

GOD IS A VERB!

Preached by Douglas Norris at the First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California
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Luke 15:1-10

While driving by a church, I noticed a message on the sign, "God is a verb, not a noun." That intrigued me. I thought about it for days. It is obvious but not usually stated in that manner, and not seriously taken, for most of us insist on relating to God as if God were a noun.

Certainly, God is not a noun. Do you remember your grammar studies? A noun is the name of a person, place, or thing. Certainly God is not a thing. God is not an object. God is not a statue, trinket, medal, building, or even a book. The Bible is not God; it is God's word, but not God. God is not a habit or a ritual. Some think that when a ritual or procedure is changed, God has left. God is not a song. Some think that when a certain hymn is not sung, or the choir doesn't sing an old favorite, God has left! God is not a thing.

Certainly, God is not a place. Our ancestors often took pilgrimages to Jerusalem or to a holy place, a shrine, as if God were found in a place. God is not in Mecca or Jerusalem or Salt Lake City or the Vatican, any more than God is found elsewhere. Don't expect to go to a place, like a childhood place, and expect to find God there, as if that place never changes.

Certainly, God is not a person. In our lucid moments we do know that God is not a person; but in practice, I suspect that many of us picture a person when we think about God, and often we image an old man, an old patriarch, like Santa Claus. Certainly God is not a person, and most definitely, God is not a man! Our culture has overidentified God with males. Part of the problem is our language, for we only have masculine or feminine pronouns to use with persons. Nor do we want to refer to God as "it." The ancient Hebrew language did not use pronouns, so most of the masculine pronouns in the Bible are English additions. God is not a man. God is not a person. God is not a noun.

God is a verb. God is an action. God is moving, dynamic, spirit, an energy, a process. God is the process--the action--by which all things come into being. God is the process of creation and creativity, and God is undefeatable. Demonstrated in the resurrection, revealed to us in the Easter event, is the certainty that God is victorious. God suffers setbacks, yes. Setbacks, like the death of Jesus; setbacks like the atrocities of war; setbacks like the famines of Africa; setbacks, yes, but not defeats. God is not defeated or overwhelmed, for Jesus rose from the dead. Christ is risen. The grave could not hold him. The powers of evil, the devil, could not chain Christ. Christ conquered. Christ arose. The spirit, the energy, the process called God is undefeatable.

God is the process by which all things come into being and, revealed through Jesus Christ, God is the process of redemption by which and through whom creation is brought back to its creator, to its created purpose, the process by which and through whom humankind is brought back to its roots, back to the Creator, to fellowship with God.

God provided the means by which reconciliation is possible, namely, Jesus Christ, the Lamb. The Lamb is our theme today. We sang "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, whose blood set us free." The choir sang "The lamb that is slain is worthy." Jesus became the sacrificial lamb, an image inherited from the ancient sacrificial systems of primitive religions. In other words, God provided the means of reconciliation. All that needs to be done before you can be redeemed, before you can live in fellowship with God, has been done by God through Christ. In traditional theological

language, Christ took upon himself the sins of us all--the punishment, the estrangement--so that no obstacles remain. In the language of today's sermon, God is a verb--the moving, dynamic process--who is constantly and continually seeking to unite you, all humankind, and all creation with God, and there is nothing standing in the way, except your own will.

Our Gospel lesson from Luke gives us two images of God--the shepherd and the housekeeper. God is like the Good Shepherd who is not content with 99 sheep. The shepherd does not rationalize, "Oh well, what's one out of 100; that's a pretty good average!" But, the shepherd searches out the one lost, finds the lamb in the bushes, carries him home on his shoulders, and shouts for joy that the lost is found.

In the other image, God is like a housekeeper. The woman loses one coin, but is not content with those remaining; so she cleans and searches her house until the lost coin is found. She, too, rejoices. Notice how God is like both a male shepherd and a female housekeeper, both a man and a woman. God is both and neither, for God transcends male and female.

The Bible summarizes this understanding of God as a verb in a simple phrase, yet a most profound phrase. We have yet to explore the rich depths of the seemingly simple phrase of I John 4:8, "God is love." Love may be a noun in English, but love is known, is experienced, only in its verb form.

This leads us to the question: how do you relate to a verb? It is easy for us to understand how to relate to a noun. If it's a thing, touch it, handle it. If it's a place, travel to it. If it's a person, shake hands, talk, listen. But, how do you relate to a verb?

First, be acted upon. Let the verb do its "verbing." You relate to a wind by being blown upon. You cannot relate to the wind in its noun form, for where is it? You only know there is wind when it blows on you. Likewise, you relate to love by being loved. God loves you with an unconditional, undeserved love. You experience love by being loved, by being acted upon.

Secondly, you relate to a verb by participating in the activity. Loving unites you with God, for God is love. I John 4:12, "No one has ever seen God; but as long as we love one another, God will live in us," and I John 4:7, "Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God."

John Powell, in his book Unconditional Love, tells of an experience he had with Tommy, one of his students. He first met Tommy several years ago when long hair was "in." Tommy's hair hung six inches below his shoulders. Tommy turned out to be the "atheist in residence" in Powell's theology class. Tommy constantly objected to, smirked at, jeered at the idea of a loving God. Powell called Tommy a "serious pain in the back pew." When he turned in his final exam, he asked cynically, "Do you think I'll ever find God?" The teacher responded with a surprising, "No!" and as Tommy turned to leave, added, "But I am absolutely certain that God will find you!" Several years later, Tommy returned to see his teacher. He was thin, pale, and all his hair was gone, as a result of chemotherapy. Tommy said, "I've got cancer in both lungs. It's a matter of weeks." Powell was surprised at Tommy's acceptance and good spirit. Tommy was only 24 years old, dying of cancer, but said, "It could be worse." "Like what?" "Well, like being fifty years old and having no values or ideals, like being fifty and thinking that booze and making money are the real 'biggies' in life." Tommy continued, "But I came to tell you how, as you predicted, God found me." After he had been told he had cancer, he got serious about finding God. He banged bloody

fists on the bronze doors of heaven, but God didn't come out. In fact nothing happened. Then he remembered another lesson from the class. Powell had said, "The essential sadness is to go through life without loving. And it would be almost equally sad to go through life and leave this world without ever telling those you loved that you loved them."

So Tommy decided to tell those he loved that he loved them. He began with the hardest one, his Dad. Dad was reading the newspaper when Tommy approached. "Dad..." Without lowering the newspaper, Dad said, "Yes." "Dad, I would like to talk with you." "Well, talk." "I mean...it's really important." The newspaper came down three slow inches. "What is it?" "Dad, I just want you to know that I love you." The newspaper fell to the floor, and his father did two things that Tommy had never seen before. His father cried and hugged him. They talked all night. He had similar experiences with his mother and his brother. He said, "Here I was, in the shadow of death, and I was just beginning to open up to all the people I had actually been close to. Then, one day, I turned around, and there was God. God found me." Powell concludes, "The surest way to find God is not to make him a private possession, a problem solver, or an instant consolation in time of need, but rather by opening to love.

Don't "nounify" God and make God into an it, for God is a verb. Let God act upon you. Let God love you. Love one another. Christ is risen!

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