Whose Are We?
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Sermon

How timely it was this week, knowing that I would be speaking about theology today, to get to share with most of you and at least a billion people worldwide perhaps the most collectively accessible theological exercise I can imagine: The rescue of the 33 trapped Chilean miners.

33 miners trapped for more than 2 months, one-half mile below the ground. Assumed dead and buried, only to be found and eventually winched to the surface in a carefully engineered contraption with only enough room for a single individual at a time. Life underground, in a sweltering cocoon, transformed to life above ground, life so bright, it requires glasses, life so crisp it requires blankets offered from loving hands. The metaphors embedded in this rescue were so rich, they were almost clichés from the start. Even in the short time I watched a few of the miners be extracted from their 600 square foot hole in the ground the other night, the reporters couldn’t help themselves from drawing what we might call theological conclusions from the scene. *These miners were being reborn*, they said, *birthed from the earth, resurrected*. *How could they have survived?*, the reporters wondered aloud before surmising that *only their faith could have sustained them*.

The miners’ story has a lot to do, I think, with my chosen topic this morning, but for now, I want you to put those miners aside for a bit. I’ll return to them later. First I want to tell you about a project of the Unitarian Universalist Ministers’ Association (UUMA) called “Whose Are We?”

This project had its beginning a couple of years ago, when a group of Unitarian Universalist lay leaders and ministers gathered for a summit meeting to discuss the future of ministerial formation for lay people and professionals. At the opening worship service of this gathered body, one of the ministers present told the story of an interfaith clergy organization in his town which has a tradition of asking the senior colleagues to share their life odysseys. At one of these events, a Roman Catholic priest was telling his story. After he shared some of the twists and turns of his life and his ministry, he concluded by shocking the crowd. He said his life was in large part a failure. He had high hopes of how his generation of liberal priests might change the church to whom he had devoted his life. And yet, he had to admit, all these years later, the church he had hoped to help change had become even more rigid and conservative. The dreams he had for most of his adult life and his ministry had not been realized.
This priest was held in high esteem by his colleagues, so they were stunned by his revelation. At the conclusion of the priest’s presentation, one of his colleagues observed that, despite the expression of pain and disappointment that had been shared in the story, the priest seemed at ease, the same peaceful guy they had known for years. “How can you claim that your life was a failure, and yet appear so calm and serene?” the colleague asked.

“I know whose I am,” replied the priest. “I know whose I am.”

This story set the tone for the conversations that followed, conversations about the future of Unitarian Universalism and those that care so very deeply about it. At the foundation of these conversations was the question, Whose are we? In particular, who or what do we serve, beyond ourselves? To whom or to what are we accountable, drawing us out of our individual preoccupations and self-interest? Whose are we as participants in a liberal religious tradition that goes back hundreds of years. Whose are we? What are the relationships that claim us, that, in turn, determine who we will be?

Those present for this conference acknowledged that “Whose are we?” is not a question we typically ask in our congregations, and that this is probably not a good thing, since this question is, at its core, a theological question. “Whose are we?” is an invitation for us to think about ourselves not just as a gaggle of individuals who simply choose to be together in a building once a week or so, but as people who belong to something greater, despite our different ways of framing and thinking about what that “something greater” might be. We are a people who covenant to be together through our differences, indeed, in the best sense of who many of us say we are, because of our differences. So why do UUs seem to have what I have heard described as a “spiritual don’t ask, don’t tell policy”?

One reason might be that to hear others invoke language that we have discarded or moved beyond can be frightening, painful, annoying, at least when we hear the language as an imposition on our own understandings rather than as an invitation to understand how others find and make meaning. I’ve been in UU congregations where members and even ministers sometimes use their own understandings to silence people rather than to bring them into community or creative interchange. Sometimes the silencing message is that God-language should be eliminated altogether, even for those in the congregation who still find meaning in their theistic understandings. Sometimes the silencing message is that those who find no use for God language are relics of another era who should open their metaphorical minds, keep their protests to themselves and just swallow the God pill, no matter how bitter it might be.

And then there are those of us who wish that this whole God or no God conversation would just go away. It doesn’t matter what we believe about speculative concepts, some of us say. All that really matters is what we do
in the world. Can’t we just clothe the naked and feed the hungry already? Isn’t action in the world all the theology we really need?

In many ways, I really relate to that third position, as I hear in it an echo of UU minister Forrest Church’s assertion that too much of a focus on identity (as in Who are we?) is an adolescent pursuit that becomes a waste of time if it does not give way to the more mature and perhaps overdue questions: How are we doing? and How can we do it better?

Is all the emphasis on individual identity in UU congregations really just an attempt to avoid that which we can accomplish if we’d stop looking so much in the mirror and start looking out more at the world around us?

Could this “Whose Are We?” project be just another invitation to intensive navel-gazing...navel gazing that wouldn’t take us anywhere other than where we have already been? That’s what some members of this church thought, anyway, when they learned I was going to the “Whose are we?” training, where I was going to experience theological engagement with about 100 of my colleagues in UU ministry. Some of the reactions to my attendance at this conference appeared on my Facebook page as posts that included:

I think our movement is too self focused—we put a disproportionate amount of energy, seemingly, into thinking about, defining and redefining ourselves.

the question [Whose are we?] is different from asking what we might do and seems ego-centric as it remains a discussion of ourselves

I get all this, and yet, I suggested in response, that asking “Whose are we?” is different than asking “Who are we?”  Still, I had to wonder, is it different? Would this project be more than just identity obsession?

Fast forward now to the training, where, for the first exercise, my colleagues and I were paired up facing each other, seated. A bell rang and the conversation began. Following the facilitator’s instructions, my partner asked me, “Whose are you?”

I answered, “I am my family’s, my wife and my daughter.”

My partner responded, “God be merciful. Whose are you?”

I answered, “My extended family, my brother and sister, my father and his wife, my nieces and nephews, my in laws.”

“God be merciful, Whose are you?”

“The congregation I serve, the people who have called me to minister to them.”
“God be merciful, Whose are you?”

For several minutes this exchange continued. After the obvious relationships to family, to friends, and to work, I listed in short phrases, acknowledgement of all the relationships that are essential to my life, confirming in the process, the reality and the significance of the connections that make me who I am and that impact who I will continue to become.

I spoke of those who, one way or another, lay claim to my heart and my life. Not all of these relationships rolled off my tongue. Sometimes there was silence before I articulated yet another connection. But the response of my partner, by design, was always the same. “God be merciful.”

Then the bell rang, and though we remained seated, my partner and I switched roles. I became the questioner, and the one bestowing the blessing: “God be merciful.”

As my partner, in her turn, listed the relationships that help define her life and determine her commitments, I could see in her searching eyes and furrowed brow the kind of focused engagement I recognized as my own. To hear my partner name the connections to whom she belonged, though different in some ways from those I had spoken, I heard my own voice.

The exchange between us for those ten minutes was tender, and real, and very unusual. It didn’t feel like navel gazing. It felt revelatory.

As the call and response took place, the articulation and the blessing spoken aloud, our words were gentle, almost whispered, as though we were sharing secrets. And, in some ways, we were.

How often do we take time to reflect upon and to name the relationships that define us, the connections that make us who we are? How rare it is to have the space or the inclination, or the permission even, to hear others name these relationships, and to honor their expressions not with hurried affirmation or argument or overlapped articulation of our own connections and convictions, but with silent, attentive listening, and only a simple blessing in response.

Even when I have had opportunities in the past to hear someone name her connections, “God be merciful” is not the response I have been inclined to offer. I rarely even use the word God, believing it is so burdened with other people’s interpretations and baggage, (including my own!), as to leave it virtually devoid of substantive meaning at least as a component of conversation.
As a friend of mine recently shared, “The minute you say ‘God,’ everyone thinks they know what you are saying, and that is just not true.”

I know what she means. In conversations rooted in argument, or competition, or certitude, we cannot help but project our own understandings on to others. We cannot help but seek to discern what we believe are falsehoods and to distract, if not distance, ourselves from what is being shared. To be asked to engage in conversations where language is used that doesn’t accurately reflect our perceptions of truth is to relinquish our integrity, or so it may seem.

And yet, as I affirmed my partner’s articulation of those to whom she is accountable with the words “God be merciful”, I didn’t care so much about my own beliefs. I cared about the encounter. I cared about her.

Each time I said, “God be merciful”, the word God, in my own mind at least, meant life itself, beautiful and wretched though it is, I meant mystery, I meant journey, I meant surprise. But perhaps most importantly, when I said God, I meant whomever or whatever calls my partner to accountability and clarity and openness and compassion and forgiveness and connection in her life. Not my life. Her life.

That’s what I meant by God.

I’m not unfamiliar with this experience of inhabiting the very same God language and concepts I have most typically rejected. Despite my agnostic tendencies, the God whose mercy I requested on behalf of my partner, is the same ever-changing God I would invoke when I was a hospital chaplain, praying with more theistically inclined patients. I quickly learned in my chaplain role, that my integrity as a minister was not solely dependent on my own understandings, but on whether or not I could openly and compassionately engage with the understandings of others. My relationship to these people with whom and to whom I ministered mattered more than what any of us thought about God. What mattered was our relationship. Could I leave space for them or did I have to muck up their understandings with my own? I learned that I could leave space for them, and that, in order to be effectively present, I must. I learned that ministering to and with people who hold different theological understandings than me—which is everyone—is not dependent on me enforcing or defending my own beliefs, my own ways of describing what I think, but on my willingness to generously engage with my companions on their own terms and with their own terms. The theology that mattered most was not to be found in our beliefs. It was in the compassionate generosity of the relationship itself.

As I offered my “God be merciful” blessing, I also thought about the way I pray with some of my ministerial colleagues in AMOS, some of whom come
from traditions that all but require they close every prayer with “In Jesus’ name we pray.” I have no issue with Jesus, so I don’t mind joining them for a prayer in his name. But there was a time when I did. A time when I was a little too caught up in argument or defensiveness or some need to cling to my own adolescent stand for self to realize that I didn’t have to agree with how the religious language was being used in order to share a religious experience with my neighbors. Religion, I now understand, is ultimately rooted not in what I believe, but in what I love, whom I love, and what that love calls me to do and to be in relationship with others. My religion is not about my beliefs or the beliefs of others. It is about my relationships.

For the next two days, I shared other exercises with my colleagues, exercises in journaling, one-on-one sharing, and small group reflection. We were asked to consider to whom or to what are we called, what are the paradoxes in our lives against and through which we must live, and what are the sources of our covenants with each other that enable us to stay engaged in community in ways that not only enrich our own lives, but the lives of those around us. We were asked to consider our relationships, our responsibilities to that which calls us to be more than we could be by ourselves, and by doing so, I contend we were invited to more fully inhabit our religion.

The training was not easy for all of us, including me. Though all of us had chosen to participate in this experience, with the understanding that we would take what we had learned and share it with the colleagues in our respective chapters, many of us still resisted at least some of the exercises. For example, after we shared with each other the answers to the questions “Whose are you?”, the facilitators listed a sample of our responses on a horizontal line, inviting us to consider that these are the horizontal or ground level relationships of our lives. Then, after we were asked to reflect on our callings to ministry, and in particular to name the source from which our calls came, (answers, as you might suspect, ranged from intellect to holy spirit and mostly everything in between), the facilitators listed some of our responses on a vertical line, with the purpose of having us then consider the intersection of the two, and what that intersection may represent. Even though we had been asked to relax our restrictions on the symbols and metaphors we may have discarded over time, in the spirit that the process was more important than the specifics, some of my colleagues couldn’t help themselves. “Why does a line have to be vertical? Shouldn’t all the relationships be horizontal?” one complained. Another said, “You’ve forced us into the symbolism of the cross!” Another voice declared, “This construction does not leave room for a feminist perspective. The answers should be listed on a circle, or on a Mobius strip.” I mostly kept quiet, even as I wondered to myself what the agenda of all this was, because, well, you know, somebody must be trying to push something.
We were ministers who had self-selected to participate in theological engagement and we were suspicious and on the defensive.

And we wonder why Unitarian Universalism isn’t more prevalent in the world?

Could it be that we are given to argument and self-definition to keep us from having to be vulnerable? Could it be that too many of us are a bit too anxious to focus on the details and differences of our beliefs rather than on relationships?

If we won’t engage the question of “Whose are we?” and to whom we ultimately belong, even when it pushes our buttons a bit, even when it makes us uncomfortable, how will we know where we should act, how will we discern that which is of most importance to our collective lives as sisters and brothers, as one human family?

Without some kind of grounding in an understanding that we belong to something beyond our individual identities, important as those are, what will motivate us to come together when we most need to? Around what will we gather if we cannot recognize that we do have some mutual relationships, some mutual loves, if you will, that provide the foundation for any meaningful work we will ever collectively do?

Perhaps the best way to answer this is to begin where I started, with the Chilean miners, in particular this notion that their faith must have saved them.

I don’t want to too quickly or easily deny the significance of the commitments to religious belief that some of these miners no doubt had, but I’m not so sure faith, at least in the traditional sense, would have been necessarily as comforting to them as we might want to assume. After all, a God who could intervene to save them, would be the same God, who, for the first fifteen days of their separation anyway, had entombed them without contact from the outside world. For me, the most crucial theological significance of their ordeal was not to be found in the details of their rescue, but rather in the relationships they had to sustain with their fellow miners in the midst of dire circumstances, and the relationships to those they had left behind above ground. The relationships on which they undoubtedly hung most of their hopes, dreams, and even prayers that they would live to see another day. The relationships that were so beautifully and tenderly renewed in front of the cameras as the men returned to the surface.

Could any of us who watched this story play out not reflect on the relationships of our lives, not ask ourselves how would we handle the separation and the uncertainly and the need to keep surviving without assurance that we would ever see those we love again? Could any of us who
watched this story not consider our own theologies, our own commitments, our own relationships, which I content are related, if not the same things.

One way or another, these men must have wondered in the depths of their crisis, “Whose are we?” Is it a stretch to suggest their survival depended on their answers? Perhaps.

But one way or another, we, too will eventually ask the same question, this question of relationship and theology and religion itself.

Whose are we?

Much will depend on our answers, too, for ourselves, for the world we share, and for all the life that will follow.

God be merciful, indeed.