

A New Holy Trinity

Shared at Shadow Rock United Church of Christ on Feb. 1, 2009

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At the beginning of our time together I suggested a theme to help guide our thoughts and help shape our group consciousness. The theme is “Remember, Restore, and Renew”. It is an image that we used to talk about our spiritual “household”. I want us to return to this image of being a people living together and doing the best we can.

Think of Shadow Rock as a sanctuary in the middle of a wilderness.

Let’s talk about the people in our wilderness refuge. Many of the people in the Shadow Rock Church came to this place as pioneers come to settle a new territory. They did not come here as wanderers lost in the wilderness. They came to establish a jumping off point for new exploration. Shadow Rock has been here long enough now that the original pioneers have had their own children and now the work of this refuge is shared by several generations. Part of the work is maintaining some important campfires. It is important to maintain these fires because there are a lot of people who are wandering around lost in the woods.

People wander around lost in the woods. People are looking for shelter, safety, companionship and nurturing. They see a faint light blinking through the trees and they move toward that light. As they move closer they begin to hear voices. They cannot quite make out the whole message but they overhear words like peace, justice, faith, hope, and love. The light is getting brighter as they get closer.

When they finally break through the tree line they stumble into a single clearing with three campfires. I will call these campfires theism, non-theism, and atheism.

Theism—the group gathered around this fire is an odd bunch. They talk about a God that intervenes into peoples’ lives and into the affairs of nations. This group struggles with the questions that come with such a God.

- Why does a loving and all powerful God intervene sometimes for some people but not other times for other people?
- What does justice and healing look like with a view of such a God?
- In what ways does such a view of God fuel some ugly and hurtful exclusive religious views?

The people around this fire understand and acknowledge these questions. Despite these questions which are acknowledged as legitimate challenges, the people around this fire sing songs, pray, and use their perspective to stay open, vulnerable and tender to each other, and the mystery, named God. They personalize God because their heart’s desire is to be intimate with the source of life and love. They have a streak of mysticism in them. Some people around this fire mean literally what they say, and some know that their language is only a metaphorical vehicle that helps them, as the creature, to stay in touch

with the Creator. How else are persons to relate to the great mystery other than personally? Some people around this fire know that all knowledge and all language are human constructs and they are okay with this truth. Some others around the fire do not think this way. Some people think of fire as an independent reality that exists all on its own. They are not always mindful that fire does not exist independent from air, fuel, and heat. So, it is with their thinking about God. Some think of God as being exactly what our language says God **is**, independent from our thoughts and feelings. And some theists speak of God thinking that it is **through** our thoughts and feelings that God finds expression. Regardless, all of these people find hope in a God who cares and they often have the right message for the people who are feeling the most estranged from the goodness and God-ness of life. It is a great place for some people to get warmed up for the adventure ahead.

Non-Theism—not too far a way from the theism fire are the people gathered around the non-theism fire. Many of the people gathered around this fire are people who stumbled out of the wilderness of intellectual dishonesty; not their own, but the dishonesty of the institution. While they wandered in the wilderness they were given many false directions to sanctuary, and no matter how hard they tried to follow the directions the directions never led them home. When they challenged the authorities who gave them the directions they were told they were too sinful, too rebellious, or too stupid. Some of them were told all of these things. Some were told that they were too ignorant and too smart at the same time, and therefore, too big for their britches. They tried to fit into the rules and worldview of the institution but it was truly like trying to put a square peg in a round hole.

The fire of faith for these people began to burn brightly when...

- ...these people who often wandered in the woods haunted and hunted by the questions of God's justice and existence, were acknowledged and affirmed.
- ...they were told that their questions and doubts were not only okay but reflected a good mind and legitimate challenges to faith and to the institutions of organized religion.
- ...they were given an alternative way to think and speak about God, and therefore enabled to affirm the "more" to life that is beyond our sciences to measure and all five of our senses to perceive.

Around this fire people found that they were not spiritually deficit nor alone. They found permission to not talk about God as an all powerful being who sometimes intervened and sometimes did not for whatever reason. To state it in a positive way, they found permission to talk about God as the "ground of being", the source of all life and love, the is-ness of life, the more of life, the energy and movement of the unfolding of life itself, and/or the mystery which defies defining. Around this fire some people not only found that they were not alone, but they found liberation from the oppression of religion when religion is at its sickest and most demonic.

Atheism—while I have personally flirted with atheism at various times in my own spiritual journey it is not where I am and therefore I am least qualified to represent it. However, it is important for me to try because there are three fires in the sanctuary clearing of Shadow Rock and they are all inviting and burn in equal distance from each other.

This third fire is where people who cannot think in terms of theism or non-theism come for sanctuary from the wilderness. At this fire, people share their stories about their wandering. Their story of wilderness wandering is personal and therefore, varies from person to person and may include some of the following.

- Maybe one person emphasizes reason over emotion and understanding over faith. This person may experience the vastness of the universe and the depth of life so acutely that religion and concepts of God fall so short that they cannot imagine otherwise. For them their journey to Shadow Rock was not so much a wandering around until they found us as much as a walk in the woods and then stumbling upon a fellow hiker.
- Maybe another person is knowledgeable about history and philosophy as well as incredibly sensitive to the horror and violence done in the name of God and they in no way want to be associated with that history.
- Another person around this fire tells the story of being wounded too often and too deeply to recover from doubt and the questions of love and justice.
- Maybe it is all of these things and more.

The people around this fire are passionate about life, peace, justice and celebrations of life and community. They bring a unique and much needed honesty to the Shadow Rock sanctuary not only as a place but also sanctuary as a process.

Today's scripture story makes a very important point. Joshua has been toughened by wilderness wandering for 40 years. He has been toughened up by fighting battles and leading a nation without a home. He has the confidence of success and many triumphs. He confidently walks up to this unknown leader of war and demands that this stranger declare himself. The stranger rejects Joshua's premise that you are either for him or against him. The stranger refuses to take sides as Joshua defines them and differentiates from all demands and all on comers. This is an important lesson in humility and spirituality. No matter how insistent we as humans may try to make God in our image and claim that God is on our side, God differentiates and defies defining and confining. Every time we ignore this truth we are living in idolatry of our own human constructs. This is the point of radical monotheism. Radical monotheism breaks all idols including the last one that functioned to set us free. This is why all three fires are needed in our sanctuary.

The fire of theism keeps me tender and intimate. The fire of non-theism keeps me on my toes intellectually. The fire of atheism keeps me honest, and God differentiates from all three.

I want to elaborate just a little more on this image. Just as the campfires are equal distance from each other they are also equal distance from the edge of the wilderness. Anyone can find sanctuary with us at any fire coming to us from any direction. Also, we can leave our particular campfire at anytime to visit others within the camp. In terms of movement it is even more important to acknowledge that we can and should move away from the warmth and security of our sanctuary out into the wilderness and invite people into our happy company. When we cross paths with someone in the wilderness we can make the invitation: “No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here!”

The image we have discussed this morning includes a place of sanctuary in the midst of a wilderness. It includes the idea that people are in this wilderness and they are looking for a place to rest and belong. The sanctuary is a clearing where people work hard affirming the worth and dignity of every life. Within the sanctuary clearing are three fires, where people who are looking for sanctuary, may find a place and a people to belong. Central to the sanctuary clearing of Shadow Rock and equal distance from the fires of theism, non-theism, and atheism is a table. It is a table of love and grace where all people are welcomed. Let us prepare to meet each other and all wilderness wanderers at this Table.