

## ***In Our Own Words***

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*The United Church of Christ affirms the responsibility of the Church in each generation to make this faith its own in reality of worship, in honesty of thought and expression, and in purity of heart before God.*

—Preamble of The Constitution of the United Church of Christ

### **Ancient Witness:** Joel 2:28-29

Scientists tell us that we need dreams to survive. A human being needs to have a certain amount of rapid eye movement, or REM, and if deprived of this dream state, will begin to deteriorate physically: depression, hallucinations, sickness and finally even death can follow.

In the same way, when deprived of dreams and visions, a human being's spiritual life can die, as well. Now, by dreams and visions I do not mean mere fantasy. But rather, I am talking about the place where possibilities emerge. God's spirit, like a voice from the future, is constantly calling forth newness, for change, for renewal—at the heart of everything. And when this spirit and flesh touch, there are visions:

*I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh;  
Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,  
You old shall dream dreams,  
And your young shall see visions.*

We hear about stories of the past, stories of other people's spiritual experience. But the Word does not speak to us until it is brought into the present, until it means something to us and speaks to our own circumstances. Only then does it finally speak to us, through visions. As people of faith, we are each called to use our imagination, to dream, to envision under the enchantment of the Spirit.

Episcopal Bishop, John Spong, said it well:

*Our task is neither to literalize nor worship the words of yesterday's theological consensus. It is rather, to return to the experience that created these creedal words in the first place and then to seek to incorporate that experience in the words that we today can use, without compromising its truth or our integrity as citizens of this century.*

I came across an old folktale:

*Once upon a time when the earth was new, the Creator decided that she wanted to play a game of hide-and-go-seek...*

*It was about this same time that the Creator's angels were having a meeting. They were afraid that people might try to kidnap or monopolize God, and so they decided that she had to be hidden in a safe place, a place where all people would be able to find her if they searched, but where none could own her exclusively. So they sent out angel scouts to find this perfect place...*

*Meanwhile the Creator had already found her hiding place, the safest, fairest and warmest place to hide, and yet the most difficult to find: inside each and every human heart.*

Each human being experiences the grace and wisdom of God at the depth of our being. And when we hear stories of others we are reminded of our own knowing, our own experience.

In the United Church of Christ, they have that famous tag line: “God is still speaking.” I want you to see that this is truly an amazing, audacious thing to say. God is still speaking directly to our hearts, causing us to dream dreams and see visions. Think about it. If you say this and trust this—that this is an honest-to-goodness possibility right here and right now for you and me—what can be more mind-blowing than that?

There’s another story of the Hasidic master, Rabbi Barukh, and a time when his grandson, Yeheil, was playing hide-and-go-seek with a friend. Yeheil hid himself well and waited a long time for his friend to find him. Finally, he came out of his hiding place only to discover that his friend had not been looking for him at all. Discovering this, Yeheil ran to his grandfather in tears at his friend’s faithlessness. Then tears brimmed in Rabbi Barukh’s eyes, and he said, “God says the same thing: ‘I hide, but no one wants to seek me.’”

Make no mistake, the journey of spiritual discovery is not the safe one. This reminds me, back when computers weren’t as sophisticated as they are today, of the writer, who said that every time she ran the spell-check program it didn’t like the word “sacred,” and it changed the word “sacred” to the word “scared.” She reflected on this, saying, “I know the feeling, I have it.” When it comes to the sacred, there is fear, and a respect. “The proper word is awe. The sacred is awful; it is full of awe.” (Sara Maitland, *A Big-Enough God*)

Because it’s a perilous path. We are called to change, and that’s often not a pleasant process. We’re called to risk failure, to risk not being liked, perhaps to risk losing jobs, possessions and even respect. It will take us to some scary places. So the temptation for each generation has been to rely upon the stories of the past of *someone else’s* experience and *someone else’s* words—a second-hand religion—instead of finding our own voice, our own words, our own experience.

Some say we should question the assumption of a closed and fixed canon of sacred writings. Robert Funk has said, “The canon of scripture adopted by traditional Christianity should be contracted and expanded simultaneously to reflect respect for the old tradition and openness to the new.” After all, the collection of sacred writings wasn’t set until 300-400 years after Jesus. The people who participated in those councils of the church in that distant time weren’t any more brilliant, insightful, or knowledgeable than are the people of today. I would add that God is just as active today as in those earlier generations, too. The words of the prophet still ring true: “I will pour out my spirit on all flesh... Your old shall dream dreams, and your young shall see visions.”

One of the most profound examples of this is the story about Our Lady of Guadalupe. In his brilliant book, Virgil Elizondo talks about how the conquistadors, such as Cortez, brutally conquered what we know today as Mexico. (*Guadalupe: Mother of the New Creation*, Orbis Books, 1997) The beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century marked for the natives of the Americas humiliation, destruction, sickness, enslavement and massive death. Two civilizations came together in an unequal struggle. The Europeans had superiority in instruments of war. In addition, their bodies had naturally developed immunity to the diseases that they carried with them. Between war and diseases, the native population would come close to being annihilated.

But maybe just as devastating, the conquerors came with their image of a violent God and this idea that they were the only civilized human beings to have absolute dominion over non-Christian lands, the exclusive possessors of all truth. And so they destroyed everything of the indigenous religions, which meant the brutal destruction of the deepest roots of Indian existence and the collective soul of the native peoples.

The Europeans, you see, kept for themselves a monopoly of the sacred. Even after the natives “converted” to the new religion, they were still seen as less than human and denied ordination into the priesthood.

But something new would emerge in 1531 on the hill of Tepeyac near what is today Mexico City. A native American named Juan Diego had a vision of the Mother of God. She had the attire and the features of a native maiden and addressed Juan Diego *in his own language, in his own words*. This poor and lowly less-than-human-being was given a message to tell the bishop to build a shrine on that spot. At that shrine, Our Lady of Guadalupe would welcome *all people* on an *equal basis*, each to experience the wholeness and healing of God *for themselves*.

Now, I don’t have time to go into the rich story of Guadalupe today. But what was amazing was that it happened as the missionaries were trying to discredit and destroy their indigenous religious tradition. Even today, European Christianity is still suspicious of any type of syncretism, forgetting the creative syncretism of its own European origins. Elizondo says it so well:

*Guadalupe respects the two apparently irreconcilable religious views, takes in what is good in both of them, avoids what is false in both, and offers a new synthesis that will bring together the true aspects of both through a new imagery of God.*

And so, I am talking today about this wonderful possibility that we gently guard in others and in ourselves. We can speak of God in our own language, *in our own words*. We are called to create something that is new, a *new synthesis*, something uniquely our own.

You know, we often adopt someone else’s script, follow the conventional standard and guidelines. And then we wonder why it doesn’t seem to work. Don’t get me wrong, the script is important. But we also have to use our own words, put our own stamp on it, to make it real.

The famous story of an 18<sup>th</sup> century Hasidic rabbi named Zusya now makes sense to me. As he was about to die, one of his students timidly asked what he was most afraid of about dying. “I am most afraid of what they will ask me when I get to heaven,” he answered. “What will they ask you?” his disciples were eager to know. “They will not ask me, ‘Zusya, why were you not like Moses, or why weren’t you more like Solomon, or why weren’t you more like David?’” he answered. “They will ask me, ‘Zusya, why were you not Zusya?’”

Thomas Merton wrote:

*For me to be a saint means to be myself. Therefore, the problem of sanctity is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self. (Seeds)*

This struggle to find oneself, to be authentic and the freedom to do so is something that the U.C.C. knows especially well. That's why I put that wonderful sentence from the Preamble of the Constitution on the bulletin:

*The United Church of Christ affirms the **responsibility of each generation to make this faith its own**, in reality of worship, in honesty of thought and expression, and in purity of heart before God. (emphasis added)*

In order for our faith to be alive we must have the freedom to be honest and authentic, to use our own words. Look, God wasn't any more active 2,000 or 4,000 years ago. The nature and the activity of God haven't changed, but sometimes we act as if they have. The generations before us weren't smarter or more spiritually sensitive. Human nature and activity haven't changed, but sometimes we act as if they have.

Each of us must synthesize God's spirit with our own flesh. This can only happen when we become ourselves and not someone else. To be ourselves, to use our own words, to speak our own language—this is a sacred task. We each need to discover how to be a unique incarnation, to merge our imaginations with God's creativity. As Augustine said, "Love God, and then do what you will."

Let me end with another story. Richard Selzer, a professor at Yale University Medical School, wrote a book of essays called, *Mortal Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery*. He wrote,

*I stand at the bed where a young woman lies, her face postoperative, her mouth twisted in palsy, clownish. A tiny twig of the facial nerve, the one to the muscles of her mouth, has been severed. She will be thus from now on. The surgeon had followed with religious fervor the curve of her flesh: I promise you that. Nevertheless, to remove the tumor in her cheek, I had to cut the little nerve.*

*Her young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed, and together they seem to dwell in the evening lamplight, isolated from me, private. Who are they, I ask myself, he and this wry-mouth I have made, who gaze at each other so generously, greedily? The young woman speaks,*

*"Will my mouth always be like this?" she asks.*

*"Yes," I say, "it will. It is because the nerve was cut."*

*She nods and is silent. But the young man smiles.*

*"I like it," he says. "It is kind of cute."*

*All at once I know who he is. I understand and lower my gaze. One is not bold in an encounter with a god. Unmindful, he bends to kiss her crooked mouth, and I am so close I can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate to hers, to show that their kiss still works.*

Good friends,

There are dreams to be dreamt

And visions to be seen.

The Spirit beguiles our imaginations—still pours out on all flesh—

To figure out  
New ways for love to work its way into the world  
New ways for love to work its way through us.  
And we can discover  
That in every situation  
*The kiss still works.*

*(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)*