

August 2, 2015
Falcon Heights Church, UCC
Falcon Heights, MN
The Rev. Anne Swallow Gillis

Pentecost 10 B
Deuteronomy 10:12-19
I John 4:16-19

Exploring Our Beliefs Series, Part I:
GOD: A Concept or a Connection?

How is it that people first start thinking about God? Some people report that they had some kind of mystical or numinous experience of an Other as a child. Often out in nature, they had a unitive feeling of deep connection with nature and all that is. Some people describe having a vision, hearing a voice, or a sensing strong inner feeling of a powerful presence. Think back to your own childhood. Did an experience of God's mystery come first? Or perhaps there was someone in your life who spoke about God in a natural, even informal way. Not all of us had this gift early on, of an adult who could speak of a sense of deep connection with a power greater than themselves, and could actually talk about this intimacy. Maybe you observed this person talking to God, praying, in your presence. What was your relationship with this person like? How did this person describe God to you?

Throughout this month-long exploration of our beliefs, I will invite us to consider both our experiences of this mystery we call God, and also our thinking about God. Our brain is constantly trying to make sense out of what we are intuiting, imagining, feeling or not feeling about God's presence in our lives and the world around us. And we are part of a long tradition that values the way our brain can think about God, but our brain is not the only way we actually experience God.

Talking about beliefs always seems to make people nervous, particularly in mainline, liberal congregations. Many people are drawn to a church like FHCUCC because they are tired of denominations where they were told what they must believe to belong, or worse, were ridiculed, shamed, even rejected for some kind of "false" belief. Many of us cringe when faced with a "test" about our beliefs. Some stranger, or family member, asks: "Do you know where you will spend eternity?" or "Are you born again?" We don't want to push our perspectives on someone else, and most assuredly don't want to be perceived as proselytizing. But I have come to see that there is a problem in our reticence to discuss our beliefs and our experiences of God with one another.

Anthony B. Robinson is a longtime United Church of Christ pastor and author who has done a lot of work of figuring out what makes for healthy congregations (see "What's Theology Got to Do with It?"). He has noticed that a lot of the research and writing about revitalizing congregations has focused on three areas: first, *systems theory* and how families, organizations, churches all work as a connected, interactive system. Research has also come from

leadership studies as they relate to organization health. And finally, on *conflict resolution* within groups and organizations. But as Robinson has looked back over his years of ministry in the church, he realized that the way out of most problems he and his churches faced was to focus on “theological teaching and conviction.” (p. 3)

Careful as you hear this. Robinson does not mean focusing on some specific “correct” way to talk about God and to believe in God. He’s concerned that we have simply stopped talking among ourselves about our own experience of and thinking about God. What would God have our church do next? Discerning this becomes a very difficult process if folks aren’t already openly talking about their faith! Your Discovery Team, eight members who are helping me lead the self-exploration part of our interim process together, has invited you all to consider the beliefs that you share as congregation. They decided to use the UCC Statement of Faith, which is in your church constitution, as a grounding point for those decisions. The team is seeking to understand your shared beliefs not so we can police the edges for doctrinal purity. If that were so, we could all call up our inner adolescent right now, fold our arms defiantly and say, “No one can tell *me* what to believe!” What the Discovery Team is doing is helping you to identify and better embrace the center of who you are as a congregation. The center, I would say, is essentially theological: it is language about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the church and scripture that identify who you are as a unique congregation. It is language that should provide the center of your life as a church, and your ongoing daily round through each week of your life.

Robinson writes in his book “What’s Theology Got to Do with It?” that “when we are reasonably clear about our core convictions and their relevance to our life and purpose as a church, chances of vitality are great. Conversely, where we are fuzzy about our core convictions and unsure of their meaning or value, disarray is likely. Organizations, including congregations, that lack norms and convictions and the ability to interpret their ongoing significance for their life and mission, are organizations that are likely to be ingrown, conflicted, and driven (often off the road and into a ditch) by personalities of leaders and members.”

Here’s the challenge for us: It’s not that “anything goes” around here. Churches like Falcon Heights Church have to get clear about what they proclaim as the “good news” and be able to talk about it openly. It’s no longer enough to say we are a friendly church, we welcome everyone, and we do lots of good works. A lot of local community centers and nonprofits do the same. What’s distinctive here? What are the core theological convictions that mold *your* life, draw you into the ups and downs of Christian fellowship, guide your relationship with God and deepen your sense of God’s purpose for your life? The challenge for the church, continues Robinson, is not new techniques or tricks to attract young people. It’s about what we “believe and confess and the difference it makes” in our lives. (p. 4)

The Discovery Team decided to use the UCC Statement of Faith to lead us into this exploration. This statement was written right after the two congregations came together, the Evangelical and Reformed Churches and the Congregational Christian churches, to form the United Church of Christ in 1957. It's different from traditional creeds, because it is not intended to be a "test" of faith. It is more a testimony offered to the local churches, so we might be encouraged to each search our own minds and declare our own convictions. And, of particular importance to this congregation, it was included in Article II of the Falcon Heights Church Constitution, which reads: "While granting each member the freedom to interpret God's Truth as God give each of them light and wisdom, the church recognizes and accepts as the basis of our common purpose, faith and covenant found in the Statement of Faith adopted at the Second General Synod (of the UCC)." This statement has been read in worship in unison through the years here, as it is in many UCC churches across the country.

I invite us now to read together the front of the bulletin. I suggest you read all of the words, even if you are not sure if this is what you exactly believe. Try them out in your mouth; hear the sound of the words. Perhaps take a pencil and mark the phrases that are particularly meaningful to you. Mark the lines that raise questions or just don't feel right to you.

*We believe in you, O God, Eternal Spirit,
God of our Savior Jesus Christ and our God,
and to your deeds we testify:*

*You call the worlds into being,
create persons in your own image,
and set before each one the ways of life and death.*

You seek in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.

*You judge people and nations by your righteous will
declared through prophets and apostles.*

You may notice as we wend our way through this section that the statement doesn't spend a lot of time saying who God "is." It talks a lot about what God "does" – God's deeds in the world. God "calls" everything into being, including us, and we are created in God's image. We get this choice, each day, between following the ways of life-giving or engaging in things that are deadening. Every day, new choices. God seeks in holy love. And here's a line that probably sticks in some of our craws: to save all people from aimlessness and sin. Now there is nothing wrong in my mind with a bit of non-focused aimlessness, especially on a warm summer day when we are trying to take a break from all our darn productiveness. This is called Sabbath, and we better be taking it! But aimlessness also reflects that contemporary sense of emptiness or lack of purpose that is very real. And I do believe we all make mistakes; we sin. We hurt people and ourselves and the planet. Intentionally and by accident. And

it is good to name it, confess it and seeks one another's forgiveness. Then, this final sentence with the word judge usually sends many people off the cliff. Judgmental, vengeful, fearful and punishing – we want nothing to do with this, or people that do this in God's name. Yes. Of course. But the judgment declared by the prophets and the apostles was always less about individual sins and more about the sins of nations and ruling elites. God's judgment is a *restorative judgment*, seeking to bring healing and justice and hope to our communal experience.

Lots to think about and explore here. I invite you to join us in the Gathering Room for some discussion on this section about God. Take the bulletin home and mull over these words this week. Where do you experience God calling you, creating, seeking, saving and judging with loving discernment? To be continued.... Amen.