

“The Rest of the Story” – December 4, 2016

Preached by Ministerial Intern D. Scott Cooper at the Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

First Reading: “Is there a Santa Claus?” by Francis Pharcellus Church

Second Reading: Excerpt from

On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process by Katherine Keller

“Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus.” I imagine you recognized the famous editorial written by Francis Pharcellus Church in response to a letter from Virginia O’Hanlon. It appeared in the September 21, 1897 edition of *The New York Sun* and has become a part of popular American folklore. Books and TV shows have been based on his response to the little girl’s question. More than a century later it is the most reprinted editorial in any newspaper in the English language.

Perhaps more than any other time of year, we are surrounded by stories that we know and love, sometimes passed down through generations, and even through millennia. I can just give you a name and it conjures up an entire world related to the Christmas season. George Bailey. Bob Cratchit. Cindy Lou Who. And they stand up to repeated readings and watchings. How often have parents heard children beg to hear the same bedtime story read again and again. How often as adults have we watched a favorite old movie or TV show for the umpteenth time and caught something we never picked up on before?

It’s been said “Human beings are fundamentally storytellers and story-listeners. We not only *have* stories but *are* stories too.”¹ And there is a Jewish saying that says “God created humankind because God loves stories.”

Students who endure classroom lectures accompanied by many wordy PowerPoint slides usually report remembering best the stories that illustrated the professor’s points. People who listen to sermons week after week agree. I’m sure there are those of you who heard my first sermon and

¹ Susan H. McFadden and John T. McFadden, *Aging Together, Dementia, Friendship & Flourishing Communities*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 16-17.

remember my stories about driving from Dallas to Sacramento or my stories about my grandparents, but don't remember the pearls of wisdom that fell from my lips. That's okay – everyone remembers the stories.

Some of the stories that endure are stories that explain our world and our customs down through generations. I'm sure the reason "Yes, Virginia There is a Santa Claus" is still read one hundred and nineteen years later is its uplifting explanation of our custom of welcoming jolly old St. Nick, plus it's an explanation that navigates the tricky difference between truth and factual accuracy. The word for 'story' in Greek is 'mythos' and the Merriam-Webster's Encyclopedia of Literature defines myth as ". . . any traditional story consisting of events that are ostensibly historical, though often supernatural, explaining the origins of a cultural practice or natural phenomenon."

According to Irish-American New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan, myth attempts to mediate opposites, explain mystery, reconcile polarities, to take the randomness out of life and weave it into a believable pattern. Through myth, there are explanations for the apparent incongruities of life, reasons given by the gods.... Myth explains, settles, closes the gaps in our consciousness.

Crossan says myth's polar opposite is parable. Parable is meant to change us, not reassure us. Parable is always a somewhat unnerving experience. The standard reaction to parable is "I don't know what you mean by that story, but I'm certain I don't like it."

And the supernatural aspect of many myths lead some of us to want to dismiss *them* as entirely useless. After all, one of the Sources of Our Living Tradition, as listed by the Unitarian Universalist Association, is "**Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.**" But another one is "**Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.**" It takes a humility to accept that there are some things we won't ever know or understand, no matter how smart we become, or how old we grow.

As Francis Pharcellus Church described to Virginia,” You may tear apart the baby’s rattle and see what makes the noise inside, but there is a veil covering the unseen world which not the strongest man, nor even the united strength of all the strongest men that ever lived, could tear apart. Only faith, fancy, poetry, love, romance, can push aside that curtain and view and picture the supernal beauty and glory beyond.”
We may picture the beauty, but frustratingly for us, not an explanation.

As well as being uneasy with the supernatural aspects of some of the stories, many simply use the word myth to mean a collectively held belief that has no basis in fact. According to a source online, “This usage, which is often pejorative, arose from labeling the religious myths and beliefs of **other cultures** as incorrect, but it has spread to cover non-religious beliefs as well. Because of this popular and subjective word usage, many people take offense when the narratives they believe to be true are called myths. To the source culture a myth by definition is of course "true", because it embodies beliefs, concepts and ways of questioning that make sense of the world.”²

In fact, there are those who have come to believe the important writings of their culture are not only literally true but inerrant. And I can understand why people want to be assured and told exactly what is true and correct by an authority figure, it is comforting and less confusing. It helps us believe there is order and fairness in the world, and it’s all going to be alright. Perhaps on occasion you’ve felt like me, and like Virginia O’Hanlon, and desperately wanted to be able to contact someone and beg them: “Please just tell me the truth!”

Of course, this may assume there is one truth for all time that can be handed down. As Catherine Keller stated in our earlier reading, “Literalism freezes theology into single meanings. Instead of flowing from an inexhaustible truth-*process*, meaning gets trapped in a truth-*stasis*.”

Many people don’t realize biblical literalism was not always the default – down through history people like Francis Pharcellus Church understood that myth and metaphor could be true *without* the pitfall of literalism. Before the Protestant reformation, the final authority, the ultimate arbiter and source of information in religious matters was the church, with its

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myth>

ancient traditions and living experts. When Luther and friends opposed the teaching of the Catholic hierarchy, they needed a superior authority to appeal to, which was provided by the Bible.³ And just before the time of Virginia O'Hanlon, the backlash against the writings of Charles Darwin helped solidify a resolve for biblical literalism.

I'm getting too bogged down in all this historical minutia, so let me stop and tell a story.

After lunch one day, our second-grade teacher, Mrs. Bullock, apparently not prepared or willing to move on to the next lesson, offered to allow a student to tell a story. Skipping over the me and the other performers in the room wildly waving our hands, Mrs. Bullock chose Debbie, a mousey girl with long, straight hair, who seemed pleased with an opportunity to do something for the class within her abilities.

"This is the story," she began breathlessly, "of Curlilocks and the Three Bears." The room burst into laughter. "Curlilocks! Don't you mean Goldilocks? Everyone knows it's Goldilocks!"

Mrs. Bullock jumped in to save the startled storyteller's dignity with the information, apparently known previously only to her and Debbie, that Curlilocks was a perfectly acceptable moniker for the main character. Who knew?

Of course, as Debbie and Mrs. Bullock knew, the accuracy of the details did not change the wisdom of the story; breaking and entering is never a good idea; and even if it is only porridge, one should not steal food from an anthropomorphic family of half-ton omnivores.

But the more important piece of my story is our reaction to her presentation. My school chums and I thought there was one accurate version, which of course was our version, so we didn't listen to her interpretation of the story, one we might have appreciated and learned from, had we been wiser.

Even more problematic, the other students, including me, mocked Debbie because of her "faulty" telling of a beloved story. As UUs, we uphold the notion that how we treat people is more important than having the same interpretation of the story. That is why we are a covenantal faith, not a

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2011/feb/21/biblical-literalism-bible-christians>

creedal faith. We don't agree to have the same specific beliefs; we agree to treat each other well.

Our theology is found in experience and relationship. We put relationships with others, the divine, and the divine we see in others over doctrine and tradition. These relationships happen now, we are personally involved in them, they have immediacy. UU Transcendentalist and provider of quotes, Ralph Waldo Emerson once asked,

“Why should not we enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? The sun shines also today. Let us demand our own words and law and worship.”

I participated in Spirit Play training a few weeks ago. If you have kids, you probably know that many of them go participate in a curriculum called Spirit Play once we sing them out of the sanctuary.

They are told an engaging story and then the storyteller begins wondering out loud about aspects of the story. The kids respond verbally and creatively. I'm sure there are those in Sacramento, and I know there are those in Texas, who believe that kids should be told what the stories mean, so they can be sure to learn the correct lesson.

But UUs go in a different direction. One of Unitarianism's first leading theologians, William Ellery Channing wrote in 1837:

“The great end in religious instruction, whether in the Sunday-school or family, is not to stamp our minds upon the young, but to stir up their own; not to make them see with our eyes, but to look inquiringly and steadily with their own; not to give them a definite amount of knowledge, but to inspire a fervent love of the truth; not to form an outward regularity but to touch inward springs. . .”⁴

One of my seminary professors has just written a book that describes how the lessons and morals of the story of Noah and the Ark have changed

⁴ Channing, William Ellery, 1884. “The Sunday-School: Discourse pronounced before the Sunday-School Society,” in *The Complete Works of William Ellery Channing*. Reprint, Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, LLC, 2006.

dramatically through time. In Victorian times, it was used to describe to children how they must do exactly as they're told because God is an angry God who will destroy those who misbehave – look at all those people who drowned. It has also been used to tell children how God is loving and protects those he loves – look at Noah and his family and all those happy animals. He lists other examples that show how various lessons can be taught from the same story. So, when someone says children should be taught biblical truths, I have to wonder, who's interpretation of the truth?

Just as the children in Spirit Play wonder aloud at the meaning of the story, we adults can ask what meaning, what truths, does a text handed down over generations have for us. If these writings have resonated for people for hundreds or even thousands of years, what might they mean to people in a turbulent and divided America in 2016?

Might the life of a homeless, itinerant Jewish preacher-turned-rebel and insurrectionist against a corrupt government drunk on power and wealth might have any resonance today?

Remember what I said about parables. Jesus taught with parables because his intent was to shake things up, not make sure everyone believes the same thing. When people tried to pin him down with questions, he answered in parable.

We must look beyond the abstractions that Catherine Keller named, the abstractions that have pounded stories into simple propositions of belief. We must sift through the complex mix of metaphor, history, and philosophy. We must use our intelligence, values and appreciation of the mystery to discern meaning for us hiding behind the pseudo-facts. Truth is not absolute; we must discern what it means for us today. But it is not dissolute, we know we must discern with integrity, and with our sense of morals and ethics firmly in place.

It's certainly not that we don't believe anything, or that we can believe anything we want, it's that we wonder: how can truth be absolute if it is only relevant to one culture at one place in the world in one point in time? We must determine how this wisdom is relevant for us here and now. *Why should not we have poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?*

Discernment is a tall order. What tools do we have to tackle this formidable task? First, UUs hold up Seven Principles as guides. These are strong values and moral teachings, not dogma or doctrine. We also cite six sources of our Living Tradition, two of which I referred to earlier.

The Fourth UU Principle is “A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” When we read stories from long ago, and from a variety of faith traditions, we join with one another to discern what meaning we find in them for us today. The fact that others before us have misinterpreted them, or insist their interpretation is the only one, is beside the point. Many of these stories that have stood the test of time and resonate as valuable sources of insight and wisdom. We take these stories seriously, not literally.

And it would be a mistake to think we should do it alone. We gather here in community and have discussions about important matters – to come away more thoughtful, enlightened and loving than when we arrived. Not to be told the one right answer. Because I don’t have the one right answer to tell you.

Like Francis Pharcellus Church, we can assure small ones that “the most real things in the world are those that neither children nor [adults] can see - love and generosity and devotion.

Much like those children in Spirit Play, when we are presented with stories, especially those that have cultural relevance and spiritual resonance, we can wonder what wisdom may be found in them. Not make the mistake of asking, “is this story true’ but asking “what is true about this story?”

Like Virginia, we can engage people we love and trust to help us go find the answers. If you can’t think of anyone to help you, just look around.