

ANNOUNCE: SURVEY

What five things are the most important that we get right as a church?

- maybe we are already getting them right.
- maybe we need to do better.
- but either way...
- what's most important?

I ask -- because our new year begins in Sep.

And it's going to be a busy Fall

There are lots of options coming up -- for working on healthy souls

As that happens...

I want to make sure our teams -- our volunteers -- our community

- we keep the big picture in mind.
- we keep the essentials in focus.

so, i'll give you three minutes...

- *Given what know about our culture -- our values -- our priorities...*
- *Whatever it is that makes us distinctive...*
- *What are the five most important things?*
- *What are the things we have to get right*

LESSON

We just finished a lesson on four big-picture themes

- Themes that easily get lost in the dailyness of life

The hope of that lesson...

- Is that we integrate some small part of these big themes
- Into how we live our daily lives
- If you missed -- you can have a listen online

It's never good form -- to say about one's own words...

- Hey you should listen to what I said...

- So forgive me...
- But if you missed -- you should listen to that one
- Put it in the car while you're driving
- You'll miss the "what are you thinking" part -- but you'll get a good read

I thought I'd do an interim lesson before we start our next one

- Because of several conversations I've had lately
- I realized how important it is -- to review
- For newcomers and longtimers alike

Important concepts -- affect how we live

- They shape -- how we live, how we act, how we react

So today, I want to review some *big-important-concept* kinds of thoughts...

- About God

If you're new to our community

Or if you haven't attended one of Michelle's newcomer lunches...

- Here's something you need to know about our community...
- Who we are...
- And what we do
- And why we do it the way we do...
- It is the way it is...
- Because we started our community with a singular question
- It's the subtitle of the book I wrote to help newcomers catch up

The question was this...

- Can we still be Christian?
- Can we still be Christian in the quantum era?

There was a day when *Christian* was a respected word

- When people said they were Christians...
- They were committed to virtue
- They were committed to loving their neighbor -- even their enemy

- There was a day when -- if a Christian moved in next door...
- You thought you'd be getting a good neighbor

And then what happens -- happened

- We Xns -- we lost our way

It is our way -- to lose our way

- But when we were just starting this community...
- The corollary -- to that truth -- wasn't yet on our radar

Yes. It is our way -- to lose our way...

- But it is also our way -- when we've lost it -- to find it again

Along the way we realized that

- And when we did -- we began trying our best -- to find it again
- And since we find what we look for...
- We are -- we are finding our way again

I often apologize to people on behalf of our tradition

- I'm sorry -- we're not very good neighbors right now
- We got wrapped around a toxic story
- It made us bad neighbors -- more often than not
- I'm sorry.

But give us 50 years

We're in the process of finding our way again

- The Deep Light we have accessed again and again and again
- For thousands of years...

- We're accessing it again
- And we will find our way

But when we began NRCC...

- We didn't know that
- We hadn't yet thrown in our lot -- with finding our way again

And -- most of us had come from toxic Xn life

- And had almost given up
- So we were -- asking ourselves...
- Can we still be Xn?

We did a lot of soul searching

- What went so wrong?
- Why do we behave so badly -- so often?

And we began to realize -- the story we tell ourselves

- Our story about ourselves
- Our story about what is good and beautiful about life
- Our story about what is ugly and mean about life
- Our story had gotten tweaked

So we did a lot of work -- rethinking our story

- Which is demanding
- Deep internal work like that
- Sure. It's deeply transformative of our lives...
- Sure. It helps us find our way again...
- But man -- it is tough

For years -- a lot of our lessons began with the word "rethinking"

We were rethinking what we thought we knew...

- Rethinking the Bible
- Rethinking sin

- Rethinking God -- and Jesus -- and praying -- and meditating
- Rethinking confession
- Rethinking peacemaking
- Rethinking the whole shooting match

It was a series of exercises...

- In which we asked ourselves what was painful -- what is toxic...
- In the practice of our religion

And then we began to strip away the layers on top of the hurtful -- or meaningless -- or toxic thing...

- We looked and looked and looked...
- For the thing -- at the core of the painful thing

Where was the truth?

Where was the beauty?

- Where was the originating impetus -- that started the thing in the first place

Why did that thing -- that concept -- that practice...

- Why did it start?
- Why has it hung on so long?
- What good thing -- did it give people...
- What truth -- what beauty -- what light or life...
- What was at the core -- that made it hang around so long?

And -- can we strip back the meaninglessness -- the ugliness...

- And can we discern -- the core of truth and beauty?

And the concept of God...

- That's about as bedrock of a religious concept as there is

It can point us to deep goodness -- and truth -- and beauty -- and life

- And -- it can shackle us -- with instincts that betray us
- It can also make us not-good -- and not-true -- and not-beautiful

So we spent considerable energy -- rethinking God

And these last couple weeks -- in a few conversations about life's pain

- It occurred to me -- that I...
- Needed to bring these reconsidered ideas about God
- Back up to the front of my mind

And that it would also be a good exercise for all of us

- To do the same
- To think about God in ways that lead us into life

As I've said in our contemplative practice this morning

- One of our most ancient truths – is that God cannot be contained
- God cannot be captured in a picture we can draw . . .
- God cannot be captured in a statue we fashion . . .

SLIDE: TEXTS

Our earliest Hebrew texts forbade us to even try

- “no graven images,”
- That's the way the old words say it

Here are a couple representative texts

- That underscore that essential truth of our tradition

Can you build a house for God?

However God is, it's not like that.

The highest heavens couldn't contain God.

- 2 Chron. 2:6 (quoted in Acts 7:49)

*God-thoughts, if you can call them that, are as unlike people-thoughts...
As the infinite heavens are unlike the dirt under our feet.
- Is. 55:8-9*

SLIDE: TITLE

Here's the upshot of this ancient idea...

(It's actually called "the doctrine of transcendence -- or ineffability")

- God cannot be contained in our minds
- God cannot be contained in any metaphor we create in our minds

Consequently, trying to get our thinking about God straight...

- Is kind of a fool's errand

If you're familiar with the word *holon* -- it applies here

- Divine is forest.
- Human is tree
- Forest can contain tree – tree cannot contain forest

That's why the greatest sin of our ancient texts...

- Wasn't atheism
- Or sex and or drugs and rock-roll

No, the greatest sin in the ancient texts – was idolatry

- It was trying to reduce the irreducible Divine

Because once we do that...

- Once we assume we've got God figured out...
- First, we are by definition wrong...
- But second, then we justify all kinds of horrible things...
- In the name -- of what we believe God wants

The ancient wisdom understood how badly that goes for us...

- And forbade it

The greatest sin was to make God containable . . .

- And predictable
- And controllable

Because once we do...

- We can anticipate God's next move
- And predicting it -- we can work it
- We can get God on our side
- Against our enemies -- against the bad people -- against the other people

And that -- was the greatest sin

And so...

- We fashioning our meaning making narratives...
- *(remember the 3rd great theme in the last lesson)*

We all do...

Everybody has a meaning-making story

- Everybody finds themselves in that story -- and lives accordingly
- As we saw -- very few of us actually see our meaning making narrative
- We tend to do what we do -- without knowing why

One of the perennial dangers when we are hammering out our meaning making stories...

- Is that we fix God -- in some construct or another

And that's bad for us

- Give it enough time -- and it will make us bad people

- It will weaken our souls -- thwart our spiritual journeys

Once we fix our instincts about what God does -- and doesn't do

- Who God likes -- and doesn't like
- Who God loves -- and who God hates

Over time -- and not surprisingly...

- In our stories -- and in our minds...
- Usually -- God loves -- or God hates...
- Pretty much -- who we love -- and who we hate

Because it impacts us so deeply...

- You hear me repeat this truism all the time
- *What we look for – is what we find*

Once we tell ourselves a fixed story about the way God is

- Once we escape the discomfort of uncertainty
- And take God out of -- the realm of Unknowable Mystery
- Once we pin God down to being this way -- or that way

...What we look for -- is this way -- or that way

And given that God can't be pinned down to a fixed truth...

- When our religion isn't working for us
- When we become brittle -- or angry -- or indignant
- When we becomes hypocritical -- or mean-spirited
- When we get bored -- or our religion gets dreary
- When it makes us worse people -- rather than better...

A good place to look for the problem...

- The story we tell ourselves about God

Here's the thing...

- Words can't contain God
- Metaphors can't contain God
- Thoughts can't contain God

But all we *have*...

- Are words -- and metaphors -- and thoughts

That's a pickle.

Back when we were working our way through this idea...

- When were challenging our figure-God-out instinct...
- I ran into a quote in one of Joseph Campbell's books
- The guy he was quoting was a religious anthropologist...
- Heinrich Zimmer

The best things can't be talked about -- he said...

- They're too big to contain

The second best things

- Are us trying to talk about the best things

Of course we get them wrong -- we misunderstand them

- But our efforts to speak about that which can't be spoken about
- Is often where we experience -- our deepest beauty

And the third best things...

- That's the stuff we talk about

What makes religion beautiful...

- Is our effort to talk about -- that which can't be talked about
- It is the language of aspiration

- It is the language of deep hope
- And deep yearning
- It is the language of our deepest inner longings

But the wisdom of our tradition -- has been to warn us
When we're doing this beautiful thing...
Trying to talk about -- that which can't be talked about...

We must keep in mind...

- That all our efforts to speak of God...
- Are wrong.
- Inadequate.
- Temporary.
- Passing metaphors -- that will inevitably break down

That is the necessary framework

- In which we aspire to talk about -- second best things

If we aspire to articulate...

- Our deep longings -- and hopes -- and aspirations
- We must know -- that all of our efforts...
- Are at best -- transient metaphors

When I got kicked out of our denomination...

- This concept was one of the sticking points
- The notion that we couldn't -- get our talk about God right

Because -- the concern was...

If we can't claim solid ground in our talk about God...

- Then how do we know the Buddhists -- or Muslims -- or Hindus...
- Aren't right about God

Which...

Yeah.

In the end -- after a bunch of defense papers...

- With a great deal of trepidation...
- One of folks on the tribunal -- had to concede

- If we take our own tradition seriously
- If we allow -- that we can't contain God
- That we can't pin God down
- Yeah. That's exactly what happens

Which is demanding -- difficult

So you can see why this rethinking journey -- was scary for us

- I had to face that myself -- before I ever got called up by the denomination's doctrinal committee

Whatever you say about God...

- It is at best -- a temporary metaphor
- It is at best -- incomplete -- inadequate

It's a truth deeply embedded in our tradition

- If we want to fight it -- we have to fight 5000 years of religious heritage

Certitude about God

- Is not ours to have

So...

What's the point?

What's the relevance for living our lives?

Well -- it turns out...

- Quite a lot

We each carry -- deep in our minds...

- Some story about Ultimacy
- Some story about that code word, "God"

Whatever notion got laid down in our experience early on

- Is profoundly influential in our lives

We may have picked up a "*there is no God*" story

Or -- a "*God is a male authority figure*" story

We may carry a "*God is your best buddy*" story

- There are as many metaphor-stories for God...
- As there are people who use them

Some of the more culturally shared stories...

- God is a Father
- God is a King
- God is a Bridegroom
- God is our wisdom-mother

And these God stories -- these God-metaphors are widely shared...

- Because as we used them...
- It has led many people -- into deep and meaningful spiritual experience

But here's the thing...

- They are only metaphors
- Incomplete -- transient -- passing -- metaphors

And the reason this matters...

- In their inadequacy -- all they can do -- is point us to some ways to experience the Divine
- But their partial insight...
- Can actually keep us -- from other ways to experience the Divine

They are limited insights into the nature of the Divine

- And they limit -- our experience of the Divine

A couple ways this affects our day-to-day life...

This notion is the root system -- from which I personally...

- And our community in general
- Has grown into the idea -- that we don't have to fight science
- Or psychology -- or the Big Bang -- of Evolution

This is the root system -- from which has grown

- Our willingness to listen to other religions
- Our willingness to listen across political divides
- Our willingness to bring an open heart and mind -- to people whose sexuality doesn't work out like our own

It started with this notion...

- If the stories we tell about God -- are always partial and incomplete...

If our traditions prohibits us holding a tight grip...

- On knowing -- that we know -- what we know...

Then we probably don't have the market cornered...

- On ultimate truth either

Our tradition begins with an ancient warning

- Bad things happen to you -- when your God gets fixed -- containable
- When you practice idolatry

But it's just as true...

- That once our story about God gets too limited
- Our availability for wisdom we can't see yet -- also gets limited

If our God is too contained -- too certain

If we're too confident and definite...

- It makes our filter too tight
- It limits the kind of things...
- And the number of things...
- We are available to -- when we seek spiritual insight
- Or the experience of the Divine
- Or spiritual growth
- Or how to live in our world

A specific, accurate, definite view of God...

- *Eliminates* spiritual opportunities
- *Eliminates* spiritual possibilities

This notion about God...

- Is also the root system -- from which has grown...
- Our deep commitment to contemplative practice

As you hear when we practice meditation...

- It is one of the best ways we know...
- To disidentify with compulsive thought patterns
- Deeply rooted narratives -- that define us -- define our days

- I read a research article recently that said meditation is one of the most effective ways -- to dismantle implicit bias

- To humanize -- the other

When we have a fixed take on God

- We have a fixed take on everything

When we have a fixed take on God

- We have a fixed take -- on the spiritual life
- When God is father -- we journey as children
- Which is good -- but not life-long, forever-amen -- good

When God is male -- we have to grapple with faulty ideas about...

- And hurtful experiences of -- males

When God is human...

- We have to experience God the way we experience humans
- That one limites us deeply...
- But one illustration comes to mind from this week

Every human being has a line

- A line that when crossed -- breaks relationship
- And if our fixed metaphor for God is human
- Then when we cross some line
- Maybe a line somebody told us was God's break point...
- Or maybe a break line we figured on our own

Once we cross it -- the big one

- There is no way back to a good life
- A deep sense that we lost our chance
- That redemption is a wonderful story -- for other people
- But for me -- I broke the future
- I squandered my chance

That's a story that dominates a lot of people

- And once that's our God -- once that's our story...
- It defines what we look for -- and what we find

Our stories about God -- are always too small

A God whose line can be crossed...

- That's just one small story
- But there are a million iterations...
- That limit us -- constrain us -- dominate our days
- When we allow our metaphors for God -- to become fixed and certain

Even a good and beautiful God story...

- Will in the end...
- Betray us

PRAY

So HS within us...

May our heart remain pliable

And our images of God remain supple.

So that our hearts -- can consistently adapt -- to bigger and bigger truth

Life that is more and more beautiful. Amen.