

SERMON "UUs Do Believe Something, Don't We?" 1/8/23

From the time we returned from our recent trip Petra/Jordan and Luxor/Egypt to Dubai, I have been anxious to tell you about a couple of conversations I had with fellow travelers, strangers. The ship was set up with one dining room for all three meals for about a hundred people. We soon noticed there were a few tables for two and they were always taken, and we soon understood why. But I would not have wanted to miss out on these conversations.

But first there's a background story I have to tell. For most of the 70's I was the minister of a small, struggling Methodist congregation in Dix Hills, Long Island. If you know Long Island Dix Hills is on the Nassau/Suffolk border. One Sunday, in 1975 I think, a very distinguished looking black man began worshiping with us. He introduced himself as Dr. Matthew Wakatama. He told us he had recently been A OR THE minister of education for the nation of Rhodesia. Rhodesia, led by whites, was in turmoil as it was transitioning to become Zimbabwe, led by blacks, which it did in 1980. He, Dr. Wakatama, decided to find a professorship in the US.

He was active in our congregation and reported what was going on in Africa. He also wrote letters to the NYTimes which got published. I found one recently he sent in 1976 making the point that **the US had not earned a moral high ground** from which to lecture Africa, particularly, Zimbabwe and South Africa which was still apartheid South Africa. We had our own apartheid, he wrote, whites to the suburbs and under-served and under-funded black ghettos, called inner cities.

OK, so back to my ship which we boarded in the gulf of Aqaba, between Egypt and Jordan Nov. 2022. For our first dinner at sea we were joined by a couple, she black and he white, our age. She said. "Let's get the obligatories out of the way, NAME and FROM." After that round, I added "Let's also say CAREER." She told us she had been a US diplomat in Africa and in the EU, Brussels, and had worked in the US State Dept. So I said, "Did you work with anybody I might have heard of?" She said, "**Have you heard of Colin Powell?**" She went on to reminisce about her admiration for him. She said, he liked to be called General Powell rather than Mr. Secretary or Mr. Secretary of State. Because he said, General was a title you really had to work, to earn whereas Mr. Secretary might only mean, you were someone's friend. Understood!

She went on to tell us how much **she admired his speeches**. And one time she told him, General, you give great speeches and whoever writes them should be up for praise and promotion. To which he responded, "Madam, I write my own speeches." At that point **I found what little inner store of diplomacy I own** and did not mention THE

ONE COLIN POWELL SPEECH I remember and you remember, the one speech he later said **he hoped NOT TO BE REMEMBERED FOR**. Of course I mean the speech to the UN given to justify the invasion of Iraq in 2003. She was very interesting and spoke with authority.

Her husband was a retired executive of a Bible distribution company. He said it was like the American Bible Society but bigger. He had worked for this company in Africa and particularly Rhodesia. He was the son of two Methodist missionaries who worked in Rhodesia. When I heard that, I had to ask, Did you by any chance ever meet a man named Matthew Wakatama? **He lit up** and told me his parents had discovered Matthew at one of their missions, had seen the promise in him, had talked him into college and financed his going. Well, I've seen the movies, Hawaii and Mission and haven't had the greatest appreciation for missionaries but that story about Matthew Wakatama raised their stock. I know Methodists and Roman Catholics and other denominations have seeded educational systems around the world.

Now for the table chat that led to this sermon. Harry was/is a 90 year old retired psychoanalyst from Irvine CA. I've mentioned we have a number of retired counselors here and when you tell me you are that, a little voice triggers, Be careful what you say. But Harry wanted to talk so I asked if he had a specialty and he said not really. I asked if he had worked with many children and he said not a lot but he found children to be basically healthy, including his own. We had just that day walked around the tombs of Egyptian pharaohs in Luxor and there were loudspeakers blaring their accomplishments. About one Rameses it was said he had a hundred wives who gave him a hundred sons and a hundred daughters, AND HE MARRIED ALL HIS DAUGHTERS. So I couldn't resist, Harry, what does a psychoanalyst make of that? Well, he says, "I don't judge ancient cultures but if you have that many wives, you are bound to have a few good children."

Then I thought I should let him eat, but he says, Well, I told you mine, now you tell me yours." So I said I had had a career as a minister, but when we retired to Florida, I found the churches there pretty conservative so I tried Unitarian Universalism, sat near the door at first, but graduated to the front. Then Harry says, "UU, that really isn't a religion, is it?!" I come back, how do you define religion? **Well, he says, you have to believe in something**. Ah, I say, I'm pretty sure my folks believe in something, just not the same something. Beliefs and creeds are things you repeat, often for confirmation, for things your parents said they believed at your baptism(LITERALLY CONFIRM WHAT WAS SAID AT BAPTISM, so what your parents said they believed). I'm pretty sure the people in my congregation would agree, they DO believe that the purpose of life is to learn and to love. And such actions speak louder than repeated beliefs. And religions have

sometimes led to learning and loving, and sometimes been a major block, and in fact have perpetrated evil.

Harry concludes this with, "Well I have learned something today." And I said, So have I. "What have you learned?" I learned I could talk to a psychoanalyst without fear or fee!

HOW WOULD YOU PUT, what UUs believe? You might start out, ***I can only speak for myself***, and I don't expect anybody to REPEAT AFTER ME. That's usually the threshold for the young in religion. My brother and I discovered church on our own and got there about the time of confirmation. So we wanted in. I had to be baptized and was baptized in the same service I was confirmed in and the minister agreed not to pick me 14 up and walk around to oohs and aahs so cute. So beliefs began as things to repeat for admission. College for me lowered the boom on all that with BUT WHAT IT MEANS MATTERS and why say it if you don't know what it means.

Paul Tillich saved me with God talk having to square with meaning something. And not about life somewhere else. Tillich called deity **the ground of being**, meaning DEPTH, so religion was not about surface but rather religion was about depth. Ministers made fun of that, who would pray to the ground of our being, but prayer for Tillich wasn't a long distance call. It was a searching and seeking and finding within, because everyone has depth. Everyone has depth, within, to which many have contributed.

Tillich wrote pretty deep stuff, conceptual architecture to explain the ground, German **grund** of all existence, and I and many were glad he published books of sermons that were more understand- able than his theology. One of his more famous sermons was titled "YOU ARE ACCEPTED." An emigre from pre-WWII Germany and a German Lutheran minister, he believed in sin and defined it as ***separation from our best selves***. The point of that sermon was that the ***MAIN POINT OF CHRISTIANITY*** was grace, you are accepted.

An old friend of mine, a priest, used to say the problem with his brand of Christianity, RC, was the church certainly sounded bigger on sin and what he called hoops to jump through. Bigger on a penance system than FORGIVENESS AND GRACE, which too often seemed an afterthought. So you wind up feeling more excepted, excluded, than accepted, included. And the culprit too often is beliefs you can't understand or can't repeat once your brain has kicked in.

For many of us religion started out with a creed to repeat, tradition, what your parents said. I took part in the planning of a lot of ceremonies where the key thing was not to upset the grand- parents present or the ones in their graves. However it began for us, it

has become a search with no google or gps, and questions more than answers. And for us, when we were younger, certainty seemed possible but **what is certain has in fact diminished**. And many cues along the way prepare you for life as a package with a lot more ambivalence and ambiguity and a lot less certainty. And if you have children you soon learn that the only person repeating all the wisdom you have amassed, and want to share is YOU!

Beliefs have had a historical place, in our personal journeys and in history. Sadly beliefs have not HIGHLIGHT(highlighted) GRACE, If it was all supposed to be about grace, “you are accepted”, compassion, even for yourself, it turned out, it turned into something QUITE DIFFERENT and seemed, AND WAS MORE ABOUT division and divisiveness, the sheep and the goats, heaven and hell, WTH.

Beliefs may be in our attics but our experience has mattered more, a lot more. And the only thing that makes religion appealing at all is **WHERE WE HAVE ACTUALLY EXPERIENCED YOU ARE ACCEPTED, GRACE, WELCOME**. My brother and I found our lives in church because those Methodists in Troy conveyed to us ACCEPTANCE. We were welcomed and it meant a lot. Jump ahead to what we have just survived, the pandemic and hope to go on surviving. What mattered here as we regrouped, and as we met in the park was COMMUNITY, people we connected with, a community here and there where we knew ACCEPTED, WELCOME. And shared values. And nobody's excepted, excluded unless you want an echo chamber that ain't us!

UU is a mix of spirituality and activism. You might say this differently but for me, the spirituality is not another world and time, but within, what runs deep, and lasting for us. The activism is as varied as we are. This is a rhetorical question, WHAT DO YOU WANT TO FIX WHILE WE ARE HERE? I used to think we would fix a lot. Now, I hope we can fix a little. But while we are trying to figure out our spiritual and our activism, **I know I need a community of people who share values**. A big one being, YOU DON'T GIVE UP. Liberal isn't a dirty word. Conservative isn't a dirty word. What has been dirty, toxic and deadly and still is, in my opinion, is letting religion be that game Eric Berne identified, “Mine is better than yours.” May deity, nature or health save us from that!