

Ministry in the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster

Community Ministry Sunday 2011

The Rev. Dr. C . Scot Giles

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Talk Like A Pirate

Several years ago I learned about the *Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster* when, within a single day, several clients arrived at my office talking like they were Pirates.

“Avast Ye Hardies! There be Booty and Spoils today! Argh....”

Now, some of my clients are unusual people, but this was more unusual than usual, so I asked what in the world was going on. That’s when I learned that it was September 19th, the “International Talk Like a Pirate Day,” the official holiday of the *Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster*, whose members call themselves “Pastafarians” and end their prayers by saying “Ramen.”

Several of my clients turned out to be members, and one gave me a copy of The Gospel of the Flying Spaghetti Monster where I learned about the religion, it’s vision of heaven (complete with a Stripper Factory and a Beer Volcano), and of course about His Majesty, the Great Flying Spaghetti Monster, Blessed Be His Noodly Appendages.

The design on the Order of Worship today is the car ornament honoring this deity. And yes, it’s a joke.

The Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster

The *Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster* is a parody religion created in 2005 by Bobby Henderson, who was at the time a graduate student in Physics at Oregon State University. Enraged by the decision of the Board of Education in Kansas to

start teaching Intelligent Design as an alternative theory to Evolution, he created his church as a way of demonstrating that just because a theory has an explanation for everything, does mean that it is a sound theory.

Most broad theories about how the universe works can't be proven beyond a shadow of a doubt. What scientists and logicians do to test them, is to try to disprove them. If you can't, then it's more likely that the theory is true.

For example, you can disprove the theory that "all mongooses live forever," by looking for the carcass of one dead mongoose. However, the broader theory that "mongooses can live forever" can't be disproven, as one would have to live forever oneself to determine if there is some mongoose, somewhere, that never dies.

The theory of Evolution is like that. It explains the data we can observe about how living creatures change over time. It explains the historical record left by petrified dinosaurs. It allows us to explain why common pesticides no longer work on bedbugs, and how some bacteria become resistant to antibiotics. However, one cannot prove it.

In order to prove it, you see, one would have to possess the ability to observe all life, over all time, and thereby observe that Evolution took place, and nothing else. It's not possible to do that, so the Theory of Evolution cannot be proven.

This led some people to claim that the theory of Intelligent Design; that the universe is actually the work of an intelligent God who designed everything to be exactly the way it is, is just as good a theory, as Evolution.

Intelligent Design also explains why things are they way they are. Things are the way they are because God wants them that way. And it can't be disproven either. Dinosaur skeletons? God put them there as decoration. Bedbugs resistant to pesticides? God's punishment on a sinful world.

However, all theories are not created equal. Some make more common sense than others, and the burden of proof is always on the people we believe the more

unlikely claim.

For example, if I had arrived late this morning and excused myself by saying I'd had a flat tire, you'd probably believe me as flat tires happen to us all. However, if I explained that I arrived late this morning because on my way to church I was kidnapped by aliens, you might want me to say a bit more about that.

The more unusual claim requires more than usual justification. People who believe that everything can be explained by an appeal to an invisible power from God, have more explaining to do than people who think things can be explained by observable, natural forces.

Unfortunately, a lot of people don't get this, and want all sort of improbable things taught to children in schools. To illustrate what's wrong with that, Bobby Henderson created a parody of religion that explains everything by appeal to the power of an invisible, undetectable, Flying Spaghetti Monster.

For example, the Power of Gravity comes from the Flying Spaghetti Monster invisibly pushing us all down with His invisible, undetectable Noodly Appendages.

People around the world are getting taller because the population has gotten larger. As the Flying Spaghetti Monster only has so many Noodly Appendages to go around, he can't push everyone down as often, and so people are getting taller. Got it?

This church quickly became an Internet sensation. The Pastafarian Religion now has more members than our denomination. You can buy stained glass windows, personal jewelry and bumper stickers honoring the Flying Spaghetti Monster.

Astronomers have located distant galaxies they claim resemble the Flying Spaghetti Monster, and under my pulpit robe this morning I am wearing a tie that is has a pattern made up of little tiny Flying Spaghetti Monsters.

The tie was a Christmas gift from our Parish Minister, Rev. Hilary. Now, I think she was just being supportive and I'm pretty sure she isn't a member of the Church

of the Flying Spaghetti Monster. Although I did give her the “Sign of the Noodle” just to be safe. Perhaps you might want to as well.

Unitarian Universalism

Unitarian Universalism isn't a parody of a religion. We are a old and distinguished denomination, but there are some things we do have in common with the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster.

We are endlessly creative and are more than willing to build in new insights and methods. We know better than to take ourselves too seriously, and we're about as non-doctrinal and open to new spiritual insights and theories as it's possible to be, and still be serious.

Because we are friends of science and reason, because we value education and evidence, because we know the dangers of irrationality and religious extremism of all sorts, we are not unlike the people in the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster. Those people created their parody religion to point out the dangers of the religious style that we also identify as dangerous, and I wouldn't be surprised to learn that there is an overlapping membership.

I personally find the path of parody to be problematic, as it makes fun of other people and what they believe. That's a negative energy and I try to keep negative energy out of my life.

I think it is possible for religion and science to get along. One does not exclude the other. Each can take the other seriously, and we don't need to make fun of religion to honor science. But that's only my view.

Community Ministry

I've been a Unitarian Universalist clergy-person for 33 years now. My ministry isn't a ministry in the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, but it is a ministry as a nontraditional minister in a nontraditional denomination. A denomination that

is almost as strange as the one spoofed by the Pastafarians.

I spent 13 years serving as a Parish Minister to two congregations. In 1991 our denomination created a category of ministry called Community Ministry. It was something I had always wanted to do, and I jumped into that new category of ministry that same year.

As a result I am one of the longest-standing Community Ministers in our denomination, and one of the very first to receive Full Fellowship, our permanent ministerial credential. For the last 20 years, it's been my work.

Community Ministers are Unitarian Universalist missionaries. We work “beyond the walls” of the local congregation directly with secular society. We are politicians and lobbyists. We are chaplains and counselors. We are in the prisons and in the hospitals. On the whole we raise our own salaries and fund our work independently of the local congregations. We strive to make secular society match the democratic and educated principles of Unitarian Universalism.

We go back to the work of the Rev. Dr. Joseph Tuckerman, who was the first formal Community Minister working on the streets of 18th century Boston. A colleague of the Rev. Dr. William Ellery Channing, who would be the first President of the American Unitarian Association.

Tuckerman called what he did “ministry-at-large,” and worked with anyone who was in trouble whom he thought he could help. He was a spiritual guide, a first-aid worker, a political activist and a personal banker. He showed that ministry did not have to be contained in the walls of a church building.

Because Community Ministers have to have the same basic training as our Parish Clergy, plus specialized training, the training curve is expensive and steep. There are only a few of us--about 250. We are represented by the Unitarian Universalist Society for Community Ministries, of which I am the current President.

Today is Community Ministry Sunday, where we ask all of our Community Ministers to speak to one of our congregations. As we work beyond the walls of

the congregation, most members of our congregations don't know what we do. We're trying to fix that.

As many of you know, my ministry is one of spiritual healing. To accomplish that healing I use the hypnotic arts and sciences, and hold a high level of standing with the National Guild of Hypnotists as well as the Association of Professional Chaplains.

I limit my private work to the more difficult and challenging cases and in conjunction with several hospitals, maintain a network of free clinics around Chicago where I help people who otherwise cannot afford to pay.

Research has shown that hypnotism helps the medically ill enormously, and while many scoffed at me when I began this work, few scoff now. The evidence has steadily accumulated.

The Ministry of All Believers

But enough about me. Let's talk about you.

I bet many of you have the mistaken idea that I am the only Community Minister in the room this morning. In actuality, we've got a room full of 'em.

While there is no sense that every Unitarian Universalist is a member of the clergy, there is a sense that every Unitarian Universalist is a minister.

Being a member of the clergy is an identity--just like being a lawyer or a certified snowmobile mechanic is an identity. It requires certain education, passing specific tests and jumping through an ever-expanding series of hoops. Either you have done those things or you have not. You either are a clergy-person or you are not.

However, ministry is behavior. It is what one does when one extends oneself to help another person. You "minister to" them. There is a sense in which every person in this room is, or at least could be, a minister. All you have to do

is “minister to” someone else.

Further, as almost all of you do your ministry “beyond the walls” of this building; most of you are Community Ministers, just like me. You’re just not trying to make a living at it.

We Unitarian Universalists are the descendants of the radical wing of the Protestant Reformation. When Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral in 1517 he initiated the movement that would split the Christian world into Catholic and Protestant. Some of those ideas got to Eastern Europe. In Transylvania, those ideas took hold in their more radical form, and our denomination descends from that wing of the movement.

One of the key beliefs has always been that everyone is as worthwhile as everyone else. It is still the First Principle of the Unitarian Universalist Association: The inherent worth and dignity of every person.

Because they believed that all were equal before God, our spiritual ancestors announced the “*Ministry of All Believers.*” That is, they believed that everyone had a Call from God to do something important in the world. God’s favor did not rest on the priesthood alone.

Everyone had a mission from God. It didn’t matter if you were the King or a Queen, a shoemaker or a Knight. Each person was special in his or her own way and each was here on earth to do something important.

What a King or Queen might do would be very different from what a shoemaker or a nurse might do, but all had a role to play. All were important. Everyone was, in some sense, a minister; and a priesthood was unneeded. Which is why our congregations have “ministers” elected by congregations rather than “priests” appointed by “bishops.”

Your Call from God

Now we all have our own opinion about what is ultimate in life. You may believe in God as I do, or you may have some other conception completely. But still, there is some ultimate concern. There is something you think is important in the world or you wouldn't be trying for an effective life; you would just embrace nihilism.

So, what are you here to do? Why are you on this planet?

A time-management consultant I like, called David Allen, talks about what he calls our "Horizons of Focus." Like an airplane sitting on the runway at the lowest elevation of our lives we spend out time dealing with our projects and tasks. But as the aircraft climbs into the sky we start to see a more expansive horizon. Finally, at 50,000 feet we are so high the curvature of the Earth can be observed.

He argues that we should all spend time periodically to think about our lives as if we were that soaring aircraft at it's highest elevation. We should think about the ultimate meaning of our lives. What are we striving for in the big picture? What do we want to be remembered for?

If our spiritual ancestors were correct, you are here because you have a Call to a ministry. It may be major, it may be minor, it may be something in between. It may be something special you do--like working on a committee or a project, a political party or with a charitable group.

It may be doing what you would otherwise do to earn a living, but somehow doing it in a way that makes a difference.

You may be a law enforcement professional who shows an exceptional wisdom. You may be a helping professional who shows an extraordinary compassion. You may be an engineer who goes that extra little bit to make what is created of high quality. You may be a parent who reflects on how to help children be of good character.

In Chaos Theory, a form of speculative mathematics, there is something called the Butterfly Effect. It's become a popular metaphor, but it relates to the work of

Edward Lorenz. In 1961 he was using a computer model to run a duplicate weather prediction, and as a shortcut entered a variable as .506 instead of the full value of .506127. Much to his surprise he got a completely different result from his computer model. In 1963 he gave a paper to the New York Academy of Sciences where he said it was like the flap of a Butterfly's wings could change the weather forever.

The point is that what we do, no matter how small it may seem to us, might, in a larger scheme have a far-reaching effect. None of us knows the ultimate effect of our "ministry." It might seem minor to us, but it could have a profound effect.

Like Dan Aykroid said when he was playing Elwood in The Blues Brothers, "They not going to catch us. We're on a mission from God."

While I take a great deal of personal comfort from the undeniable testimony of the scripture, where it is clear that God is not picky about His help, I believe each of us has a mission. We're all Community Ministers. Even a true scoundrel can still be on a mission from God (whatever meaning you give to that word), how much more so those of us who try to be good.

The Burden of Proof

As I said earlier, the burden of proof is always on the people who believe the more unlikely claim. If anyone thinks that my claim that every person in this room as a special "mission" in their lives, isn't an unlikely claim; I think they should have a second cup of coffee at the Coffee Hour this morning.

Of course, it's an extreme claim. But it is a claim that has a long tradition.

In the Gospel of Thomas, a Gospel that was lost and then rediscovered at an excavation at Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1945, Jesus is quoted in Saying #70, with words I take to heart. "If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you." We're supposed to find our Mission in Life, and bring it

forth.

Some churches engage in what is called “evangelism.” That is, they seek to convert others to their way of belief. They hold Revivals and Rallies, they pack stadiums with Promisekeepers, they buy ads on television and say “Get Right With God; Before It’s Too Late.”

We don’t reach out like that. But we do have a way of reaching out. We try to live our own lives in such a way that others see the spirit we have, and want it for themselves too. That’s what brings new people to this place. This is sometimes called “Lifestyle Evangelism,” but I just call it trying to be the Best We Can Be. We do that by trying to be the persons we were created to be, by answering that inner call.

The very fact that new people come to join us in our spiritual path speaks to the reality that at least many of us have found a way to respond to that inner call. That creates an attractiveness that brings others to us, in the way that steel is drawn to a powerful magnet.

Without that attraction this place would not exist. We would still just be a small group of friends drinking Bloody Marys on Sunday morning in the lounge of an athletic club. Because that’s how this congregation began.

We all reach out to the Community in our own way, and we’ve been successful. Look at us now.

Can We Be Successful?

I believe that effective Community Ministry is vital to preserving and advancing what is important in civilization. There are powerful forces arrayed against us.

When the human community developed clothing and harnessed fire, our physical bodies stopped evolving, or at least slowed in their evolution. There were fewer physical forces that could cause us to perish, and so Natural Selection lost some of

its ability to shape what we are like now in our flesh and in our nerves.

But our society has continued to evolve. It's become much more stressful, demanding, interconnected and complex. We're reachable 24/7/365 and our bodies have trouble keeping up with the strain. Dr. Herbert Benson, one of the foremost experts on Mind-Body Medicine calls "stress" the "hidden plague" of our age.

Craving anything that might make an overly-complex world seem simpler and more understandable, people have begun to cling to fundamentalisms of all sorts. Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Political or Economic--people want simple answers. People want things they can understand.

That craving is vast. To it, people seem willing to sacrifice free inquiry, artistic liberty, civil rights, fairness and justice. Some days it seems to me that the various fundamentalisms of this world have placed in peril the very flower of high culture, civility and reasonable order among people.

But I take courage from people like us. For we are all in our way Community Ministers working "beyond the walls" of a congregation with society-at-large. Like paratroopers dropped behind enemy lines to soften up the opposition, we can have an influence that is larger than our numbers.

Jesus said this long ago, in the Gospel of Matthew when he compared his follows to the salt used to season a dish, or the yeast that leavens a loaf of bread. In comparison to the rest of the meal, the salt is a tiny amount. But it changes everything. In relation to the flour, butter and sugar in the recipe for a loaf of bread, the amount of yeast is very small. But it changes everything.

In comparison to secular society and the stress of our age, the number of people who seek to make the world a better place have no numerical advantage. There are many more people who are out just for themselves. But we can change everything. We are Community Ministers together.

We are the yeast. We are the salt. And we are here.

And that's my sermon.