

Laughing With God – Sermon Text

Our reading this morning comes from Chris Stedman, an atheist with a commitment to interfaith work. Chris talks about creating his own personal canon of texts. As a Unitarian Universalist, I can't help find myself drawn to this idea. I have no "Bible," no sacred text that I draw from. But I have a multitude of other sources that I draw inspiration from. Among them, I count many things: movies, songs, books. Quotes. Things people have said to me in passing.

I'm sure that if you took a moment right now to think about those songs and books and movies that held this place in your life, you could.

And for me, that song we just heard is a part of my personal canon.

"No one's laughing at God in a hospital"

Those are the first words. I was walking away from my summer job as a chaplain at Brigham and Women's Hospital when I heard these words through my headphones. And though I had heard this song before, I had never really listened to the words. I'm sure you've had this experience, where suddenly something will hit you different. As if you needed to hear those words just in that moment.

This was one of those moments for me. Here I was, listening to these words, on this hot summer day, walking away from a hospital.

"No one's laughing at God in a hospital"

I was walking away from a hospital, a hospital where I was as chaplain. Where in some ways I was representing God. And, I don't mean as a Prophet, or as Jesus or even as a clergy member being "God's representative," the way that some religions see their clergy.

No, that's not what I mean. What I mean is more symbolic than that. I was representing, in a way, the "church." Representing religion. Representing people's *relationship* with God. People's relationship with the concept of God. Be that antagonistic or favorable or just plain apathetic. I can't tell you how many times I walked into a room and was called "Father," though I am a father by no definition of the word. I am not ordained. I am not Catholic, but that's what people expected when they saw me come in. A man as God's representative.

Which was a funny feeling for a guy who was president of his College's Atheist Club. A funny feeling for a guy who, if you get right down to it, might even still be an atheist. A funny feeling for a guy who got despite being in seminary, confessed to his supervisor that praying made him more than a little nervous.

But of course, not a funny feeling in a humorous way. Because no one is laughing at God in a hospital.

Which is not to say that I've never laughed at God.

Here, let's try a God-themed joke:

In the beginning there was nothing. God said "Let there be light!" And there was light. There was still nothing, but you could see it a whole lot better.

(Funny! Ok good, I wasn't sure how that'd go over.)

(Not funny, huh? I tried...)

I actually Googled "Jokes about God," for you! Do you have any idea how hard it is to find a joke about God that's not sexist, racist, homophobic, or too risqué to share in church?

Regina Spektor in the chorus of her song says:

"God can be funny, like at a cocktail party when listening to a good God themed joke. Or when the crazies say he hates us and they get so red in the neck you think they're about to choke."

Let me read truncate that and say it again, before I take the multitude of issues I have with that sentence.

"God can be funny... when the crazies say he hates us and they get to red in the neck you think they're about to choke."

So yes, I take issue with the word "crazy" here, from a mental health standpoint.

And I take issue with the word "he." As much as I believe or don't believe about God, I can tell you that God is most certainly not a man.

But putting that aside.

What if the "us" in this sentence are the people at an abortion clinic. What if the "us" in this statement are the people that work at a Planned Parenthood. Or the people that go to a Planned Parenthood.

And what if the people who say God hates "us" have bombs, or guns? And what if they kill us?

I don't think anybody will be laughing at God then.

Now, friends, it's too early to tell if these were the motives of the man who shot and killed three people at a Planned Parenthood in Colorado Springs on Friday. But that's where my mind

went. "It's got to be an act of Christian terrorism." That was my first thought. But we don't know.

But I can tell you that people prayed. While Planned Parenthood was in a hostage situation people prayed. Afterwards people prayed. People are still praying. Christians prayed. Muslims prayed. Unitarian Universalists prayed. I prayed. Many of you probably prayed. Maybe not even really knowing what that meant.

And if you didn't pray? If you didn't get on your knees, literally or figuratively, and prayed to whatever God, or Gods, or spirits, or to the Universe, or just to the rest of humanity, and I bet you weren't laughing at those of us who were.

Prayer doesn't depend on some kind of strong belief. Sometimes prayer is what you do when you can't think of anything else. Sometimes prayer is more for you than for them.

So I say to this song, this my personal canon, this song I played for you all, that Yeah, yeah, sure, God *can* but funny when people are saying that God hates us.

But not when people are dying because of it.

And so she say "No one laughs at God in a hospital, no one laughs at God in a war."

Which is interesting because many people have no use for God in a hospital. When I was a hospital chaplain there were countless rooms I walked into and was greeted with a polite "no, thank you." Others when the patient or family member smiled and said they were atheists.

Other's still where I walked into the room and was asked what my denomination was, upon my reply of "Unitarian Universalist" I heard, "Oh, well, that's ok. That's not *really* a church. Why don't you come in?"

And I much as I may have laughed at that statement, no one, not a single person, ever laughed at me for being there. But I wouldn't confuse "Not laughing at" with "lack of annoyance."

Still the words struck me: No one's laughing at God in a hospital. No one's laughing at God in a war.

I think of it as Regina Spektor's softer version of "There are no atheists in foxholes." I'm sure you've heard this expression, the idea that in times of stress everyone prays to *something*. This statement has been objected to by several prominent atheists organizations for its inaccuracy. And it's true, there are indeed atheists in foxholes.

Just like there are atheists in hospitals – among the doctors and nurses, the family, and even those close to death.

But no one is laughing at you if you aren't.

No one says to a dying woman "Your prayers are frivolous." Even if they believe it.

And it's not because there is no laughter in hospitals – indeed I can tell you there is. No doubt you probably already knew that.

I think what's important about this song usage of laughter is that distinction between laughing *at* someone and laughing *with* them. Perhaps many of us have experienced that feeling. I distinctly remember being in middle school and having some friends of mine say to my face when I asked them why they were laughing "Oh, Otto, we're laughing at you, not with you."

Ouch.

To laugh at God, or maybe more accurately to laugh at *someone's* God, carries a similar connotation doesn't it? For our Gods are personal.

And in times of war, in times of stress, they are who we turn to.

Tell me about the God you don't believe in; I probably don't believe in him either.

(It is always a him isn't it?)

When I became a Unitarian Universalist I was living in a college dormitory. A young man who also lived there asked me about my newfound religion one day.

"Oh, that's the church where you can believe whatever you want." He didn't say it like it was a good thing.

I was new to Unitarian Universalism. "I guess so." I replied, in a less-than-confident manner.

"Well. Here's what I know. God is like your father, he loves all his children. But, he wants to be called by the right name. Your dad wouldn't like if you call him 'mom,' right? Same with God."

I knew I didn't agree with him, but it felt pointless to keep talking. In that moment it felt like what divided us was so fundamental that it was hard for me to understand.

"I'm not interested in accepting refugees from Syria," said the Governor. When I heard those words I found myself again at a divide that was so hard for me to understand. I imagined those families, those children, on those boats simply looking for a place to land. And I see us turning them away. Saying "I'm not interested" in the way we might say we "aren't interested" in going to see that movie or we "aren't interested" in the score from the latest sports game.

As if lives aren't hanging in the balance.

“No one’s laughing at God when you’re starving or freezing or so very poor”

And I wonder, those families on those boats. Those families fleeing their homes, forced from their homes. Those families that now sleep on the streets. I wonder, how do they pray? Who do they pray to?

And then I wonder who the Governor prays to.

And then I wonder, who I pray to.

And then I wonder, what is praying at all.

I just prayed with you all. Maybe ten minutes ago. I prayed to the “spirit of life” to the “source of all.” I prayed for the Syrian refugees. I prayed for the five who were shot at a black lives matter protest. I prayed for the victims of the Planned Parenthood shooting in Colorado Springs. I prayed to God.

And regardless of my conception of this concept of God, I prayed. This maybe atheist prayed with all of you.

And not one of you laughed.

You may have gathered this by now, but this isn’t a sermon about God. At least it’s a not a sermon that tries to define God. Part of the beauty of being Unitarian Universalist is that we welcome a multitude of conceptions of God, from personal being God, to God-who-breaths in us, to multiple Gods and Goddesses, to no God at all. And one of my favorite things about being a Unitarian Universalists is that I don’t get to come up here and tell you what, if anything, to believe about God.

In fact we are a religion without a creed; a religion based on the idea of *pluralism*. That is, a religion where many beliefs coexist. At a Unitarian Universalist Congregation, you might have an Atheist sitting next to a Christian. You might have a Jew sitting next to a Muslim. You might have a Hindu sitting next to a Buddhist.

In theory, at least. And all these people would identify as Unitarian Universalists.

But what happens when you put many people in a room who disagree about something as emotionally charged and personal as God?

You have to put yourself aside for a moment. You have to have the humility to accept that what you think might not be what’s right. You have to bring yourself, just for this one hour, not to laugh at someone else’s God, or lack thereof.

This service began this morning with the lighting of the Advent candle, a candle that we light for Hope. Advent is a season in the Christian tradition – the time where we, where Christians, I should say, wait for the arrival of Christ.

Our first hymn this morning, was a Christian Advent hymn: “O come, o come, Emmanuel.” Listen closely as I recite the first verse.

O come, o come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appears. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel, Shall come to thee, O Israel.

Ok, so that’s not quite what we sung this morning.

Those are the original words of the first verse of our advent hymn today. I wonder how many of you are more familiar with these words than the ones we sang this morning? I can tell you that among some circles, we UUs are given a bad rap for changing so many words of so many beloved hymns. Many of you may even fall in that camp. Why do we change them? To take our gendered language; and to take out many references to “Lord” and to “Christ” or “Jesus.” What we ended up with in this hymn, is a Christmas song that doesn’t sing about Christ. There is this idea that we changed them because we are afraid of offending the atheists among us.

Yet we left in the most blatant reference to God in the song: Emmanuel. This word literally means “God is with us” in Hebrew.

What I find fascinating about this re-writing of this hymn is how the removal of the references to the “Son of God” we actually changed the theological meaning of the hymn.

Open your hymnals. Go on. Hymn 225.

Read with me the first verse.

O come, O come Emmanuel, and with your captive children dwell. Give comfort to all exiles here, and to the aching heart bid cheer. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come within as Love to dwell.

The song no longer becomes about the historic people of Israel, trapped in the Babylonian exile, but about God being with us *now* and bringing comfort to *all* exiles. The verse ends by stating that God will come within us *as* love, not as Christ.

And I think we could use some love.

On Friday night, as I watched the news of a white man shooting at Planned Parenthood and I prayed. I don’t know how or what, but by the love of God I prayed. I prayed for a world where this kind of thing doesn’t happen.

And the scary thing is that so often the people who commit crimes like these are praying, too. They are praying to some God that agrees with them. To some God that believes that killing is the solution. And in times like these, we know that our prayers are not enough.

No one is laughing at God in this situation.

And as Unitarian Universalists, where do we have to turn? Who do we call for help from?

At the hospital, last summer, I walked into a room of a man and his wife. I asked them if they wanted to a chaplain. The woman looked me straight in the eye and said "Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and savior."

I didn't want to disappoint this woman. And maybe more than that – I didn't want to be rejected. I didn't want her to tell me I wasn't "Christian-enough" to be a chaplain. In my insecurity I stumbled in my answer to her.

"Uh... I'm a Unitarian Universalist... And we believe in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ."

I know, not a smart move to claim that "we" Unitarian Universalists believe any one thing.

The woman looked at me. I asked her if she still wanted to pray.

"Yes," she said, much to my surprise. We prayed. She might have thought this little chaplain was going hell, but we prayed. We prayed together. And in that moment, we were connected beyond our different beliefs. Beyond my fear of her. Beyond my fear of prayer.

As you go out into this world this week, my friends. This world that see so much pain and suffering.

The only thing I can really say is that we have to have Grace.

Grace is a theological concept that means divine influence which inspires us to be virtuous, and inspires us to practice humility.

Thought all of our disagreements about who or what God is or isn't, we can show grace by remaining humble in our beliefs, and understanding that we don't always know what's right and good and best.

We can show grace by respecting the beliefs of those we disagree with, be they in the pew next to us or in the world.

We can denounce acts of violence, and yet know that these acts are not the fault of any one religion or way of thinking. Most Muslims are not ISIS; most Christians are not the Planned Parenthood shooter.

Let us not be among those who are laughing at God. Rather let our uncertainty make us humble. Let our grace be that practice of that humility. And let us find hope from a love that dwells in each of us.

May it be so.