



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

The Parable of the Quaking Aspens

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I started out this sermon wanting to write about incarnation. Yes, I know I seem to be on a roll of making sermons on scandalously “Christian” theological terms. Last fall I talked about conversion. Now incarnation. Feel free to suggest future topics to me after the service – Revelation? Resurrection?

Incarnation, to me, has a deliciously tangible and concrete feel to it. Incarnation literally means “embodied in flesh” or “taking on flesh.” It is a concept found in many religious traditions. It is used to refer to the material manifestation of a divine entity, god, or force whose nature is immaterial. In the Christian context, incarnation refers to Jesus Christ, the “Word made flesh.” In ancient Egypt, the pharaohs were said to be incarnations of the sun gods Horus and Ra. In Buddhism and Hinduism, there are multiple incarnations of gods, sometimes called avatars, and there are bodhisattvas, or enlightened beings that take on new rebirths in order to help other sentient beings. Similarly we can speak of re-incarnation, the belief in a continual cycle of being born into a material body, living and dying. Incarnation has everything to do with finding the ineffable, indescribable Nameless God or Source or Divine Spirit, *within* everyday bodies. Incarnation, is believing that that which is transcendent and most holy, is also deeply present in the flesh and blood existence of which we are all participants.

In religious traditions, the focus of incarnation appears to be significant individuals—Jesus, Krishna, Kuan Yin bodhisattva—to name a few. If we branch out a little more and think of our modern day heroes of Love and Justice, we might also name people like Martin Luther King Jr., Maya Angelou, or Dorothy Day. Those who are less prone to human-centric thinking will point out, why the focus on humans? Can we include divinity incarnate in an oak tree, a butterfly, or even a beloved pet dog? Sure! I certainly believe in recognizing and celebrating holiness in whatever shape we find it, within and around us.

However, here is where I’m going to invite us to look at incarnation one step closer. I invite us to consider incarnation, not as divinity taking on flesh in a single organism, but divinity taking on flesh in a system. Divinity in a system, a group of seemingly separate individuals interacting with one another, interdependent upon one another. Take the example of Jesus. We know he would not have become incarnate without his mother. We usually see him surrounded by his disciples, followers, as well as challengers and opponents. What if we looked at the incarnation of Jesus, not as the singular life of one being, but as a system and movement of people, dynamic, connected, and changing?

Here’s one of my clearest memories of working in a system: In middle and high school, I played cello in orchestra. The creation of music by a group, whether it is an orchestra, band, or choir, is an excellent example of a highly-functioning system. Although if asked, I will definitely say that cello is the best instrument ever, I also believe that each instrument plays an equally important role. Many times, the other cellists and I would complain—“Why do the violins get the beautiful melody and we are stuck with the boring droning undertone?” Yet sometimes, our conductor would say to the violin section, “Listen to the cellos, and they will

show you the right direction.” If one section of the orchestra was too slow, too fast, came in early or late, it could throw everyone else off. In an orchestra, each section and member plays a different part, and depends upon one another in order to create great music. It is the push and pull, the inter-relation between the different instruments and melodies that makes a symphony.

Today I ask us to reflect—what systems are we a part of? Can you think of some ways that you function as part of a system, with different members creating one unified whole? Today I’m speaking about systems theory – which is a term originally developed in scientific fields, but which I learned about as a way of understanding families for pastoral care. We’re going to start with the natural world, then look at family systems, and lastly try to understand our congregation as a system. The basic principle of systems theory is that instead of breaking something into individual parts, we must look at the way parts relate to one another to create a whole. That is, instead of analyzing component parts, we want to focus to processes and relationships, in order to understand the whole. But before we get to congregations, let’s start with the natural world.

Our most powerful examples of systems come from nature. In the reading today, Lewis Thomas talks about termites. One might also use the example of bees, or ants. Individually, a single bee can do very little. It is in the collection of bees, the full organism of the hive, that we see a miraculous intelligence—moving parts that communicate, can learn and solve problems, an organism that can evolve.

The hive of bees contains a collective consciousness, some would say a sacred wisdom, greater than the sum of its individual parts.

Now we come to a parable – the heaviest single known organism, and one of the oldest living organisms in the world, lives in south-central Utah. Its name is Pando, which is Latin for “I spread.” It is a clonal colony of single male quaking aspen, a grove of about 47,000 trees that appear to be individuals, but are actually genetic clones of one another. This particular type of aspen reproduces asexually, by sprouting new trees from the expansive root system of the parent. Pando, a grove of trees, is a single organism, sharing a massive root system that spans 107 acres. The quaking aspen is named for its leaves, which stir easily and produce a fluttering sound with a slight breeze.

What if Pando, was our best example of incarnation, of the material nature of divinity, in our world? Thousands of trees, growing and whispering to one another with their leaves, all sharing the same roots, all sharing the same destiny, *all part of the same great tree*. Isn’t our world like this, so interconnected and so interdependent, that anything affecting one member, will eventually affect us all?

I encourage you when you get home to look online for pictures of Pando—the trunks of the quaking aspens are stark white, they shoot straight up, and are crowned with golden yellow leaves. What would it look like if we centered our religious life, not on the symbol of a sacred

person's life, or a sacred book, or even a set of principles, but on these quaking aspens, on a hive of bees, on the incarnations that nature daily presents us with, of interrelated systems? I love the image of Pando as God, and how it leads me to reflect on our human interconnections and upon our own family trees and branches.

Here is the difficult part—we are not bees or termites or clones of the same aspen tree—but human beings, with thoughts and feelings, and complex lives and relationships. The theory of family systems, says that in order to understand an individual human being, we must look at the family, because families are systems of interrelated and interconnected people. In the hospital, I see all different kinds of family systems, and learning to see my patients and their families, as well as the whole hospital, as systems, is incredibly important for my work as a chaplain. Of course, to understand other families, it helps to take a look at our own.

Here's a small example: the lint trap. I live in a house, once owned by my grandparents, along with my brother and cousin. My parents visit approximately once a month. Nearly every time that my mother visits and does laundry at the house, she says, "Are you kids remembering to clean the lint trap for the dryer? You have to be careful to do that!" Every time I respond, "Yes, we clean the lint trap. We all know how to do laundry." Here's the individual analysis: I might be forgetful or lazy. My mother might be slightly neurotic about cleanliness. Here's the family systems analysis: I know that I clean the lint trap right before I put laundry in, not after a load. I know that my mother does it afterwards so that the next person, perhaps herself, does not need to clean it. I refuse to change my practice, she thinks that we're neglecting the dryer, and she needs to remind us. I respond with asserting my independence. The lint remains, and serves as a reminder of the balance of tension and relationship between mother and daughter.

Perhaps the best lesson I have integrated from my study of family systems is two-fold—less judgment and more curiosity about myself, and less judgment and more curiosity about others.

Much of our behavior is a function of our participation in systems, whether we are aware of it or not. Instead of judging behavior as wrong or right, good or bad, we might ask, what purpose is this serving in our system? We can laugh at ourselves and be curious of others, rather than finding individual flaws or failures.

One of the key points of family systems theory is the principle that systems seek balance or equilibrium, and that when a change occurs, it can throw a system into crisis. Illness and death throw families into a feeling of chaos—but so can positive changes such as marriage, birth, a new job or a child going off to college. The roles played by each member of the family may change, and the question is, will the system adapt in a healthy way, or an unhealthy one? Will members of the system become flexible, learning new roles and skills, creating a new sense of balance? Or will members of the system react with rigidity and anxiety, shifting responsibilities unevenly and ineffectively?

Here's another example: A woman in her early fifties is newly diagnosed with cancer. She is immediately admitted to the hospital for a week for the first round of chemotherapy. She is

cheerful, talkative and friendly to staff; it hardly seems like she is sick. Her husband is at her bedside 24/7, he asks lots of anxious questions, is sometimes tearful, and often is overprotective of his wife. On the last day of hospitalization, their 25 year old son arrives. He wants to talk to the doctor, gets angry and starts a fight with his father. Staff calls a chaplain to speak with the family because they seem “stressed out.”

A second principle of systems theory is that “problem behavior” or crisis seen in one individual, is actually symptomatic of the entire system, less a character failure of one person. Understanding behavior as part of a system is critical to understanding how to create positive change. Rather than asking, “What is going wrong with this one person?” we might ask, “What are the significant relationships here? How is this behavior related to the interactions we see in the group?” Perhaps the son is acting out as a way of expressing stress felt by the whole family, stress that his parents have done their best to pretend does not exist.

So given this understanding of family groups, what is the role of someone (within or without) who wants to help a system function in a healthier way? The most important advice I learned from my chaplain supervisor is, being a non-anxious and non-judgmental presence. Within a chaotic family, it is easy to be pulled into siding with one person or the other, known as triangulation, and easy to be drawn into feeling anxious and stressed oneself. The challenge is to resist these pulls, to be aware of one’s own boundaries and role, and to model peaceful and neutral presence. This is quite a task!

Two Sundays ago, Rev. Lissa, using systems theory, talked about the church organization as an ecosystem. From a grove of trees, to families, to congregations. Neighborhood – how are we a system? Not only are we a community with many members, we even have groups within groups—the church staff, committees, long-time members, new visitors, families with kids, young adults, theists and skeptics and atheists, the people who like clapping during services, the people who do not. The thing is, we need all of these groups, this is what makes for a dynamic church, for a symphony.

We’re going through a time of transition and change—a time that includes grieving, anxiety about the future, fear of the unknown, and hope for new possibilities. It’s a time when instead of reacting with judgment or blame, we’re leaning in, listening more, dreaming and giving more. Just as with our own families, a good stance to take when we feel ourselves being pulled or challenged is to show up and listen. To engage with curiosity, to pay attention to where the energy is and where it is leading. Our system, this beloved community, is flexible, resourceful and creative, and I have faith that we will journey through this transition with grace, love and a little laughter.

So is Neighborhood Church an incarnation? Is our own community a living representation of holiness and sacredness? I say yes. Incarnation, and understanding Spirit in the material world is less one special human being, for as Lewis Thomas says, there is no such thing as a single human being, but more the whole collection of myriad relationships and processes that constitute the world in which we live.

Each one of us is part of an indescribably intricate and beautiful wholeness. Each one a branch on the same tree, sharing the same root system. This fact does not diminish our unique and different qualities, but enhances our understanding of the importance of diversity for a functioning system. The spiritual life is found in a dynamic and changing community. The Spirit of Life is found in a system of interrelated parts. God in a grove of aspens that are really one great tree.

We need one another to be whole. May we use our connections and relationships for healing, justice, and peace. May we celebrate our deep belonging to this interdependent web. May we all know the sacred feelings of giving and receiving, changing and growing together, in love.

Amen and blessed be.