

## **God Is: One**

*Rev. John Allen*

For the past two weeks we have been exploring one question.

Who is God?

Who is this God who we talk about week after week, the one who we pray to, who we praise with beautiful music, whose love we feel, whose forgiveness and grace we seek.

Who is God?

The first week we looked at an image from theologian Paul Tillich, God as the Ground of Being. Not merely a being, but being itself. God not just as the one who loves, but love itself.

God is the ground in which all life is rooted. We all live in God as fish live in the sea. In God we live and move and have our being.

Last week, we explored the mystery of God, confessing the limits of our human perspective. God is beyond any name we use. Because God is beyond even the universe in which we dwell, our minds could never stretch wide enough to fully grasp all of who God is.

And so we seek glimmers and flashes, trusting to faith all that lies beyond.

God is ground. In which we are all rooted

God is mystery. A vastness beyond our understanding.

And then week, God is One.

This diversity of images. This vision so vast. This source and essence of all that is. Everywhere, and shot through everything, is at the same time. Undivided. United. Singular.

One.

God is One.

Today's scripture reading from Deuteronomy is also one of the most important declarations in the Jewish prayer book.

Sh'ma Israel, adonai elenau, adonai echad.

Listen O Israel. The Lord is God. The Lord is One.

These words are featured in both the morning and evening prayers.

But not only that, in many families, these words are the first ones spoken into the ears of a newborn child. And many devout Jews die with these words on their lips, their very last utterance.

Sh'ma Israel, adonai elenau, adonai echad.

Listen O Israel. The Lord is God. The Lord is One.

These words are wrapped in small scrolls, placed in little boxes, and fixed to the doorposts of Jewish homes.

And through all this, they are inscribed on people's hearts, written in the depths of their spirits.

Sh'ma Israel, adonai elenanu, adonai echad.

Listen O Israel. The Lord is God. The Lord is One.

The most basic, and pure, declaration of faith.

And yet there is one word in this simple statement that is fraught with such a depth of meaning that it has kept faithful minds turning and faithful hearts wondering since it was first uttered.

Echad.

One.

God is One.

The idea that God is one. The oneness of God is the core insight of monotheism. It marked a major departure from ancient religions who imagined whole pantheons of gods, competing and colluding.

At its most basic level, this statement of faith, God is One, is to say that we honor alone the one and only God. The God of heaven and earth. The God of all creation. And —for us Christians— the God we meet in Christ, and encounter as the powerful Holy Spirit.

And yet, to say that God is one, is to say so, so much more, than that. It is not simply to say that we believe in one God instead of 17 or 12. Or that we hold the values and justice of God above all.

To proclaim that God is One. Is to say that God is unity.

God is a uniting force.

That is that nothing happens outside of God. God is the force that holds together all creation. That lends unity to all that is. That draws the thread between past, present and future.

God lends one-ness to creation. God is, what makes us One. With each other. And with all.

Our denomination, the United Church of Christ has held this uniting Spirit of God at our heart since the very beginning.

The United Church of Christ, of which this church is a part, came into being in 1957, as a covenant between 4 large collections of churches, including the Congregational Churches of New England. All of these churches shared a commitment to the autonomy of local churches. At the same time, they saw an increasing need to signal the unity of Christ's church by entering into a covenant with one another.

The process took the better part of two decades.

One of the earliest movements toward unity began in earnest at a meeting of several key leaders in the various groups in 1942.

Reporting on that meeting, one of the participants wrote in the *Christian Century* magazine the following:

“It is a significant and heartening fact that these two churches which have had a taste of union want more of it! They are not content to be merely united churches, but wish to be uniting churches. The impulse for unity, once it has been released in action, tends to take the form of a mission, with the Holy Spirit (which is the Spirit of unity) increasingly in charge.”

Those who early on formed our denomination experienced something quite profound in those early conversations.

They found that the work of uniting with others was in fact almost

addictive. Those who took time to sit in a room with people who were different, yet shared common values, found that there was an invisible and sacred spirit that pulled them toward each other, much more powerfully than the forces of the world were pulling them apart.

These churches we divided on many issues about theology, worship, and church governance.

But perhaps the most potent division that was carried into these negotiations was that the culturally German churches of the Evangelical Reformed movement, one of the key groups in the merger, were on the receiving end of quite a bit of anger and bigotry during the 1940's, with the United States at war with Germany abroad. And yet they found in the Congregational Churches of New England, and others, partners willing to explore what could bring them together, even while the world tore apart.



And yet most everyone who sat in those rooms tasted unity, and wanted more. And moreover they felt a spirit drawing them, not just to be united, but uniting!

Not just merging once and for all, but discovering a new spirit that would fundamentally change their posture toward the world. Always seeking to draw the circle wider, and wider still. A uniting church.

I believe that the spirit those early UCC folks felt was this very spirit of God's oneness. That is that God's essence inclines toward connection and unity. It draws us toward our similarity over our difference, and and pulls us toward knowing our connection as God's children, which is, for every person on this planet, our first and foremost identity.

One way that this spirit of our uniting church continues to manifest today is in our increasing willingness to see the beauty, and encounter the truth, held in religious traditions that are not our own.

The zeal that the Christian church once held to turn every person on Earth into Christians like us, has given way to approaching the world with curiosity and wonder. To learning from our siblings of different faiths, how they encounter our one God.

As you can tell from the beginning of this sermon, my sense of who God is, in part, shaped by my encounter with Jewish spirituality.

And, as I have shared in other sermons, I find the way that Muslim prayer and religious devotion so regularly punctuated their lives to be inspiring and edifying to my own faith, and my own desire to bring God more deeply into my heart.

God is One. God is one united and unity force. Drawing our circle wider.

A wise Quaker woman named Sharon Parks once said: "God is always redefining our boundaries outward."

This has been my core experience of God in my life.

God inspires me with God's transcendence.

God surprises me with imminence, God's presence in the midst of all things.

But more than everything God is always pulling me past the edge of my comfort, beyond the realm of the familiar, by pulling me into unity with all people and all creation, by revealing just how deeply we belong to one another and to this Earth.

God is the ground of all being.

God is a mystery deeper than our understanding.

And that God, who holds all that, and more.

Is One.

