

A Dialogical Faith

Stephen Van Kuiken
North Congregational United Church of Christ
Columbus, OH
October 6, 2024

Everybody prays. People pray whether or not they call it prayer... God hears all the voices that speak out of us—our vocal prayer, the prayer said in our minds, the unvoiced longing rising from our hearts, the many voices of which we are not conscious but which cry out eloquently.

—Ann and Barry Ulanov, *Primary Speech*

Ancient Witness: Matthew 13: 13-17

Today I want to talk about the importance of loving dialogue when it comes to faith. Paul Knitter, who taught comparative religion at Xavier University in Cincinnati where I met him and later moved to Union Seminary in New York, talked about how exploring other religious traditions has helped him to a deeper understanding and appreciation of his own. In his book, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be A Christian* (2009), he wrote,

I've come to be convinced that I have to do my theology—and live my Christian life—dialogically. Or in current theological jargon: I have to be religious interreligiously.

I agree with him about this dialogical nature of faith. That is, we grow when we are in loving dialogue with those who are different. This is true not just between religious traditions but *within* them. And this is true *within congregations*, even. Let me tell you what I mean.

Some people view the sermon as a one-way process, where the preacher has the Truth and gives it, conveys it, to others. But I see sermons differently. I see them not as the Word of God but simply as a *testimony* to the Word. There's a big difference. I view preaching not as the *last* word but the *first* word, *something that inspires an internal dialogue within the listener*. One of the highest compliments is not that one agrees with me; it is if I helped cause someone to wrestle with matters of faith and reflect more deeply.

It was the great preacher, David Reed, who once said,

We have failed to present the gospel as a living experience. We have become reporters of religious experience of others from Abraham to Bonhoeffer, rather than catalysts of [this experience.]

No one can enter the dialogue of faith for you. True dialogue is up to us. Soren Kierkegaard wrote:

that which is genuinely human no generation learns from the foregoing... every generation begins all over again...

In the late 1950's, when the U.C.C. was formed, they wrote a constitution for the new denomination. And there's this great line from the preamble:

[The U.C.C.] 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.

Marilynne Robinson gives a great line to one of the characters in her novel, *Gilead*: “A good sermon is one side of a passionate conversation.” And so a religious community, it seems to me, engages with the tradition, with the ancient witnesses, and *enters into a dialogue with them*. It notices how each witness is one side of a passionate conversation. And in so doing, a community develops its own witness, its own passionate conversation with the Sacred. People in a religious community hear the passionate dialogue that preachers, teachers and each other are having. And they enter into a dialogue with these witnesses in hopes of finding their own passionate conversation with God. Religious communities can provide a safe place for this to happen.

In two of my previous congregations I had the advantage of actually beginning this dialogue immediately after the sermon in the worship service itself. People were encouraged to agree or disagree, add other insights and perspectives or raise questions. As a minister, I find this kind of dialogue very gratifying. I've started offering a sermon dialogue here after each service, and I always welcome follow-up discussions during the week. We affirm that we are all on a journey of faith, individually and collectively. We are all evolving, changing and being transformed. It doesn't stop. None of us here ever “arrives,” including me. Often I am affected and changed with my dialogue with you.

Now, some things are important for a spirit of dialogue: civility, respect and love. In true dialogue we *don't try to change the other person*, but we are simply honest about who we are and express our truth. At the same time, we encourage others to express themselves. And when they do, we truly listen and become open, open even to *being changed* by the other. It's not about offering criticism. It's not about debating. It's not about winning or losing. It's simply where souls—our deepest selves—meet.

It's helpful to remember that the word, “dialogue,” comes from two Greek words, *dia*, which means “through” or “flow,” and *logos*, which means “word” or “meaning.” So dialogue is about “how meaning flows.” Dialogue is the idea that meaning flows two ways—back and forth. And we gain understanding in the give-and-take of a reciprocal relation. I would assert that this is the nature of faith; it is dialogical. Further, our dialogue with each other can lead us to a deeper level of dialogue with that still, small voice within. For God is speaking to us and wants a dialogue with us at *every moment!*

One could say that faith is our continual response to the world, to others, and to the Sacred that is always speaking, always trying to strike up a conversation. And so the question is: What is the *quality* of our dialogue? For this is how we are transformed.

John Hume, a former member of British parliament from Northern Ireland, tried to create dialogue between the Catholic Nationalists and the Protestant Unionists. And he said, “Difference is the essence of being human...and the essence of unity is the acceptance of diversity.”

I believe that this is true on many different levels. *The essence of unity is the acceptance of diversity*: with our personal relationships, in families, in churches and on the political level. This is even true on the level of faith, our relationship to God. *The essence of our unity with God is the acceptance of our difference from God.*

In their book, *Primary Speech: The Psychology of Prayer*, Barry and Ann Ulanov said that in prayer

we must be honest with ourselves...To pray is to listen to and hear this self who is speaking...In prayer we say who in fact we are—not who we should be nor who we wish we were, but who we are.

It seems to me that they are onto something here. So much of prayer is what we think we should be saying to God. And so, much of our prayer lacks an authenticity, and our dialogue with God remains on a superficial level, a pseudo-dialogue. We do not wish to acknowledge our difference from God. The Ulanovs say that in true prayer

we begin to hear the self we actually are emerging out of the shadow selves, our counterfeit selves, our pretend selves. We become aware of what is in us, the best and the worst.

Another way to think of prayer is getting in touch with our *interior reality* (soul). It is a place beyond words and thought. I like to think of this as an inner room where we find ourselves as we truly are and the room where God meets us. Prayer, it seems to me, is to make our way as close as we can to this part of ourselves.

This is why the Psalms can be so helpful in understanding what it means to be in dialogue with God. A colleague once wrote about preparing for a sermon and noticing that the lectionary reading for that particular Sunday. (The lectionary is a schedule of readings of the Bible that some churches and ministers follow.) This lectionary reading was Psalm 104:25-34 and 35b. So naturally, he wanted to read 35a, the part that was left out. It was kind of like the *forbidden fruit!* So he went on to read the last three verses of Psalm 104:

*I will sing to the Lord as long as I live,
I will sing praise to my God while I have being.
May my meditation be pleasing to God
For I rejoice in the Lord.*

O.K., so far so good. And then he comes to verse 35a:

Let sinners be consumed from the earth,

And let the wicked be no more!

Now, it's understandable why this part was omitted! It's not very pretty. And in public worship perhaps we should appeal to the best motives in people. Yet at the same time, we should not deceive ourselves that we have outgrown such vindictive and awful thoughts. And the Psalms are great because among other things, they tell us *who we are*, and like so many instances in the scriptures, they reveal to us truth not in a *prescriptive* sense, but in a *descriptive* sense, what it means to be human.

The thing about the Psalms is that they are honest and they model true dialogue between creature and the Spirit. And the church, it seems to me, must make room for this kind of honesty and true dialogue. We can allow, no, encourage, prayer as the psalmist prayed.

In today's ancient witness, a reading from Matthew's gospel, Jesus is asked why he keeps speaking to people with parables. Apparently some were getting annoyed and were losing their patience. Because parables create more questions than answers. They leave things unresolved and encourage listeners to reflect and search for their own answers. They are open-ended stories that challenge listeners to think for themselves, to listen and see for themselves.

So Jesus quotes the ancient witness from his own tradition, the prophet Isaiah, and he says, "Look, I use parables because people see, but they don't *see*; they hear, but they don't *hear*." He wanted them to see, hear and perceive more deeply. And so a parable leads those to engage in an *inner dialogue*. Like a Zen koan, a parable resists any simplistic answer, but *requires* the listener to go on an internal journey. It directs people to *go within* and to *trust what they find*.

And for this to happen, though, there must be a willingness, a receptivity, an openness and a movement beyond one's resistance.

It reminds me of the story of the Buddhist monk who goes to his master for some teaching and insight. The master says, "Sure, let's sit down and have some tea, and we can talk."

He puts the tea on, and he comes back to the student, who holds out his cup. And the master begins to fill it. Soon it fills to the top and overflows, as the master just keeps pouring.

The monk yells out as the hot water touches his hand. "What are you doing?" he exclaims.

The master responds, "Just like the cup that is full, you come to this dialogue filled up with your own thoughts, opinions and ideas. There's no room for anything else."

Realizing his own mind, the monk bowed deeply to his master.

Here's another quick story from Abraham Heschel about a young man who wanted to become a blacksmith. As the story goes, the young man becomes an apprentice and soon learns all the techniques of the trade. He learns how to hold the tongs, smite the anvil, use the bellows. When he finishes his apprenticeship, he finds a place in the palace smithy. But all of his skill at using the tools turns out to be of no use. He has never learned how to kindle a spark and light a fire.

Sometimes our lives are like this. We spend so much of our time in preparation in school. We learn how to spell, to add and subtract. Perhaps we learn a trade. We acquire all kinds of knowledge. We know how to survive, how to prosper, how to succeed. Yet, we may find that even with all of our ability and training, we have never learned how to light that fire within ourselves.

May this be a community where, together, we learn to kindle the spark:
where we can be honestly open and receptive and see ourselves as we truly are;
where we are encouraged to go within, to take the inner journey and trust what we find;
where meaning flows between us and within us;
where we engage in dialogue, and
where our souls, our deepest selves, can emerge and perhaps meet.

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