

Let's Talk About god, God, or G.O.D.©

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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Let's talk about god, God, or G.O.D. That statement might seem like I am being repetitive. In this case the spoken word doesn't convey what the written word clearly shows—that each of the three letter words at the end of that sentence are different. The author of our reading today, e. e. cummings, utilized this understanding to create poetry that was unique and that pushed the boundaries of the literary genre he worked in. As such, cummings work was a reflection of his upbringing in a Unitarian family. His father, Edward Cummings, was a Unitarian minister who served South Congregational Church in Boston from 1900 to 1925. The poetry of e. e. cummings invites people to step out of their comfort zones and to embrace new ways of looking at and thinking about words and the world.

I hope that is what we can do today, step out of our comfort zones to embrace, or at least to consider, new ways of looking at and thinking about the word god, God, or G.O.D. When I first came up with the idea for this sermon it was evident to me that talking about god could be pushing the boundary for some people in this Fellowship. A few people here have let me know they have difficulty with the word. That makes a lot of sense to me. Over the course of my life, I have had difficulty with the word as well, and numerous times at that. As a result, the way I think about god today is dramatically different than what I was taught as a youth. Today I am able to think and talk about god in a much more expansive, and I believe a more inclusive, way than I could have when I was younger. Yet the conversations I have had with members and friends of this Fellowship where the word god was used have been few. That leaves me wondering how often many of us speak the word. Do you recall the last time you spoke the word? Was it today, this week, this month? I would venture to say that the longer it has been since you spoke the word the more likelihood there is that you have some negative experience or connotation associated with it.

Some of the people who have spoken with me of their difficulties with the word god have indicated that they have chosen, for one reason or another, not to use the word. A number of you may have even experienced trauma connected to your prior experiences with the word. With that in mind, I want to say that if this topic is offensive or hurtful to you, I am sorry. My intention is not to offend or to cause hurt. Instead, my intention is to offer options that may provide opportunities for moving beyond past understandings and wounds. My intention is to seek to find ways that we might have discussions which include the word god.

Why, you might ask, do I think it is important to push this boundary? In the past several months some of you have heard me speak about words we are using less than in the past. You have heard me talk about words such as kindness, gratitude, generosity, honesty, love, humility and justice. And some of you may recall my sermon on salvation last December. Salvation is another word we UU's tend to avoid. There are frequently detrimental ramifications associated with declining usage of certain words, especially words that have had significant meaning or importance over a long period of time and across cultures—words such as kindness, honesty, love, justice, and yes, god.

So what happens when some of us, especially those of us who think beyond the conventional boundaries of our culture, avoid using the word god? One thing that happens is that we lose the ability to have influence over what the word means. More than that, we give those who have much narrower and restrictive definitions of the word the power to control not only its meaning, but also our discourse, as we avoid or even abandon the word. That concerns me. It concerns me because I do not believe the word god, a word with such a long and involved history, should be left to those who seek to limit the definition and the conceptualization of god to their liking. My understanding of history leads me to believe that giving a small group of people the power to define god is not only detrimental, it is dangerous for all of us.

Let's take some time now to consider these three words, god, God and G.O.D. The first of these, god with a small g, has been around a very, very long time in languages around the world. This word, in its various language forms, has provided a vast array of cultures a way of attempting to identify and conceptualize ideas that were beyond their ability to fully grasp or understand. Numerous cultures identified a pantheon of gods. Typically these gods were considered to be supernatural, immortal and to have special powers over the affairs and lives of people and the course of nature. One of the multiple difficulties with this word is that it has often been associated with a particular gender, specifically the male gender. In the English language the corresponding word for the female gender is goddess, of which there have been many over the course of time and across cultures.

And then there is God, with a capital G. This way of thinking about God, while having been around for a long time, isn't nearly as old as god with a small g. God with a capital G comes to us from the monotheistic religious traditions. It seems at some point in distant history there was a desire for one ultimate, supreme, creator and sustainer God, with a capital G. This monotheistic idea of God is the basis of the largest religions in the world today, Christianity and Islam. Some version of this concept of God is quite probably what many of us learned about as we were growing up. It may also be the one some of us have significant difficulty with. The idea of a supernatural father figure who already knows everything that will ever happen and will punish or reward us for what we do just doesn't work for some of us, me included. It makes total sense to me that a person could be traumatized when they think about this God. When you think about what this God, sometimes referred to as "vengeful" in the Hebrew Bible, has done or will do in the future, there is good reason to worry or even feel terror.

No matter what version of God (with a capital G) we learned about, it was only a snapshot of what this word has meant over time. Here is what Karen Armstrong writes about this version of the word in her book *A History of God*.

The human idea of God has a history, since it has always meant something slightly different to each group of people who have used it at various points of time. The idea of God formed in one generation by one set of human beings could be meaningless in another. Indeed, the statement "I believe in God" has no objective meaning, as such, but like any other statement only means something in context, when proclaimed by a particular community. Consequently there is no one unchanging idea contained in the word "God"; instead, the word contains a

whole spectrum of meanings, some of which are contradictory or even mutually exclusive.

This then brings us to the the word god written in a way e. e. cummings might have used in his poetry, G.O.D. I first encountered this version of the word in a book by Gary Schwartz titled *The G.O.D. Experiments*. The way Schwartz spells the word, with each letter capitalized and followed by a period is purposeful. This version of the word is an acronym. As Schwartz states, this acronym, G period, O period, D period refers to “a Guiding, Organizing and Designing process.” I quickly recognized that, like the other word God, this acronym could refer to many things. And in typical UU fashion, I also realized that the various letters could stand for words other than the ones Schwartz identified. For example, the “D” could stand for driving—referring to the driving force or process that makes all things possible. I imagine that some of you may have already begun thinking about other words one or more of these three letters might stand for. This way of conceptualizing or defining this word can move us beyond some or possibly even all of the limiting or unacceptable ideas about the god or God that we have difficulty with. Thinking of G.O.D. in this way has the ability to diminish or even eliminate concepts that some of us may have significant difficulty with—concepts such as a supernatural being, a dominant and dominating male deity, or a jealous and vengeful ultimate and unchanging source. When we approach this three letter word from the perspective of an acronym, our way of understanding and conceptualizing what it means can change dramatically. For example, we can easily scale our thinking up or down. We can consider, in all kinds of ways, what guides, what organizes, and what designs or drives all that is, was or will ever be. But we can also easily consider, in this very moment, what or who provides or has provided guidance in our lives, what helps us organize our thinking, feeling and acting, and what feeds or has fed our drive to address the many challenges we face in life. This acronym might provide a way for more of us to feel comfortable speaking the word G.O.D. And in doing so, we might develop a greater sense of curiosity about what others mean when they speak the word. Maybe, if we listen carefully and closely with an open mind and an open heart we can find areas where we share perspectives in common.

I began this sermon by speaking its title, “Let’s Talk About god, God, or G.O.D.” I want to be very clear at this point as I say that this title is a suggestion and an invitation. It is definitely not a command, a requirement or an expectation. As I said earlier, my hope is that in the near future more of us can step out of our comfort zones as we think about and talk about god, God, or G.O.D. If we can do that, we may find ourselves in conversations that we would not have been open to engaging in previously. Through such discussions we may, like our religious forebears before us, begin to create a more expansive and more inclusive concept of the divine or the ultimate which deserves our respect, appreciation and gratitude. Through such conversations we might share concepts of this seemingly simple three letter word that are free of guilt, shame and fear. Instead, we can offer relief, hope and inspiration. These are what I hope for all of us.

So may it be.