. Rather, doing theology balances what we have learned in our heads about how the world works with the lived experience of God each of us has.

Thinking theologically isn't only about trying to name or define or even understand how we encounter the divine; it's also about allowing those encounters to transform how we live, how we interact with other people, how we go about our jobs, how we problem solve, how we bring other voices and other perspectives into our conversations. All of our experience has meaning and provides insight for our particular and unique journeys, and to the particular and unique place in which we all find ourselves.

In an essay about life-long faith-based education, religious educator Sally Simmel wrote this in an essay for the book *A Life Long Call to Learning*ⁱ: A forty-three-year-old from the East Coast sums up some of the longing for meaning in life when she asks, "What is this deep longing I feel in spite of success and happiness? What is God's purpose for me? How do I know when God is speaking to me?"

One sixty-something puts it, "to deal with end-of-life decisions for parents and in-laws. How, as Christians, do we make choices for ourselves and our loved ones?"

Some issues in later life are about new relationships with children and grandchildren, meaningful retirement or new directions for the vital years yet to come. Other issues are connected to new technologies that are frightening and often not understood by clergy or laity who are not working in the fields of science and technology. How do we bring the science and faith perspectives together in ways that assist Christians in making decisions?

In his letter to the church in Philippi, the apostle Paul wrote, "work out your salvation with fear and trembling." For a long time I had no idea what that verse meant. But now, how I read those words is that we are each responsible for our own spiritual health, we are each responsible for our own understanding of God. Nobody else can do that work for us – not the minister, not a spouse or a parent, not a mentor or teacher or friend. We must each try to make sense for ourselves how God is present and at work in us.

So, how, indeed, do we go about this? How do go about this search for meaning, as members of this church, and as individuals? Let me make four suggestions.

One. A little slogan that you might hear around First Church from time to time (and, by the way, it's not my favorite, but I know where it is coming from) is "you don't have to park your brain at the door." I think what people generally mean by that comment is that this is a congregation that doesn't go for pat answers, dogmas or creeds. Some of us come from religious communities where questions were not

welcome and we were expected to take everything on faith. Challenging long-held assumptions as illogical or unreasonable could a sign of being a trouble-maker, and some of you here had that experience. So for many of us, finding a faith community where our tough questions are not only accepted, but welcomed and encouraged, is nothing short of a miracle.

But let me suggest that we don't park anything at the door. In fact, for us to be faithfully engaged, it's vital that we don't. We need to bring our whole selves into this church, into this community. We need to bring our hurt and our resentment. We need to bring our frustration and our fear. For where else but in a community of other people can we learn what it means to really be human?

We need to bring our brokenness, because if we don't admit that we are broken, we can never be healed. We need to bring our skepticism, because if we don't admit that we sometimes don't know what we're doing, we can't learn anything. We need to bring our vulnerabilities, because if we aren't willing to be touched, then we never will be. We can't be the whole people of God if we don't bring our whole selves into the community.

Two. Talk about it with somebody who knows what you're up against. Many of you are retired. What are you doing to find meaning and identity in your life in a society that defines people by what they do to earn a living? Many of you are educators. How do you help your students when they are struggling with difficult issues? What are your thoughts about possible solutions to violence on campuses? Some of you work in health care. How does increasing technology stretch the limits of medical ethics? Some of you are in law. What are the gray areas between legality and right and wrong? Who decides? How does being a person of faith impact your decision making, your problem solving?

Some churches have created reflection groups of people in similar occupations. These small groups then provide information, support, accountability, and deep engagement in the issues of work and the marketplace. That's something that could be done here – or perhaps ecumenically, or as a part of an interfaith network. Maybe that's a project for our partnership with St. Luke's Episcopal Church.

Just remember – you are the church outside the walls of this building. Working together to bring about God's realm of justice and peace isn't going to happen because we talk about it in this room at 10 o'clock on Sunday mornings. It will only happen because our lives are transformed, and we, in turn, become agents of change in our homes, our communities, our places of business, and our world.

My third suggestion for how to go your theological work: Find a new name for God. Let me use myself as an example. Like many Christians, the name that I used to use for God is “Father.” This works just fine for many people, including most of the people in my family, and maybe for you, too, and that’s great if it does, but it doesn’t work so well for me anymore.

For me, “Father” is not only overly anthropomorphic, that is, it humanizes God too much, it is associated with a particular form and meaning of human. In mind, that word is too male, too dominant, too personal, too flappable, too much like Marcus Welby to be a helpful descriptor of the sacred. Also, I have had a sometimes contentious relationship with my own dad, and so to call the divine “Father” is just not something that fits for me. So I have had to find something different.

The names that we use for God really, really matter. They matter because words are symbols and are fraught with meaning, with emotion, with purpose. The words we choose for God have historical and social context, and mean something different to everyone. And the words that we use for God can actually form or shift how we experience God. And that, in turn, impacts how we do theology, and that changes how we live.

The best example of this for me comes from retired Episcopal bishop John Shelby Spong. I like very much the language that Spong has chosen for God, and you’ve heard both Jerry and me use this language: Spong calls God “the source of life, the source of love, and the ground of our being.” But even more than these words, I like the lived reality that he says that our language must lead us to. I’ve used this example from Spong before, so it may sound very familiar to you.

If we say that God is the source of life, then that must mean that God is present in all living things. God is present in you, in me, in all of creation. And if we are to honor a God who is the source of life, then we must do so by living fully, not being afraid, but sharing, giving life away.

If we say that God is the source of love, then we must honor God by being loving, by caring about people more than we care about being right. We must love wastefully. Spong uses the example, and I’ve shared this with you before, of a sink that is filled to overflowing, and the water pours over the edge of the sink, soaking down into all the crevices and cracks along the way. It never stops to ask if the crack deserves water, it just flows, abundantly. That’s how we are to love one another.

If we say that God is the ground of being, then we must honor God by being all that we can be, by living into the fullness of our humanity, not bound by the fears of yesterday.

God, the source of life, the source of love, the ground of being, is language that works for Spong – perhaps it works for you, too. Other words might work – but they all have consequences. If your word for God is love, will that not impact how you treat other people – especially people you don't like or don't know? Wouldn't it impact how well you love yourself? If your word for God is spirit, might not that impact how much you seek, or how tightly you grasp, material possession?

It does matter what language you choose, because it will shape how you think. And how you think will shape how you live.

So, to engage in our theological work, our search for meaning, one, bring your whole self into this community of faith – let it touch and move you and heal you. You will also be a source of grace and healing for others in this community. Two, engage in conversation. Share your experiences, your thoughts, your fears, your hopes with others who understand who you are and what you are going through and what your challenges are. Three, consider the language that you use for that sacred center of our being, that divine source of our living. Find language that is big enough for your experience and that invites you live into who and what God may be nudging you to be and to do.

And finally, four. Remember the rabbi who asked, “So what’s wrong with a question?” I would say, “Nothing.” In fact I think that living faithfully requires asking questions – lots of questions – just like the two-year old that is still inside each of us. Ask questions, and then engage in the work of finding how the search for meaning leads you into the heart of God. Amen.

¹ Sally Simmel “Why Would Laypeople Want Theological Education, Anyway?” in *A Lifelong Call to Learn? Continuing Education for Religious Educators*. Robert E. Reber and D. Bruce Roberts, editors. The Alban Institute, 2010.