

IS GOD WATCHING?

Sermon by Laura Pedersen

Sunday, July 1, 2018

All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City

Reading:

If there were a god

I would thank her for the toothy insides of ripe
pomegranates,

for the easy thumbing of their soft peels,

thank her for seventy-three degree weather— for
leaning oaks,

glass bottom boats,

and always acknowledging what is beneath us.

for the neighbors who kept their tire swings
long after their kids had grown up and moved out and the
loyal lemonade stand customers.

for the man who gave up his seat to a
pregnant woman

on the 5 o'clock 3 train,

and for the brief moment of connectedness between
two strangers reading the same book, I would thank
her for that book.

I would thank her for the bicycle shops that
fix tires without charge.

and the good kinds of taxes and the
schools that they build,

I would thank her for the persistent love of New York City, and the
fact that even when I want to hate it
I end up dancing to a singing saxophone in the
middle of Grand Central Station,

I want to thank her for the saxophone
because it always sounds so good.

I would thank her for the parents
who made their kids learn an instrument
or the kids who made their parents let them,
I would thank her for the kids
who said to heck with it and taught themselves.

For the teachers
and philosophers
and waitresses and
scientists

I would thank her for every coincidence, and
someone might say
"In god's eyes there is no coincidence"
but the god I am imagining
still doesn't know what to make of the fact that people
run into their friends on the street just moments after
thinking of one another

I just want to thank something for the
people who organize archives,
for the museum guides who get way too excited and the
tourists who ask questions.

I want to thank something for
the answer Yes

If this god exists,
I would hope she loves the people who doubt her existence because
then maybe she would
continue to give us these moments, these
moments that make us say
 If there were a god,
 I would thank her for this.

—excerpted from "If there were a god" by Olivia Gatwood

Sermon:

Thank you for the pleasure and privilege of joining you in this very warm and welcoming UU church, or church basement, which is blessed with air-conditioning while the sanctuary is not. The utopians among us call it our Summer Chapel.

I grew up attending a UU church in Buffalo, NY, back when it was 80% Catholic. Buffalo was so Catholic that even the atheists and Unitarian Universalists were Catholic in that the God we did not worship was a Catholic God. Despite attending public learning institutions from kindergarten through high school graduation, there was always the sense that someone was watching, and I don't mean the principal. My teachers were fond of saying, "You'll have to answer for that."

Before soccer games we gathered in a prayer circle. There were two people on the sidelines out in the middle of nowhere, or Where Jesus Lost his Sandals as my mom liked to say, and as the only UU kid I couldn't help wondering, Does God have time to decide girls' athletic events? Because not even the school cared that much, evidenced by the fact we were given the boys' old uniforms to wear.

Are there advantages to thinking that God is watching? Of course. During the French Revolution three insurrectionists were sent to the guillotine. The first one, a Christian, said his prayers and bowed his head but the blade malfunctioned. If it doesn't work you're allowed to go free, so he was spared. He looked up and said, "Thank you God for your benevolence." The Jewish man was next, the guillotine malfunctioned again, he looked up and said, "Blessed is the Lord, I have set him before me always." Now it's the Unitarian's turn. The blade malfunctioned. He looked up and pointed and said, "I think I see the problem."

The simple but powerful idea of an all-knowing God has long served to deter self-interest and achieve remarkable levels of cooperation. Indeed, as most societies have discovered, supernatural beliefs are so good at promoting collaboration that they may have been favored by natural selection. Members of religious groups describe themselves as treating each other as fictive kin, so it makes sense that many churchgoers employ terms such as brother and sister. At All Souls we call Mary-Ella Holst our church grandmother, although she was recently elevated to great-grandmother status.

So if God is watching then does everything happen for a reason? Like meeting your soul mate on the C train when you almost always take the A train. When you went to the animal shelter and that one dog grabbed your pant cuff? What about an earthquake that kills thousands of people? A man who emerged unscathed from the Las Vegas Massacre last October where 58 people died and almost 500 were wounded said that he'd become a believer in God because his life had been spared. Growing up how many times did I hear the phrase "There but for the grace of God go I"?

Any disaster, manmade or natural, causes us to wonder why this house was destroyed and this one spared, why this life was saved and this one taken. I worked on Wall Street and after 9-11 asked myself that question when many dear friends were lost. Some people find it reassuring to think that there are no accidents and what happens to us – good and bad – reflects an unfolding plan. I called this sermon IS GOD WATCHING? but after reading the news this past year I almost called it IS GOD PUNISHING US?

Most of us are familiar with the biblical story of Noah's Ark, which in its petrifying and theatrical simplicity embodies the notion of divine retribution. Early in life we're made to understand that individuals who commit crimes or diverge from religious and social mores will suffer punishment, while those who behave properly and follow the rules will be rewarded.

Today, while secularism is at an all-time high, the willingness to believe in some kind of payback or karma remains nearly universal. Even atheists often feel they're monitored and judged, which may or may not be the result of dashboard cameras and being forced to work on everyone else's religious holidays. As a journalist I was trained to write atheist with a lowercase "a" while God was always capitalized.

We frequently find ourselves imagining what our parents, spouse, children or boss would think of our actions, even if they're miles away and will never find out. We talk of eyes burning into the back of our heads, the walls listening, a sense that someone or something is out there, observing our every move, possibly aware of our thoughts and intentions.

The US, the world's most economically powerful and scientifically advanced society also has the most religions; and is where two of the fastest growing–

Mormonism & Pentecostalism—were founded. Over 90% of Americans believe in God, 93% believe in heaven, 85% in hell, and 40% believe in a literal interpretation of Genesis rather than evolution. Seventy-seven percent believe in angels compared with 61% who believe in climate change. At least 14% believe

that Joan of Arc was Noah's wife, and they had three sons: Shem, Ham & Cheese.

Man has been around as long as God, or God has been around as long as Man, take your pick. As the 18th century French Enlightenment writer Voltaire said, "If there were no God it would be necessary to invent him."

Going back in time, when we operated in small bands of hunter-gatherers, we tended to know everyone with whom we interacted. They were either kin, direct blood relatives, or kith, friends and allies we knew well along with their families.

Gods back then also tended to be less versatile—they weren't omnipotent and didn't judge individual moral transgressions, mainly because your community was small and therefore it was easy to keep track of people and punish them yourself.

About 12,000 years ago, when we began moving toward large-scale communities of anonymous strangers as a result of agriculture, God began watching and controlling our individual movements, which makes sense, because we didn't yet have cooperation in the form of institutions such as courts, police, and law firms to enforce contracts.

It's commonly thought that religion is the antithesis of secularism, yet history and psychology reveal unexpected continuities. It transpires that an initial religious framework can assist us in building communities with the kind of organizations, practices, and social conditions that help a cooperative society thrive, whether their members chose to be godless or god-fearing.

Do we behave differently if someone might be watching? Drivers slow down when they see a police car. Cameras in stores reduce theft. With transparency in politics and corporations there's less malfeasance. In the presence of others

there's more generosity, and also handwashing. Thomas Jefferson said, "Whenever you do a thing, act as if all the world were watching."

Problems arise when society is affected by anonymity and can't check reputations, as is often the case with cyberbullying and fake news. The monotheistic God in the Hebrew Bible, New Testament, and Koran supposedly

sees everything, especially when no one is watching, much like my friend Mary's mom, who had eyes in the back of her head, even though we looked and couldn't find them. The Great Seal of the US on the one-dollar bill shows a watchful eye atop a pyramid.

In Buddhism you have representations of eyes on flags and monuments believed to be looking in all four directions. In ancient Egypt, Horus the Sky God, also known as Horus Who Rules With Two Eyes, was often depicted as a falcon watching over towns and villages. Similar examples are found throughout Inca Society and many native peoples.

If we examine the thousands of religions that have come and gone, most don't last, however, the ones with the meanest Gods do the best. And they're the ones in which followers behaved the best. Think of your strictest teacher—the one nobody messed with. Nastier gods also made people better neighbors. Unitarian Universalists are a perfect example of being too lenient—we don't believe in damnation or have a strict set of rules, we respect your choices, don't judge your lifestyle or what you wore today...and we don't have a lot of people who want to join. Alcohol addiction—there's a meeting on Wednesday, we support you. Meantime some religious countries jail citizens for drinking. We need to get tough about something—maybe more regulations about carrying NPR tote bags, a seating chart, or a dress code.

Supernatural monitoring is the outsourcing of social monitoring to watch when no one is watching, to care when no one can care, and to threaten when no one can threaten. In more modern terms, God stabilizes cooperation levels in large groups.

In 1904, on a long railroad trip through America, German sociologist Max Weber asked a traveling salesman about religion. The salesman's now famous reply was, "Sir, for my part everybody may believe or not believe as he pleases; but if I saw a farmer or a businessman not belonging to any church at all, I wouldn't trust him with fifty cents. Why pay *me* if he doesn't believe in anything?"

The interesting thing in this example is the salesman doesn't care *what* his customers believe in, so long as it's something. The dilemma of the traveling salesman is the problem with all large anonymous societies where strangers interact with one other. And this is why religious groups have experienced a

cultural evolutionary advantage until recently. Because mutual cooperation bestows phenomenal benefits with regard to individual and community success. But it doesn't come free and requires a considerable amount of ingenuity to foster the necessary trust.

In the post-World War II era, Americans flocked to church in record numbers, swelling the growth of traditional denominations—Methodist, Baptist, Disciples of Christ, Lutheran, Catholic, and Presbyterian. Church building boomed; Bible sales skyrocketed; communion wafers flew off the shelves. Amid the prosperity, the United States and the Soviet Union faced off in a Cold War, a spiritual struggle that pitted “Christian America” against “Godless Communism.”

The Soviets successfully tested their first nuclear bomb in 1949. In 1952, President-elect Dwight Eisenhower famously said, "Our form of government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith, and I don't care what it is." This statement suggests that the nonreligious, be they atheist or socialist, are fundamentally anti-American and unpatriotic.

My parents said a different Pledge of Allegiance and probably some of you did too. In 1954 what phrase was added to the Pledge of Allegiance? “Under God,” which I was required to say every morning in a *public school*. "In God We Trust" was made our national motto in 1956, and rituals emerged like the National Day of Prayer and National Prayer Breakfast – which convinced many Americans, particularly future FOX News anchors that their country has been, and always would be, a formally Christian nation.

So, is religion necessary for morality? Some extremist versions pose a threat. Others are considered oppressive to minorities, especially African-Americans, the LGBTQ community, and women. Many perform valuable community services.

The Scandinavian countries and Switzerland, the world's *least* religious societies, where the majority of people don't believe in God, top international rankings for being law-abiding, having high levels of cooperation and trust, and even high rates of societal well-being. Meantime, they don't have a distrust of atheists the way we do in the US, which is why you won't see an out-of-the-closet atheist running for high office here anytime soon. On the Supreme Court we have five Catholics, three Jews, and one Gorsuch, who is some type of Christian. And that's about to change.

Secularism seems able to thrive where institutions operating the Rule of Law in the form of courts, contracts, and police without favoring any race, creed or gender, combine with societal benefits such as a good standard of living, health care, education and tolerance of individualism, or freedom. However, in much of the world it's ties of blood, honor, and ethnic solidarity that are dominant and so religion rules.

Experiments show that words such as *police* and *judge* foster cooperation among strangers as much as God-related words. Monotheism may have inadvertently planted the seeds for Atheism, because if so many other Gods are false why not this one, but more importantly, monotheism served as the groundwork for secularism. By employing so many intermediaries in the form of priests and rabbis, monotheistic religious institutions made a personal god seem distant—He created the world but didn't actively manage daily affairs.

Simply put, when government institutions are credible and successful, there's less religion, and when government is corrupt or lacking, we have more religion. Correspondingly, societies with more income disparity tend to be more religious while those with a more equitable distribution of wealth are less religious.

We tell children that Santa is watching to see if they've been naughty or nice. In many households a God-like holiday elf on the shelf is installed to supposedly monitor behavior. Which has also led to many an editorial questioning whether these supernatural creatures are 1) a harmless myth considered a threshold to adulthood, 2) leading us to a dystopian surveillance state or 3) part and parcel of lodging false belief systems in young minds.

And that brings us to Pascal's Wager, which supposes that believing in God is simply a safer bet against even narrow odds of eternal damnation. But it's based on a fatal premise: an omnipotent God would surely know you're just covering all your bases.

Our core ethical instincts evolved long before religion spread through human groups. Early building blocks of morality predate religion and don't depend on it. Groups of animals regularly suppress self-interest for the collective good and I assume they're not religious, although baboons and show poodles look like they might be part of a cult.

Secular institutions have weaknesses—understaffing, systemic racism, flawed evidence, being closed on Sunday. Religious societies believe God has no imperfections. And I will admit that God doesn't go out on strike the way teachers and garbage collectors can. Likewise, it's hard to compare supernatural punishment with secular punishment.

To answer the question of whether we can motivate ourselves to behave without being monitored by God I offer two things. Studies have shown that most people aren't helpful and generous because we fear the consequences of not acting so, but because we're happiest when demonstrating kindness to others, and this in turn releases the hormone oxytocin, which has positive health benefits. Like the line in "Santa Claus Is Coming To Town," *So be good for goodness sake*, it transpires that being good is good for us.

Moreover, cooperation is vital to our society. It's how we wrote a Constitution, rocketed to the moon, split the atom, decoded our genome, mapped the brain, invented the Twinkie, and added caller ID to our phones. Cooperation is hard to achieve, hard to sustain, and hard to explain, yet vital to our existence. It's the root of our greatest triumphs and our bloodiest tragedies. It's what will make or break our future.

Meantime, the belief that everything happens for a reason can have some ugly consequences. It tilts us toward the view that the world is a fundamentally fair place, where goodness is rewarded and wickedness punished. It can lead us to blame those who suffer from disease or who are victims of crimes, and it can motivate a reflexive bias in favor of the status quo—seeing poverty, inequality, and oppression as the workings of an all-encompassing plan.

Over time, history has favored religious groups and that's why most of us are descendants of one faith or another. And why the joke about UUs is that we believe in at most, one God.

Another salient fact is that, at least for now, Christians, Hindus, Muslims and Orthodox Jews reproduce faster than the nonaffiliated and spiritual-but-not-religious. It's no accident that religious conservatives' attitudes on sexual orientation, contraception, and reproductive rights are conducive to maintaining high fertility levels. In fact, the *most* secularized societies have the fewest

children. Of course, not *all* religions encourage reproduction. The Shakers banned sex, which was definitely not a good model for growth, and not necessarily a surprise considering their legacy is a hardback chair.

This dichotomy between a religious or secular way of life will continue to shape the century and leaves us asking, can we have a conscience without religion?

Does the Golden Rule to treat others as we wish to be treated need a theological imprimatur to hold weight and value? We're still finding an answer to that.

Either way, whether it's because we're fearful of going to hell or because we're flourishing on positive endorphins, we need to cooperate more and not less because there are epidemics, climate change, catastrophic weather events, a refugee crisis, racial strife, oh yeah, enough nuclear weapons at large to blow up the world. And recently there was a lime shortage that was devastating to margarita lovers. I've ruled out an alien invasion even though we know for a fact there's intelligent life out there, mostly because it hasn't tried to contact us.

Otherwise, prophets and professors work both sides of the aisle. *Heaven is for Real* topped the bestseller lists and became a movie. Richard Dawkins writes books debunking faith, and none other than Ron Reagan starred in a Super Bowl commercial asking you to support the Freedom From Religion Foundation, following which President Reagan's other son, the conservative commentator Michael Reagan tweeted that their father was crying in Heaven.

Not long ago, in the town of Auburn, Illinois, a 75-year-old man who couldn't walk was crossing the railroad tracks on a motorized scooter when the wheels became stuck. True story. He began yelling and a train approaching at 81-miles per hour blew its horn. Ashley Aldridge, a 19-year-old young mother making lunch for her two toddlers, looked out the kitchen window and although she'd never seen this person before in her life, raced out of her home to try and help. Ashley attempted to lift the heavy scooter but that didn't work. Despite her small size she was able to pull the 200-pound man to safety just as the train struck his scooter, which was completely destroyed. The rescued man, Earl Moorman, called the teenager his guardian angel. Ashley Aldridge said, "I would want someone to do that if my grandpa was stuck, so I just had to." The local martial arts school awarded Ashley an honorary black belt

The bottom line, for now at least, is that it's probably pointless trying to change one another's beliefs about God. Our time is better spent finding ways to communicate and cooperate with each other locally, nationally, and globally, or else.... We can care for the least among us, as it says to do in the Bible, to please God or because it's the right thing to do. Just so long as we do it.

And finally, bending toward a common purpose is more important than arising from a common place.