

## **THOU SHALT OPEN YOUR HEART TO THE HOLY**

Sermon IV in the Yearlong Series, "10 Commandments for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century"

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I want to begin this morning by telling you about a moment...in some ways a profoundly ordinary moment of my life...but also a moment when what I can only call "The Holy" broke in upon me in all its saving glory, and would not let me go. I'm a little hesitant to try to describe this fleeting moment of my life because my words may fail to fully convey the power, grace and healing with which that moment broke over my human being...and gave me renewed energy for my life. But let me try...because I believe this moment sums up almost everything I will be trying to communicate to you this morning about the importance of opening yourself up to that which is sacred in this life.

It was an early morning in late April of last year...right here in Vero Beach, actually... during the Candidating Week when I was here getting to know all of you, prior to the vote which has brought me here permanently as your minister. You and the Ministerial Search Committee had the good grace to put me up that week down on the beach, at Gloria Estefan's wonderful, little Costa D'Este Hotel, an admittedly pleasant environment by any standard!

Well, that morning, I had risen early...about 6 AM, I think...just before the sun was to come up out of the Atlantic to signal the beginning of a new day...which for me was to be filled with many hours of meetings, interactions and conversations up here at the Fellowship. When the alarm went off -- with the rest of the hotel absolutely quiet -- I got out of bed, put on a bathing suit, slipped into the warm bathrobe the hotel provided, and, in the cool air, went barefoot down to the outdoor Jacuzzi which the hotel has right at the edge of the beach and its waving grasses.

In the cool, pre-dawn air -- with not another soul, not staff or guests, anywhere to be seen -- I quickly slipped out of the robe, and settled into the soothing, hot water of the Jacuzzi pool. Within moments, I was thoroughly relaxed in my early morning solitude in the warm water...and without so much as a conscious thought, began to look...really look!...at the marvelous fresh day which was unfolding all around me. In an instant, I found myself magically in the embrace of one of those spectacular, welcoming sunrises that can only happen here on the eastern coast of Florida.

The sun, having quickly risen from the turbulent gray waters, was bursting forth in red and orange through wondrous, roiling, tropical clouds. The strong and steady breeze was agitating (or was it caressing?) both the surface of the sea and the foot-tall grasses that were at my eye's level. Everything I was taking in through my senses -- the sun...the wind...the clouds...the grasses...the sea-scent...and gulls -- made me feel profoundly welcomed as a creature of creation. I felt utterly embraced in safety, serenity and beauty. And just when I thought my world could not possibly get any more magical, it did!

Seemingly out of nowhere, a flock of half-a-dozen stately pelicans – coasting gently northward on the strong breeze – sailed directly overhead...so close I could see the variegated shades of their feathers and the gentle arch of their gliding wings. In that instant, my whole body – no...my whole soul! – filled with awe and appreciation for everything that was around me – the warm water...the radiant sunrise...the spectacular clouds...the welcoming wind...the dancing waves and grass...and the pelicans...the amazing, ethereal pelicans! And a quick aside here about the particular magic of pelicans...I'm not much for the idea of reincarnation, but if I were ever to have the chance to come back to earth as another creature, I would want it to be as a pelican...these stately princes of the air who glide on the wind with such regal ease and calm. I would love to spend a lifetime floating above the tropics the way they do!

In any case, in that wondrous, simple sunrise moment, without a word coming to my lips, my heart exclaimed, "Dear God, what a beautiful morning...what a beautiful world...I am so blessed just to be here...I am so blessed just to be here as a passenger on this amazing earth." In an instant, I was spiritually ready for the day – renewed, refreshed, and grateful for my life.

This morning, I continue my year-long sermon series on "Ten Commandments for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" for Unitarian Universalists, with the fourth installment...suggesting to you with full and impassioned heart that, if you are to successfully navigate your way through this complicated and difficult century of ours, you must – must on a regular basis – know how to "Open Your Heart To the Holy."

There are, of course, many things we human beings need to be receptive to if we are to have lives of fullness, responsibility, purpose, and joy -- and over the course of my sermon series, I will be touching upon some of these. But being open to "the holy" – "the holy" or "the sacred" that is always around us – is surely one of the most important religious responses we can make in the fleeting days which are ours to live.

Now...perhaps the first thing I need to do this morning, as I try to persuade you of this great spiritual imperative in life, is to define what I mean by "the holy"...and that's where I get immediately in trouble!

I can easily tell you about moments in my life when I have felt what I can only call "the holy" breaking over me and my world – like recounting (as I did to begin this sermon) my morning dip with the sun and sea, wind and grasses and pelicans. And I can describe many other moments in my life when I am sure I was in the presence of "the sacred"...watching a newborn baby smile up at me in total, innocent radiance...feeling the love and care of dear old friends around a messy and noisy dinner table...watching a devoted spouse stand the sad night watch as their partner of six decades reaches the end of life...working with others late into the night to end a human injustice...witnessing someone with a terminal cancer choosing to live their last days with dignity and love.

I know what "the holy" looks and feels and tastes like! One of my colleagues once poetically called it "that dearest freshness in deep, down things" [Rev. Clarke Dewey Wells], and I am sure

that every one of you in this room could tell similar stories about moments when you have been keenly and blessedly aware of life's deepest and loveliest (and most holy and healing) dimensions...and can further describe how these encounters with the deep and the high moments of existence have blessed, sustained, renewed or transformed your lives.

"But why," some of you might ask, "why do you have to label such encounters as 'holy?' Why couldn't we just call them spectacular, wonderful, delightful and rare gifts of natural life? Why," those of you of a more humanist bent might well ask, "do you have to layer your natural peak experiences in life with traditional theological language on top?"

Well, indeed...this is a bit problematic, for when most people in our culture use the word "holy," they are referring to some sort of "transcendent" being or reality, some sort of spiritual entity that stands separate, higher, or apart from life on this often grimy and imperfect planet.

But this is not at all what I mean when I say "the holy." To me, "the holy" (which, again, I know best from direct, personal, everyday experience right here in this creaky old creation of ours), to me "the holy" has nothing to do with "transcendence" or separateness, but rather with "immanence"... immanence, which means that which is sunk deep down in the very nature and essence of the world we have been given. Indeed, in my theological universe, it is the very fact that everything which I call holy is utterly dependent on this transitory world that makes it so holy...and infuses it with the power to bless, transform and lift me to higher planes of human being.

Let me say all this just a bit differently. My understanding of "the holy" is: that which is most sacred and saving in life is fully natural and knowable – not supernatural, removed or untouchable, as many religions suggest. Holiness is rather a quality sunk deep down in the very nature of everyday, earthy and human things...and it arises to surprise and bless (and, yes, sometimes save us) out of ordinary, everyday moments, relationships, decisions and persons. When "the holy" breaks in upon our routines, it often feels astounding and extraordinary, but it is utterly natural – again, a part of the very nature of earthy and human things in all their imperfection and impermanence.

And here (to my mind, at least) is the real theological rub of this decidedly Unitarian Universalist view of "the holy." That which is holy – that wondrous, available sacred quality sunk deep down in our world – is not in control of the universe!

For in this creation (and please tell me if you experience your world any differently!), in this creation the holy and the beautiful, the sacred and the wondrous are spiritually counterbalanced in the grand, messy scheme of things by the undeniable presence of the horrendous and the horrible, the gruesome and the grotesque. Yes, our world is full of glorious sunsets and laughing children and brave men and women living compassionately and courageously, and countless moments of natural and human beauty...thank God! But our world is also rife, as you are all too aware, with tornadoes and traffic accidents...viciousness and violence...evil and

indifference...disasters and disease...and abundant, random sorrows that simply break the human heart.

Yes, we read in the morning paper about the miraculous mine rescue that saves 47 miners trapped miles below...but on the very next page is the heart-breaking story about the mother who backs the family SUV out of her driveway only to crush to death her only child, whom she simply did not notice. In our open and chaotic world, the holy is (quite naturally) spiritually offset by the horrible and the horrendous. That's just the way life on this chaotic planet is...eternally strung between astounding grace and unanswerable ugliness.

And this unvarnished existential understanding (of life's bitter/sweet blend) brings me to what I think the worst spiritual idea in the world, which gets so many people in theological trouble with this creation the way it is. Many people predicate their faith in the worthiness and purposefulness of life on the assumption that holiness is charge...that god (or some other transcendent, supernatural being or force) is "in charge"...and that therefore everything that happens on this planet – the good and the bad, the lovely and the hideous, the noble and the depraved, the soul-lifting and the heart-wrenching – is part of some "rational master plan" set in motion by a wise and sacred and purposeful hand.

The problem with this, of course, is that when horrible and sorrowful things happen to us – like a tsunami wiping out your brother's family while they are vacationing in Bali...or a beautiful grandchild dying of leukemia...or an old college roommate being senselessly killed during a \$10.00 street mugging – when horrible and sorrowful things randomly happen to us, we are left to theologically understand why God or some other cosmic power or principality would allow such tragedy, such heartbreak. Theologians call this problem theodicy, which can simply be stated in the form of an unflinching question: "If God is all good and all powerful, then why do so many evil and tragic things happen to good and innocent people?"

This, of course, is, for most of us in an often random and crazy world, an unanswerable question. And to me, it is the totally wrong question to ask in a creation like ours! It's the wrong question because in the chaotic world I live in, it is spiritually absurd to suggest that some higher, rational, just power is "in charge." Our creation just has too much senseless tragedy and sorrow for that theological idea to make any sense. I believe with all my heart and soul – and please hear this loud and clear from me this morning – I believe with all my heart and soul that abundant holiness is everywhere, to be seen and experienced in this difficult creation of ours. But, again, it is offset tragically by life's equally abundant horrors.

And this brings me – on this Sunday when I suggest to you that it is spiritually imperative for you to open yourselves to the holy -- to something liberal theologians (including Many Unitarian Universalists) call process theology.

I believe process theology will be useful to many of you as you think about your spiritual relationship with our universe. In a nutshell, process theology postulates that God (or holiness if you will) is not – as so much of traditional Christianity claims – some sort of fixed, external,

perfect, remote and all-powerful-and-knowing presence in creation, like some grand puppet master pulling the strings to control all earthly events. Process theology rather imagines God as a kind of dynamic verb – a mysterious-yet-available presence or energy, sunk deep down into all that is – a natural-but-sacred-quality embedded in the universe, a quality (and here is the really important part of process theology), a quality which seeks to “partner” with us. God – to a process theologian – is a sacred presence in everyday life which calls to our hearts, and invites our human participation in shaping the future of the world in the ways of goodness, beauty and health.

Process theology postulates that ours is a “participatory universe,” a place where every living thing is in a kind of “cosmic conversation” with every other part and particle of creation, and that God (or holiness) is there in the mix with us, beckoning us to know and cherish our world, and live in joyful-yet-responsible ways.

Listen to the way a colleague of mine, the Rev. Matt Alspaugh, describes the heart of process theology: “[The God of process theology] is not the almighty, all-knowing, perfect and unchanging God of traditional Christianity, but a transformative presence that is, like us, a stream of events, undergoing change and fully embedded in the universe, deeply connected to each of us. This God [or sacredness] invites us toward creativity, toward engagement and beauty in this world. We are free, event by event [in our lives], to follow or to ignore this calling, this lure toward what is good and beautiful. And when we respond, we inform and increase the potential, the possibility for good that is God. This God, unlike the ancient father God, can suffer with us and experience joy with us, because this God is so closely connected with us. We are drawn toward this process God, and in responding, co create with God a just world, one full of joy and full of beauty.

Let me return for a moment to my early morning beach experience with the pelicans here in Vero last spring. In that moment, I was fully a participant in the holy dance that was all around and within me. I was able to spiritually open myself to all the gifts and glories my creation offered up and, in that moment, participated with the holiness that was at hand. As a result, I was energized and blessed as a human being for the day. Process theology (the idea that you and I can respond again and again in our everyday lives, respond to the call and lure of the holy on our way to being fully and responsibly human) can be profoundly useful in our spiritual lives.

Now...let me be very clear about this. Process theology is admittedly a very mystical construct, but one I find profoundly useful. To describe God as a living, breathing, organic verb – as a holy, transformative power that is sunk deep down in all of creation, and that is available to us, that invites our participation as we journey in our everyday relationships toward everything that is good and just and beautiful – feels theologically right to me as a Unitarian Universalist.

Maybe this is because for as long as I can remember, theology has always been more to me a matter of feeling and intuition about my life than of logic, argument or concrete proof. When I say the word “God” in my life, I never think of the God of traditional Christianity -- that patriarchal, aloof and all-powerful personality that’s supposedly running the cosmic show.

When I say the word “God,” or encounter something I call “holy,” it is usually in a whisper when I am personally experiencing some magical, transformative moment in my earthly life like that morning on the beach...moments when I am suddenly aware of blessed, grace-filled forces at work. These transformative moments – and mercifully we all have them – help us to believe in the possibilities and promise of our broken world, and give us hope not only for our own immediate personal lives, but the larger world and life we all share with countless others.

Now...I suppose it is true that for those of you who have not found the thought of God (or the idea of “holiness”) to be a useful one in your spiritual lives – and my sense is that this is the case with about half of you in this congregation who identify yourselves as “humanist” or “atheist” – that the thinking of the process theologians may simply feel unnecessary to you. Indeed, I am certain (as I have said on numerous occasions from this pulpit) that one need not have a concept of God or holiness to lead a life of joy, responsibility, meaning, and care.

But what I personally find spiritually helpful about process theology is that it gives me a concrete spiritual way of understanding my world when I see holy things at work. Yes, there are other ways of describing what we are seeing when we watch a loving parent cradle a child...or watch a glorious sunset...or join with other good people fighting for justice – these are all naturalistic phenomenon which don’t require any complicated or erudite theological suppositions. But this Unitarian Universalist finds it spiritually fulfilling to believe, as I passionately do, that there is a transformative, holy power in my creation embedded in earthly and human things, with which I can participate in making my world more meaningful, more just, more humane, more beautiful.

It gives me great comfort and hope to feel that there is a dynamic sacred presence afoot in my creation (not an all-powerful presence, but an amazingly powerful presence, nonetheless) that drives life’s profligate possibilities, and is constantly trying to lure me into a life of evermore holiness, health and joy. I love the spiritual idea that I am both free and capable – free and capable in this often difficult and painful creation of ours – to purposefully lend myself again and again and again to a reliable holiness that resides in so many moments, and relationships, and things.

So, dear Vero friends, whether you describe yourself as a Christian, or a Jew, or an agnostic, or an atheist, or something in-between – I pray you, open yourself to that “dearest freshness in deep down things.” Be spiritually ready – every day – to lend yourself to all the fragile blessings which creation seeks so eagerly to offer up. “Partner up” with the best and most beautiful your creation has to offer, and thus expand the grace and goodness of the world. Living in this way – being open to the holy – will not, of course, protect you from tragedy, or make you immune to sorrow and pain. But it will give you the strength to live the life you are given with evermore grace and purpose...generosity and joy.

Amen.