

Rev. Dr. Steve Jungkeit

The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme

Texts: Acts 17: 22-28; The Gospel of Thomas, Fragment 77

August 31, 2025

“God, After All”

The Wizard of Oz is having a moment once again, out in the heat of Nevada - images from it are being projected on the outside of the Sphere. Which feels felicitous in a way, because every year at about this time, I feel a little like the Tin Man when I step back into the pulpit - creaky and stiff, inarticulate save for a few groans. And so let this Sunday, let this give and take between us, be the oil that loosens the joints, allowing us to continue our pilgrimage along our own yellow brick road.

In years past, I’ve come back to you with some adventure to report, or some mishap from which I could squeeze a lesson or two. This year is harder - no one got sick! We did take a little road trip and we did visit family, and we did touch down in our Holy City of New Orleans for a few days earlier this month. But mostly the kids had activities and work that kept us rooted. And so I used what time I had as a retreat. I stayed off the internet as much as possible, and I turned some pages, which for me is a kind of paradise. I’m grateful for the chance to do that for a while. And I’m grateful to have a community to come back to, one in which we can chase big thoughts together, and wrestle collectively with what it is to be people of faith in this strange and tumultuous time.

What I do want to share with you today emerged from a quiet moment, a conversation that took place as Rachael and I were driving our daughter Sabina back to college a few weeks ago. I don’t know if you remember, but a year ago, both Rachael and I got Covid, and we weren’t able to be present when Sabina moved into her dorm, which was wrenching. And so it felt like a kind of redemption to be able to help her this year.

Somewhere during the drive, the conversation turned toward church - and I swear, it wasn’t me that instigated it. Sabina shared that she actually kind of missed going to church during the school year, but that none of the ones she’s tried have the same openness and vitality that she’s grown up with at FCCOL. She then shared that yes, it was a little weird when the subject of her parents’ - and especially her dad’s - occupation came up among friends. Assumptions are made, and often she has to say, it’s not what you think, it’s not *that* kind of church. But sadly, most people can’t differentiate. She went on to describe a conversation with two friends, who happen to know FCCOL, one of whom admitted that she loves our church, and that it often leaves her in

tears, even if she doesn't really believe in God. The second friend just scoffed, and said he didn't understand how *anyone* could actually believe in God, how *anyone* could take any of it seriously.

It's a common enough attitude. But it made me wish I could talk to those friends, at least for a little, because I'm confident the God they don't believe in is a God I don't believe in either. I wanted to explain that, often, it was only when our childhood notions of God come undone that a new and more supple understanding of religion - and yes, of God - can be discovered. I wanted to point out that, in a way, what gets called atheism in the popular imagination is sometimes a necessary and helpful clearing of the ground, so that a whole new kind of faith can emerge. But when we're confronted daily, sometimes hourly with the most reptilian voices telling us what Christian faith means, well, sometimes, it just feels easier to shrug and say, yeah, that's not for me. So I don't begrudge anyone their instinct to walk away from it all. It's just that I'm also interested in what happens *after* that. I'm interested in the remainder, in what's left over when the older forms fall away and crumble, and when something new insists upon growing in that dust heap.

As Sabina talked, she grew even more animated, and she said, "I mean, if these friends were actually readers or if they explored just a little, they would know that there are other ways to make sense of all this stuff." She began searching on her phone for the passage from Alice Walker's novel, *The Color Purple*, which I've printed in full in the bulletin. She had encountered the passage in one of her high school English classes, which made me grateful for the schools and curriculums where such books are still assigned. And she went on to read the passage out loud in the car. I was sitting in the driver's seat feeling glad, because that's one of the passages that's meant the most to me over the years as well, one that I recall sharing with you years ago. And I made the determination then and there to share it with you again, because it feels important right now. I won't read it in its entirety - you can do that on your own. I simply want to draw out several themes that can be relevant and helpful to us in our community as we seek to embody what it means to be progressive people of faith in a culture ever more circumscribed and restrictive in speech, in thought, in movement and in expression.

The passage is a conversation between two African American women, Celie and Shug. They're living in Georgia, in the 1930's. The novel takes the form of letters that Celie writes to God, and we as readers follow as she acquires greater facility with language, and then greater expansiveness of thought as her consciousness grows. Shug is a barroom singer who has fallen ill, and has been, awkwardly, taken in by Celie's husband, a man who goes unnamed in the novel. The two women begin as competitors, but soon an unlikely alliance forms, and then a friendship. The conversation has to do with Celie's crisis of faith, as she realizes she no longer really believes in the God to whom she has been writing. Shug conducts a kind of therapy for Celie, helping her to move from one flawed image of God to another more life affirming image.

The first lesson I would have us see comes, ironically, toward the end of the passage, but it's implied everywhere throughout. It has to do with ridding ourselves of harmful images of God. Shug says:

“Man corrupt everything. He on your box of grits, in your head, and all over the radio. He try to make you think he everywhere. Soon as you think he everywhere, you think he God. But he ain't. Whenever you trying to pray, and man plop himself on the other end of it, tell him to git lost,” say Shug.

Shug is drawing our attention to something very basic, but something which we rarely bother to interrogate. God and the human imagination are mirrors of one another. And often the images of God that most readily come to mind are the images that have been supplied to us not only by the Bible, but by the culture around us. Even if we know better, God winds up looking like the figure painted by Michaelangelo in the Sistine Chapel, or maybe even like the man on our box of grits. If not that, our imaginations sometimes work to fill in the blanks by supplying some other image of authority, control, or command. For Shug and Celie, as for so many others, the default way of imagining God is as a white man, something I would dare say remains true for more than a few people in the United States these days.

What Shug, and Alice Walker more broadly, are inviting is a revolt of the imagination. Shug belongs to a veering and zig-zagging tradition of sacred iconoclasm, seen when Moses melts the golden calf, seen when Jesus overturns the tables in the temple. It can be seen, in renewed form, in the medieval tradition of negative theology, which insists that whatever you can say about God is *not* God, since God is beyond representation. It extends to the women mystics who supplied their own metaphors for the Divine, and on into the modern period when the three great prophets of suspicion, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, conducted their own therapy upon a sickly Christian Europe. This holy and sacred iconoclasm can be seen among enslaved peoples and their descendents, who saw with bitter clarity how misshapen was the imagination of God among the surrounding white population. Sometimes we need a clearing of the ground. Sometimes we need a shaking of the foundations. Sometimes we need to conjure stones in our minds to hurl at the less-than-Gods who can all too easily occupy our imaginations. In their own way, I actually think that's what those like Sabina's friends are doing.

If Shug initiates a clearing of the ground for Celie, she doesn't leave that ground empty. She doesn't leave Celie, as in one of Jesus's parables, an empty house into which one more Beelzebub, one more inner despot, can take up residence. Instead - and here we come to our second lesson - Shug invites a counter-imagination that extends toward you and me as well. If all those tired old images of God do not serve humanity well, where do we turn for alternatives? In a way that is both radical and also very ancient, Shug suggests turning toward

our own inner experience, for this is the place where many of the best images for God well up both in the Bible, and across human life. If we are to rid ourselves of devils, we must learn to listen to our own hidden life experiences.

Here's the thing, say Shug. The thing I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don't know what you looking for. Trouble do it for most folks, I think. Sorrow, lord. Feeling like (garbage).

If it's true, as the Apostle Paul said, that God is the One in whom we live and move and have our being, and if it is true, as Jesus said, that the kingdom of God is within you, then it may be true that God is less something out there, a SkyFather somewhere in the stars, and far more something we carry inside of us, something deep and profound and moving that manifests itself in our own experiences. And often, it's revealed, as Shug tells Celie, by trouble, by sorrow, by those moments when we know ourselves to be a mess. I don't know about you, but those tend to be the times that God - or however we choose to name such a manifestation - feels closest of all.

For Shug, that leads to an ecstatic revelation where the flowers and the leaves of every tree are manifestations of a God in whom we live and move and have our being, all of it seeking to gain our attention, seeking to please us. It's a vision close in form to The Gospel of Thomas, an extra-canonical gospel that did not make it into our Bible, and yet a book that is valuable for understanding how some early followers of Jesus understood him, puts it this way: "split a piece of wood (Jesus says) and I am there; lift up the stone and you will find me there." That's pretty close to what we get in *The Color Purple*, where failing to notice something beautiful - the purple of a lilac, say - pisses God off.

It's as lovely a recasting of spiritual imagination as most any I know, but it's not the only one. What I find so moving about this conversation between Celie and Shug is the invitation it contains to each of us to do the hard work of imagining hopeful, healing, and also challenging new images for God. We don't need to abandon Scripture or theology to do that. We can notice the wide variety of images for God that are already there in Scripture and theology, ones that move us beyond God the Skyfather or God the controlling authority. And we can notice that Scripture itself is already a record of humans giving themselves licence to use their own creativity to harness healing and hopeful images of the Divine. For my part, I turn to one of the great novels of American literature, and pay attention to the feeling of gladness I have whenever I reread this passage, trusting that here too, something of what we call God is calling.

One final lesson, and here I'll be brief. Shug is performing a therapy for Celie, just as Alice Walker is performing a therapy for American culture, a therapy we continue to require. In this time of naked white supremacy, when all the advances of the civil rights era are being erased,

when shrunken and malformed notions of Christian faith are used to persecute immigrants, and to restrict the rights of women, and to instill despair in the Trans community, and to roll back the gains of the LGBTQ+ community more broadly, we need reminders of a different kind of religion, a different kind of Christianity, and a different kind of God. Perhaps, just perhaps, we need reminders that God does not exist, so much as come to be, whenever human beings perform acts of justice and mercy over and over again. As Dr. TLC reminded us last week, now more than ever, it's going to be visions and theologies of Black and Brown communities, and perhaps especially women from within those communities, that are going to help to save us from our worst tendencies as people, while simultaneously helping us recover what is best inside of us. That's not because we're morally deformed or deficient - we just haven't had to practice staying human in the ways that members of more marginalized communities have. Alice Walker and so many others are there to guide us.

I don't know if any of this would be persuasive to those like Sabina's friends. I don't know if it's persuasive to you. Some among us carry fairly traditional understandings of God, and some of us have moved well beyond theism at this point. I love that FCCOL allows for that. I can only say that in my own life even after I've thought that I might be done with God or religion, that there was Something that wouldn't let me go - a God after God, a God after all. And maybe I've been drawn to church all these years because I wish not to find God, but to share God - the trace of the Divine in me and the trace of that same Divine in you. Alice Walker helped me to see that. Maybe she can do the same for us all.